

Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History

Journal of the Fondazione CDEC

QUESTIONI DI STORIA EBRAICA CONTEMPORANEA. RIVISTA DELLA FONDAZIONE CDEC



Jewish Experiences during the Great Depression in East Central Europe (1929-1934)

edited by *Klaus Richter* and *Ulrich Wyrwa*

Issue 26, no. 2 (2024)

QUEST. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History
Journal of the Fondazione CDEC



Fondazione
Centro di
Documentazione
Ebraica
Contemporanea

Editors

Cristiana Facchini (Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italy – Editor in Chief), **Elissa Bemporad** (Queens College of the City University of New York, USA), **Laura Brazzo** (Fondazione CDEC, Italy), **Tullia Catalan** (Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italy), **Gadi Luzzatto Voghera** (Fondazione CDEC, Italy), **Dario Miccoli** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy), **Michele Sarfatti** (Fondazione CDEC, Italy), **Guri Schwarz** (Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy), **Marcella Simoni** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy), **Ulrich Wyrwa** (Universität Potsdam, Germany)

Editorial Assistants

Miriam Benfatto (Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italy – Managing Editor), **Matteo Perissinotto** (Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italy – Managing Editor), **Bianca Ambrosio** (Fondazione CDEC, Italy), **Giordano Bottecchia** (Institut Français de Géopolitique, France), **Angela Cimino** (German Historical Institute in Rome, Italy), **Chiara Renzo** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy), **Piera Rossetto** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy)

Book Review Editor

Miriam Benfatto (Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italy)

Editorial Advisory Board

Ruth Ben Ghat (New York University, USA), **Paolo Luca Bernardini** (Università degli Studi dell'Insubria, Italy), **Dominique Bourel** (Université Paris-Sorbonne, France), **Michael Brenner** (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität and American University Washington D.C., Germany and USA), **Enzo Campelli** (La Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy), **Francesco Cassata** (Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy), **Marco Cuzzi** (Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy), **Roberto Della Rocca** (Dipartimento Educazione e Cultura – Ucei, Italy), **Lois Dubin** (Smith College, USA), **Jacques Ehrenfreund** (Université de Lausanne, Switzerland), **Katherine E. Fleming** (New York University, USA), **Anna Foa** (La Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy), **Ada Gigli Marchetti** (Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy), **François Guesnet** (University College London, UK), **Alessandro Guetta** (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, France), **András Kovács** (Central European University, Hungary-Austria), **Fabio Levi** (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy), **Simon Levis Sullam** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy), **Germano Maifreda** (Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy), **Renato Mannheimer** (Istituto Pubblica Opinione, Italy), **Dan Michman** (International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Israel), **Michael Miller** (Central European University, Hungary-Austria), **Liliana Picciotto** (Fondazione CDEC, Italy), **Marcella Ravenna** (Università degli Studi di Ferrara, Italy), **Milena Santerini** (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy), **Perrine Simon-Nahum** (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, France), **Francesca Sofia** (Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italy), **David Sorkin** (Yale University, USA), **Emanuela Trevisan Semi** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy), **Christian Wiese** (Goethe-Universität, Germany)

Direttore Responsabile ai sensi della legge italiana (Legge 47/1948), Stefano Jesurum

QUEST. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC

Reg. Trib. Milano n. 403 del 18/09/2009 – P. IVA: 12559570150 – ISSN: 2037-741X

Piazza Edmond Jacob Safra 1, 20125 Milano Italy

tel. 003902316338 – fax 00390233602728

www.quest-cdecjournal.it

questjournal@cdec.it

Cover image credit: Photograph by J. B. Lightman. S. Lindenbaum and Son furniture store, going out of business sale at 414 Grand Street, New York, March 23, 1933. Photograph courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society. From the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work (New York, N.Y.) Records (I-7).

Contents

FOCUS

*Jewish Experiences during the Great Depression
in East Central Europe (1929-1934)*

Klaus Richter and Ulrich Wyrwa

*Jewish Experiences during the Great Depression (1929-1934):
An Introduction* p. V

Péter Buchmüller and Ágnes Katalin Kelemen

The Great Depression and its Effect on Hungarian Jews p. I

Daniela Bartáková

Jewish News and Reflections on the Great Depression in Czechoslovakia p. 23

Klaus Richter

*Jews, the Great Depression, and the “Lithuanianisation” of the National
Economy* p. 45

Paula Oppermann

The World Economic Crisis. Jewish Experiences and Responses in Latvia p. 74

DISCUSSION

Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*
by **Arie M. Dubnov**

p. 102

REVIEWS

Mara Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature*
by **Michele Sarfatti**

p. 111

Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds., *Curating Fascism: Exhibitions
and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today*
by **Francesco Cassata**

p. 114

- Magda Teter, *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism*
by **Matteo Caponi** p. 119
- Tamás Turán, *Ignaz Goldziher as a Jewish Orientalist: Traditional Learning, Critical Scholarship, and Personal Piety*
by **George Y. Kohler** p. 124
- Liat Steir-Livny, *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration*
by **Guido Vitiello** p. 128
- Omer Bartov, *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past*
by **Hana Kubátová** p. 131

Jewish Experiences during the Great Depression (1929-1934): An Introduction

by *Klaus Richter* and *Ulrich Wyrwa*

After the First World War, the global economic crisis that broke out in 1929 must be considered the second “great seminal catastrophe” of the 20th century.¹ The first catastrophe had led to the collapse of the old, largely dynastically ruled Europe and, in some countries, to revolutions. At the same time, the empires of the Habsburgs, Romanovs and Ottomans collapsed, not without triggering new wars after the Great War.² From the remnants of these empires, new states were built, a process which was complicated by further conflicts, particularly regarding the treatment of minorities.

And yet the end of the war also triggered a surge of democratization in large parts of Europe.³ As the rights of minorities played a decisive role in the reorganization of Europe, these processes also benefited the Jewish populations of Europe, who were also actively involved in the democratic upheavals. However, the political upheavals in Europe also gave rise to counter-revolutionary movements and attempted coups, many of which were decidedly directed against the Jewish minority and were accompanied by an escalation of antisemitism on a previously unimaginable scale. Furthermore, during the brutal Russian Civil War, the Jewish populations were afflicted by an unprecedented level of antisemitism and

¹ Despite the inflationary use of this phrase, coined by George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order. Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3, the term remains indispensable for understanding the twentieth century. On the centrality of this formulation, Wolfgang Mommsen, *Die Urkatastrophe Deutschlands. Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914-1918* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002); Aribert Reimann, “Der Erste Weltkrieg. Urkatastrophe oder Katalysator?” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 54 (2004): 29-30 and 30-38.

² Klaus Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe. Poland and the Baltics, 1915-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Stephan Lehnstaedt, *Der vergessene Sieg. Der Polnisch-Sowjetische Krieg 1919-1921 und die Entstehung des modernen Osteuropa* (München: C.H.Beck, 2019); Steffen Kailitz, ed., *Nach dem “Großen Krieg.” Vom Triumph zum Desaster der Demokratie 1918/19 bis 1939* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

³ Tim B. Müller, *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2014); Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze, *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2015).

violence.⁴ The end of the Civil War in Russia subsequently gave rise to a new Bolshevik power, which in turn increased the intensity of antisemitic forces in other countries. This not only led to a new quality of physical violence against Jews on the part of counter-revolutionary movements, but also to an intensification of fundamentalist antisemitism. During this phase, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, compiled in pre-war Russia, were distributed internationally through numerous translations. At the same time, victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War led to the development of the new stereotype of “Jewish Bolshevism.”⁵ However, both the counter-revolutionary movements and the antisemitic acts of violence could be contained. The early post-war crises were overcome. The social situation of Jews in Europe improved, as did their legal situation, not least due to a new minority-protection regime. Jews were able to participate more and more in public life and political culture. In many cases, the last occupational barriers and legal restrictions were also lifted. In some countries, they were even able to elect their own members of parliament to represent specifically Jewish interests. This development reinforced the renaissance of Jewish culture in Europe which, according to Martin Buber, had already begun at the turn of the century.⁶ With the global Great Depression and the ensuing social upheavals and political and moral disruptions, the cautious beginnings of democratization, including the new openness towards the Jewish minorities, which still varied from country to country, collapsed.

The rapid rise in unemployment had profound socio-psychological consequences. The Great Depression led to despair, dejection, and fear of the future in almost all European countries. Social inequalities and political conflicts increased. The economic crisis became a political crisis. In many cases, politicians responded helplessly, sometimes exacerbating the problems through their actions. In many

⁴ On antisemitic violence during the Russian Civil War: Elissa Bemporad and Thomas Chopard, eds., “The Pogroms of the Russian Civil War at 100: New Trends, New Sources,” *QUEST. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 15 (2019), <https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/?issue=15>, accessed August 13, 2024.

⁵ Forthcoming: Ulrich Wyrwa, “Antisemitism in Interwar Europe,” in *Cambridge History of the Holocaust, vol. I Contexts - Origins, Comparisons, Entanglements*, eds. Mark Roseman and Dan Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

⁶ Martin Buber, “Jüdische Renaissance,” *Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatsschrift für das gesamte Judentum* 1 (Januar 1901), 7-10.

parts of Europe, there was a loss of trust in the political class and the establishment. Authoritarian political styles found widespread favor. Distrust of fellow human beings and suspiciousness of any ways of life that could be regarded as deviant emerged. In addition to this, political violence broke out once more, accompanied by street terror, which in turn fueled fears of civil war and revolution in parts of bourgeois society. The immediate consequence was a renewed rise in antisemitic movements in Europe.

The extensive literature on the Great Depression has mostly focused on the industrialized countries, too often neglecting the fact that the Great Depression had existential consequences for the agricultural states, especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, whose economies largely depended on agricultural exports and were thus shattered by the global collapse of agricultural prices.⁷

In Germany (and elsewhere in Europe), the massive collapse in prices on the New York Stock Exchange on 24 October 1929 hardly affected the broader public mood.⁸ In the spring of 1930, however, perceptions changed, especially as the global dimensions of the depression became increasingly apparent. At the same time, the political conflicts in Europe intensified, leading to the rise of the hitherto small splinter party NSDAP in Germany. Its success in turn led the old ruling class in Germany to accept this party into the government. The National Socialists soon seized all state power and smashed the republic. Armed with the power of the state, they gradually set about realizing their antisemitic delusions. The Great Depression alone paved the way for them.

⁷ From the extensive literature on the Great Depression, see i.a. the following: Roger Middleton, “The Great Depression in Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History 1914-1945*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 179-206; Christoph Kreutzmüller, Michael Wildt, and Moshe Zimmermann, eds., *National Economies. Volks-Wirtschaft, Racism and Economy in Europe between the Wars (1918-1939/45)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015); Jan-Otmar Hesse, Roman Köster, and Werner Plumpe, *Die Große Depression. Die Weltwirtschaftskrise 1929-1939* (Frankfurt/M.-New York: Campus, 2014); Randall E. Parker, ed., *The Seminal Works of the Great Depression*, 3 vol. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Pub. 2011); Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939* (New York, N.Y: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

⁸ Kristoffer Klammer, *Wirtschaftskrisen. Effekt und Faktor politischer Kommunikation. Deutschland, 1929-1976* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 80.

In contrast to the Jewish experiences during the First World War, which has been the subject of numerous studies since the commemorative year 2014 at the latest,⁹ the lives of Jews during the Great Depression have hardly ever been the object of scholarly inquiries. Although the rise of anti-democratic, authoritarian and often antisemitic movements in Europe as a direct consequence of the Great Depression has been widely analyzed in Jewish studies, there has been little research into the experiences of the Jewish population in Europe during the Great Depression and its consequences. As is evident not least in memoirs and testimonies, the memories of this were completely overshadowed by the Shoah.¹⁰

An exception is the comprehensive study on the experience of New York Jews during the Great Depression by Beth S. Wenger.¹¹ Especially after the collapse of the Bank of the United States in December 1930, where a large number of New York Jews had kept their savings accounts, confidence in the future was shattered.¹² Among young Jews in particular, optimistic expectations evaporated, and they began to look to their future with concern. Within families, however, Wenger shows that women in particular helped to overcome the crisis by adapting their household management. Young unemployed Jews, in turn, went to school for longer, thus paving the way for later upward mobility and success. The adoption of the language of the New Deal in turn promoted future cooperation with the Democratic Party.¹³

⁹ Gerald Lamprecht, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, and Ulrich Wyrwa, eds., *Jewish Soldiers in the Collective Memory of Central Europe. The Remembrance of World War I from a Jewish Perspective* (Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2019); Tim Grady, *A Deadly Legacy. German Jews and the Great War* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2017); Petra Ernst, Jeffrey Grossman, and Ulrich Wyrwa, eds., *The Great War. Reflections, Experiences and Memories of German and Habsburg Jews (1914-1918)*, *QUEST. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 9 (2016), <https://www.quest-cdejournal.it/?issue=09>, accessed August 13, 2024.

¹⁰ Monika Richarz, ed., *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland. Selbstzeugnisse zur Sozialgeschichte, 1918-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982).

¹¹ Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression. Uncertain promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹² *Ibid.*, 10-14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33-53 and 103-135.

References to the Great Depression in Jewish Encyclopedias and Handbooks

How little attention Jewish historiography has given to the impact of the Great Depression on the everyday lives of Jews in Europe is evident in the relevant handbooks and encyclopedias. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* chapters on the two great nations of the West, France and Great Britain (or England), do not address the issue at all.¹⁴ Neither does the chapter on Austria mention the economic situation of Austrian Jewry in the interwar period. The keywords Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, to name two further examples, merely indicate the population figures in the 1930s, but neither the economic activity of the Jews nor the economic slumps.¹⁵

The country chapters in the *Handbook on the History of the Jews in Europe* also refer to this aspect in brief phrases at best.¹⁶ Esther Benbassa, for instance, only mentions in passing the “economic difficulties caused by the Great Depression of 1929” in France.¹⁷ If country chapters do mention the Great Depression, they tend to refer to the fact that it led to a rise in antisemitism. Renate G. Fuchs-Mansfeld writes about the devastating effects of the economic crisis in the Netherlands, but only mentions it to refer to the government’s attempts to “stem the flow of German-Jewish refugees” after 1933.¹⁸ According to Wilfried Jilge, Jewish-Latvian relations “were not free of tensions during the Great Depression.”¹⁹ As Ezra Mendelsohn shows in his fundamental study on the Jewish minorities in Central Europe in the interwar period, the economic decline of Eastern European Jewry in the interwar period resulted in an intensification of antisemitism.²⁰

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edition. [*EJ*], 22 vol. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007); *EJ*, vol. 7, 159; *EJ*, vol. 6, 417.

¹⁵ *EJ*, vol. 4, 271; *EJ*, vol. 21, 412.

¹⁶ Elke Vera Kotowski, Julius H. Schoeps, and Hiltrud Wallenborn, eds., *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa, Bd. 1, Länder und Regionen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001).

¹⁷ Esther Benbassa, “Frankreich,” in *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, 387-418; 408.

¹⁸ Renate G. Fuchs-Mansfeld, “Die Niederlande,” in *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, 419-439; 436.

¹⁹ Norbert Franz and Wilfried Jilge, “Rußland, Ukraine, Weißrußland, Baltikum (Lettland, Estland),” in *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, 167-227; 222.

²⁰ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 255.

The *Encyclopaedia of Jewish History and Culture* also occasionally refers to the consequences of the Great Depression for the Jews.²¹ In France, according to Pierre Birnbaum, the Great Depression increased support for the Popular Front led by the Jewish socialist Leon Blum.²² As Marcos Silber emphasizes in the keyword “Profession,” the depression affected Jewish entrepreneurs and workers as well as Jews in the liberal professions in the same way as the corresponding professional groups from the non-Jewish population.²³ In Vilnius, the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institute*, established in 1925 as an interdisciplinary research institute on the past and present of the Jews of Eastern Europe, ran into financial difficulties as a result of the global economic crisis, as Samuel D. Kassow shows.²⁴ According to Peter Jelavich, the economic collapse led to a politicization of Viennese cabaret.²⁵ In the United States of America, too, the Great Depression had devastating consequences for the Jewish population. The *Encyclopaedia of Jewish History and Culture* refers occasionally to these experiences. For instance, the political and social uncertainties caused by the crisis led to the politicization of musical productions in the USA, which had previously been rather apolitical. As Theresa Eisele shows, George Gershwin’s socially critical musical *Strike Up the Band*, for example, achieved great success on Broadway three years later after initial failures in 1927.²⁶ Conversely, according to Nina Warnke, the crisis contributed to the decline of Yiddish theatre in America.²⁷ The designer Lucian Bernhard, professor of advertising at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin, who emigrated to the USA in 1932 and had previously already spent substantial time in the USA as a successful advertising designer for American companies, initiated the founding of a company for industrial design in New York in 1928, which, according to Ori Z. Soltes, ceased its activities the following year due to the global economic crisis.²⁸ Not only in America, but also in Australia, Jewish communities suffered from the

²¹ Dan Diner, ed., *Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur [EJGK]*, 8 vol. (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B.Metzler, 2011-2014).

²² *EJGK*, vol. 6, 304.

²³ *EJGK*, vol. 5, 30.

²⁴ *EJGK*, vol. 6, 482.

²⁵ *EJGK*, vol. 3, 283.

²⁶ *EJGK*, vol. 5, 213.

²⁷ *EJGK*, vol. 5, 411.

²⁸ *EJGK*, vol. 5, 288.

Great Depression, as Kay Dreyfus and Jon Stratton have stressed in the case of Melbourne.²⁹

In order to conclude the section on references to the Great Depression in Jewish historiography, the following section will summarize remarks on Germany, as well as on Poland and Romania, especially as these two latter countries in particular, which will be discussed further below, have remained a blank space in this “Focus” of *Quest 26*.

In the case of Germany, the rise of the NSDAP is widely described in general accounts of the history of the Jews in the wake of the Great Depression, but the consequences of the economic collapse for the everyday lives of Jews before 1933 are rarely analyzed. The keyword “Germany” does appear in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, but it refers to the economic crisis resulting from the hyperinflation of 1923.³⁰ In the four-volume *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte in der Neuzeit*, published on behalf of the Leo Baeck Institute, Avraham Barkai devotes a section to the topic in his chapter on demography and economic development in the Weimar Republic.³¹ In the *Encyclopaedia of Jewish History and Culture*, Michael Brenner points out in the section on the Academy of Jewish Sciences, founded in Berlin in 1919, that its decline began with the Great Depression.³² In the entry on Jewish historiography, he adds that the joint study of a Jewish global history in several volumes, planned by the Academy and Ismar Elbogen, also failed due to the depression.³³ The Deutsch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund, founded during the period of national unification, whose task was also to help organize the relief work of the Jewish communities, lost most of its assets during the Great Depression and had to cease its activities after 1930, according to Andreas Reinke.³⁴ According to Johannes Wachten, the free school founded by the Jewish community in Frankfurt am Main in 1804, the Philanthropin, also had to lay off some teachers due to the strained community finances caused by the global economic crisis, until

²⁹ *EJGK*, vol. 4, 127.

³⁰ *EJ*, vol. 7, 530.

³¹ Avraham Barkai, “Bevölkerungsrückgang und die wirtschaftliche Stagnation,” in *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte in der Neuzeit, Bd. IV. Aufbruch und Zerstörung 1918-1945*, eds. Avraham Barkai and Paul Mendes-Flohr (München: C.H.Beck 1997), 44-47.

³² *EJGK*, vol. 1, 22.

³³ *EJGK*, vol. 3, 66.

³⁴ *EJGK*, vol. 2, 109.

the kindergarten was closed in 1930 and the women's school in 1932.³⁵ In their contribution on the diary of Anne Frank, Raphael Gross and Laura Robertson stress that the Frankfurt headquarters of her father's bank fell into crisis during the Great Depression.³⁶

For Poland, the corresponding entry in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* refers rather vaguely to the "economic collapse of Polish Jewry" after the First World War, but not to the Great Depression.³⁷ Jerzy Tomaszewski, on the other hand, stresses that it was Poznań, Poland's most economically developed region, that was most severely affected by the crisis. Jewish peddlers emigrated. Growing poverty increased the demand for cheap goods of poor quality. As a result, the large trading companies made heavy losses.³⁸ The *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, on the other hand, states in the keyword "Warsaw" that, on the one hand, the city's economic problems in the new Polish state were exacerbated by the economic crisis, but that Warsaw was nevertheless able to maintain its leading position as the most important center of Yiddish book printing.³⁹ Łódź also experienced the interwar period as an era of worsening economic difficulties, which was linked to the consequences of the Great Depression.⁴⁰ According to Gertrud Pickhan's entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Jewish History and Culture* about the General Jewish Workers' Union, Bund, founded in 1897, the pauperization and proletarianization of the Jewish population in Poland, resulting from the Great Depression, directly benefited the Bund, making it the strongest political force among Polish Jews in the 1930s. This was reflected not only in the increase in membership numbers, but also in the election results for city councils and municipal councils.⁴¹ As Katrin Steffen stresses in her entry on the Polish parliament, the Sejm, the cause of the catastrophic situation of Polish Jews due to

³⁵ *EJGK*, vol. 4, 531.

³⁶ *EJGK*, vol. 6, 7.

³⁷ *EJ*, vol. 16, 304.

³⁸ Jerzy Tomaszewski, "The Role of Jews in Polish Commerce, 1918-1939," in *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, eds. Yisrael Gutman et. al. (Hanover-London: University Press of New England, 1989), 141-157; 150-151.

³⁹ Antony Polonsky, "Warsaw," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1993-2004; 1997 and 2000.

⁴⁰ Robert Moses Shapiro, "Łódź," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1081-1086; 1083.

⁴¹ *EJGK*, vol. 1, 469.

the Great Depression lay in the credit, financial and economic policies of the Polish government.⁴² In the *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, Heiko Haumann also wrote of the “proletarianization” of Polish Jews in the 1930s, but above all he notes a renewed flare-up of antisemitism due to the global depression.⁴³ In his account of the situation of the Jews of East Central Europe in the interwar period for Poland, Ezra Mendelsohn notes that the triumph of nationalism in the interwar period was exacerbated by the Great Depression and dashed any hope of Polish Jewry for an improvement of their already miserable economic situation.⁴⁴ The global economic crisis hit Poland with full force in 1929 and intensified the effects of economic antisemitism.⁴⁵ Even though the entire Polish population became impoverished in the 1930s, it became apparent that not only Polish Jewish youth had “no future” in the country, but that the entire Jewish community was in danger.⁴⁶ The most striking aspect of the economic crisis was the decline in the number of Jewish-owned businesses. Ezra Mendelsohn quotes a contemporary study by the Jewish economist Menakhem Linder, who analyzed the situation of Jewish-owned businesses in eleven towns in the Białystok region between 1932 and 1937. According to his findings, there were 663 Jewish-owned shops in these towns in 1932, which accounted for 92.0 per cent of the total number of shops. In 1937, there were only 563 shops, which corresponded to 64.5 per cent.⁴⁷

For Romania, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* does provide a picture of the occupational composition of the Jewish population, and the article also mentions the importance of Jewish banks for the Romanian economy, but the consequences of the economic crisis for the country are not explained.⁴⁸ Raphael Vago merely points out in passing that the economic crisis primarily affected the Jewish minority in those parts of the country where their share of the population was

⁴² *EJGK*, vol. 5, 419.

⁴³ Heiko Haumann, “Polen und Litauen,” in *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, 228-274; 269.

⁴⁴ E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *EJ*, vol. 17, 384.

high. Overall, however, the situation of Jews and non-Jews was similar.⁴⁹ In his contribution to the *Handbook on the History of Jews in Europe*, Avram Andrei Baleanu emphasizes the increased antisemitic agitation in the wake of the crisis, which he interprets as a “diversionary manoeuvre” in the face of “rising unemployment.”⁵⁰ According to Hildrun Glass, the number of members of Jewish credit co-operatives, which had been rebuilt in Romania after the end of the First World War with the help of loans from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, had risen sharply in the 1920s. As a result of the Great Depression, however, this number fell by a third.⁵¹ According to Ezra Mendelsohn, the Jewish population of Romania—as in other Eastern European countries—was primarily engaged in trade. But within the new Romania, the socio-economic situation of Romanian Jews differed considerably in the various parts of the country. In Bessarabia and Bukovina, the predominantly impoverished Jewish population played a strong role in trade, crafts and the liberal professions. In Moldavia, they were active in trade and industry, while in Wallachia, where the Jewish population was much smaller, there was a significant Jewish bourgeoisie, especially in Bucharest, and several wealthy Jewish banking families resided there.⁵² In an article on Bucharest Jewry, Felicia Waldman points out that the global economic crisis in Romania reached its peak in 1931, when one of Romania’s most important banks, the *Marmorosch Blank Bank* owned by the Jewish banker Aristide Blank, had to file for bankruptcy.⁵³ Overall, it can be said that the Jewish experience of the Great Depression remains rather unexplored in Jewish historiography.

⁴⁹ Raphael Vago, “Romanian Jewry During the Unterwar Period,” in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29-56; 39.

⁵⁰ Avram Andrei Baleanu, “Rumänien,” in *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Juden in Europa*, 277-286; 282.

⁵¹ Hildrun Glass, *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft. Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien 1918-1938* (München: Oldenbourg, 1996), 106-107.

⁵² E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 179.

⁵³ Felicia Waldman, “Jewish Mobility and Settlement in Bucharest,” in *Economy and Society in Central and Eastern Europe. Territory, Population, Consumption*, eds. Daniel Dumitran and Valer Moga (Wien: Lit, 2013), 109-122; 118. *Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Daily News Bulletin* 243, October 23, 1931, 5-6.

Contemporary Coverage in the German-Jewish Press

Contemporary Jewish observers, on the other hand, had a very keen sense of the effects of the economic crisis on everyday Jewish life and life in the Jewish communities. The German-Jewish press reported on this time and again. At the same time, the commentaries showcase the diversity and contradictory nature of Jewish assessments of the crisis, even if they were united in emphasizing the effects. In December 1930, the organ of liberal Judaism, the *Central-Vereins-Zeitung*, reported on a lecture at a conference of Jewish youth organizations in Nuremberg on the question: “What is to become of our youth?” The starting point of the lecture was the Great Depression, which, according to the report, “was having a particularly catastrophic effect on young German Jews.”⁵⁴ Just one month later, the paper printed a longer, two-page article by journalist and *Berliner Tageblatt* employee Günther Stein⁵⁵ on unemployment and the fate of the Jews.⁵⁶ According to Stein, it was crucial to recognize the economic causes of unemployment and the structure of “Jewry, which is also affected by it, from an economic perspective.” Judaism had a share in the extent of the “overt or covert misery that was several times greater” as that of the German middle class as a whole. According to Stein, Jews were living “in a period of the crisis of capitalism,” which, after the “first great eruption” of the world war, has been exacerbated by a “new agglomeration of foreign policy and socio-political storm clouds.” “What does all this mean for the fate of the Jews?” Stein asked in conclusion: “Sad things, very sad things. Not only will they have to bear the great difficulties of the future together with the other parts of the German people, but their share of hardship and worry will obviously be much greater than the numerical weight of the Jewish group in the German national community.” The Jewish Society for the Promotion of Sciences (Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums) was also affected by the crisis in the 1930s.⁵⁷ In January 1931, the community newspaper of the Jewish religious community in Leipzig reported on

⁵⁴ *Central-Verein-Zeitung. Blätter für Deutschtum und Judentum* 50, December 12, 1930.

⁵⁵ Günther Stein, 1932 correspondent in Moscow, emigrated in 1933 to Great Britain.

⁵⁶ Günther Stein, “Wege aus der Krise? Die Arbeitslosigkeit und das Schicksal der Juden,” *Central-Verein-Zeitung. Blätter für Deutschtum* 2, January 9, 1931.

⁵⁷ *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75, no. 2 (1931), 156-160.

a meeting of the “Interest Group of the Jewish Unemployed” on the topic of “The global economic crisis and its impact on Judaism.” According to the article, “the daily increase in unemployment” had caused “ever greater panic among Jewish employees.”⁵⁸ In the magazine *Der Morgen. Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland*, Leopold Merzbach, managing director of a Frankfurt banking house and expert witness in banking and financial matters in court, examined the issue from a macroeconomic perspective: “The economic situation must currently give the unbiased observer the impression of grotesque confusion.”⁵⁹ The Vienna-based liberal journal *Die Wahrheit. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für jüdische Interessen*, quoted in May 1931 from an appeal by the “Central Commission for Social Welfare of the Jewish Community of Vienna,” which provided a “gripping picture of the immense economic hardship among Viennese Jews.”⁶⁰ “Harrowing dramas of the most profound human suffering,” the appeal states, “play out daily in the rooms of the Vienna Jewish welfare center.” It concludes with an appeal for donations, because who “will want to stand idly by and watch in cold blood as Jewish livelihoods perish hopelessly and helplessly as a result of the catastrophic economic situation, and who can pass by the plight of our youth with indifference?”

In 1931, the economist and journalist Alfred Marcus published a sociological study on the economic crisis of German Jewry, in the foreword to which he stressed that a “strong trend towards the proletarianization of German Jewry” had become noticeable.⁶¹ However, while Marcus did not specifically address the consequences of 24 October 1929, Hubert Pollack, who had studied economics and philosophy at Berlin University and had been head of the Office for Statistics of Berlin’s Jewish community since 1930, emphasized in an article in the journal of the Cartel of Jewish Student Societies, *Der jüdische Student*: “We are in the midst of an

⁵⁸ *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* 3, January 16, 1931.

⁵⁹ Leopold Merzbach, “Betrachtungen zur Wirtschaftslage,” *Der Morgen. Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland* 1 (April 1931), 97–101.

⁶⁰ “Wirtschaftsnot,” *Die Wahrheit. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für jüdische Interessen* 22, May 29, 1931, 2.

⁶¹ Alfred Marcus, *Die wirtschaftliche Krise des deutschen Juden. Eine soziologische Untersuchung* (Berlin: Stikle, 1931).

economic crisis of German Jewry of a magnitude and with a catastrophic force that would have been inconceivable 20 years ago.”⁶²

The Jewish-Zionist labor movement also followed the consequences of the Great Depression with particular attention. As the organ of the Zionist National Committee for Austria, *Die Stimme, Jüdische Zeitung*, reported, Berl Locker, born in Galicia and a member of the executive of the Zionist-socialist organization Poale Zion and the World Zionist Organization, gave a speech on the world economic crisis at the Vienna Congress of the Workers’ International, in which he spoke of the “process of declassification” that Jewry had undergone after the war. According to Locker, Jewish workers were therefore closely following the “phenomena of the world economic crisis.” They were therefore following the “efforts of the international proletariat to counter this world economic crisis with the means of class struggle with even greater hopes.”⁶³ In the same month, the co-editor of *Die Stimme*, Leo Goldhammer, wrote at the beginning of a series of articles on the Jewish economic crisis that “the economic catastrophes occur earlier among the Jews and that the same causes trigger much stronger setbacks among them.”⁶⁴ In November 1931, the Russian-born socialist journalist Israel Hellenberg, who lived in Austria, also wrote an article *Die Stimme* about the collapse of the Austrian Creditanstalt in May 1931. The world was “plunged into an unprecedented global economic crisis [...] which ultimately also dragged the banks down into its maelstrom.” According to Hellenberg, the first to suffer were Jewish bank employees.⁶⁵

The journal of the Jewish social democratic workers’ organization Poale Zion, *Der Jüdische Arbeiter* (The Jewish Worker), struck an anti-capitalist note. On the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Austrian group, it stated that the global economic crisis had “worsened the situation of Jews throughout the capitalist world tremendously.” It “starkly demonstrates the inability of the bourgeoisie to

⁶² Hubert Pollack, “Jüdische Wirtschaftsnot. Zugleich eine Besprechung des Buches Alfred Markus [sic] ‘Die wirtschaftliche Krise des Deutschen Juden’,” *Der jüdische Student. Zeitschrift des Kartells Jüdischer Verbindungen* 8-9 (August 1931), 263-267.

⁶³ *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 187, August 6, 1931.

⁶⁴ “Die Wirtschaftsnot der österreichischen Juden,” *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 197, August 15, 1931, 2.

⁶⁵ Israel Hellenberg, “Glanz und Elend der jüdischen Bankbeamten. Zum Problem: Juden und Credit-Anstalt,” *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 202, November 19, 1931.

regulate production.” The Jewish workers’ youth had to deal with economic issues because “capitalism is plunging the whole world into chaos.”⁶⁶ In March 1932, Mendel Singer, who came from Brody, had been active in Poale Zion since 1907 and was elected to the board of the Jewish Community of Vienna in 1928, gave a speech on the Jewish community in the economic crisis, in which he explained that “the impoverishment and proletarianization” of Jewish youth was progressing inexorably. They were “in a much more desperate situation than their non-Jewish class brothers.”⁶⁷

In March 1933, the editors of the Frankfurter *Israelitisches Gemeindeblatt* felt that the economic situation of the Jews was so threatening that they asked five authors of different political orientations to contribute articles on this topic.⁶⁸ Kurt Wongtschowski, head of the German-Jewish hiking society Kameraden, which was committed to a “connection between Germanness and Judaism,”⁶⁹ deplored both the “proletarianization of the middle class, to which the majority of German Jews belong” and the “urbanisation of German Jews.” Alex Benjamin, head of a Jewish labour register, pleaded for more attention to be paid to the issue of career choice and for Jewish careers advice to be improved. Edgar Gerson referred to Karl Marx and cited the *Economic Card Index of the Jewish Community in Berlin* (*Wirtschaftskarthotek der Jüdischen Gemeinde in Berlin*), which listed around 40,000 people in need of help, as evidence of the pauperisation of the Jewish population. For Gerson, however, “a return to bourgeois positions is no longer an option.” He called on the German Jews to spiritually draw closer to the proletariat and their struggle.

In June 1933, the General Secretary of the Association for Liberal Judaism in Germany and editor-in-chief of the *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung*, George Goetz, saw the cause of the misery of Jews in Germany solely in the economic collapse.

⁶⁶ “5. Jahre Jüd. soz. Arbeiterjugend. Was sind unsere wichtigsten gegenwärtigen Aufgaben?,” *Der Jüdische Arbeiter. Organ der jüdischen sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterorganisation Poale Zion* 19, December 18, 1931, 3.

⁶⁷ Mendel Singer, “Die jüdische Gemeinde in der Wirtschaftskrise,” *Der Jüdische Arbeiter* 5, March 4, 1932, 1.

⁶⁸ “Das wirtschaftliche Schicksal des deutschen Judentums. Unsere Lage — unsere Aufgaben,” *Jugend und Gemeinde. Beilage zum Frankfurter Israelitisches Gemeindeblatt* 7 (March 1933), 176-179.

⁶⁹ *Jüdisches Jahrbuch* (Berlin: Scherbel), vol. 8 (1933), 101.

Fatalistically, he himself warned against emigration at this moment. The word emigration was circulating in Jewish newspapers, but, according to Goetz, this “magic word is a deception.”⁷⁰ For the hardship, “from the effects of which the German people are suffering more than any other, has a very specific name: it is called the world economic crisis, with the stress on the first syllable.” To anyone who believed that “the new German Jewish problem could be solved by migration,” Goetz replied: “To put it in a nutshell: it cannot be done.” As late as November 1933, Herbert Kahn, who also wrote for the magazine *Jüdische Wohlfahrtspflege und Sozialpolitik*, saw a solution to the problems in his article for the *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung*. One “root cause of the economic crisis [...] is the general illness of commercial enterprises, of individual companies. This can be cured.”⁷¹

The Zionist press followed the development of the global economic crisis and its consequences with particular attention. In July 1930, the Austrian-born supporter of Revisionist Zionism, who had lived mainly in Palestine since 1922, stated in a “Report from Palestine,” published in *Die Stimme*, that “the neighbouring countries of Palestine” had not been spared from the global economic crisis. But, he continued, “in Palestine one hardly feels anything of it.”⁷² As early as January of the following year, however, the same Zionist newspaper had to report: “The world economic crisis is also beginning to have a noticeable effect in Palestine.”⁷³ A little later, the organ of the socialist Zionists also reported that the global economic crisis was “leading to economic stagnation and unemployment, too, albeit low” in Palestine.⁷⁴ In September, however, *Keren Hayesod*, the founding fund for collecting donations and promoting immigration to Palestine, placed an advert in the *Stimme*: “The world economic crisis is threatening our work of reconstruction in Palestine” and called on all Zionists to make an “emergency donation.”⁷⁵

The German-Jewish press was not only concerned with the situation in Germany, but also frequently reported on the situation in other European and American

⁷⁰ Gtz. [George Goetz], “Emigranten,” *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung* 6, Juni 15, 1933.

⁷¹ Herbert Kahn, “Betriebsumstellung,” *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung* 24, November 10, 1933.

⁷² Wolfgang Weisl, “Der Alltag in Palästina,” *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 134, July 10, 1930.

⁷³ *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 161, January 29, 1931.

⁷⁴ *Der Jüdische Arbeiter. Organ der sozialdemokratischen Poale Zion Österreichs* 9, May 26, 1931.

⁷⁵ *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 194, September 24, 1931, 3.

countries. In February 1931, the news of B'nai B'rith wrote about the plight of Jewish workers in the Antwerp diamond industry;⁷⁶ in the same month, *Die Wahrheit* reported on a lecture on the Great Depression at a meeting of the Union of Democratic Jews in the small Polish town of Bielsko-Biala⁷⁷, in which the speaker referred to the economic situation in Poland and the catastrophic situation of the Jewish population.⁷⁸ Also in February 1931, the economist Gerhard Schacher opened a two-part detailed analysis in the magazine *Der Morgen* on the economic situation of the Jewish minorities in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, in which he described the economic development in south-eastern Europe in detail, but did not go into the consequences of the depression any further.⁷⁹ Instead, in May 1931, *Die Wahrheit* printed the annual report of the Anglo-Jewish Association on the situation of Jews in Eastern and Central Europe, which emphasised the particular impact of the Great Depression on the Jews in these countries.⁸⁰ In Poland in particular, it stated, "the unfavourable economic situation [...] has had catastrophic consequences." And according to an interview the newspaper conducted with Hungarian Prime Minister Bethlen, the economic crisis had hit the Jews "harder than any other part of the population, as Jews are mainly active in trade, which suffers most in times of economic depression."⁸¹ According to the Dresden Jewish community newspaper, the Association for the Promotion of Crafts, Industry and Agriculture among the Jews (Verband zur Förderung von Handwerk, Industrie und Landwirtschaft unter den Juden) held an event in November 1931 on the Jewish question in the context of the global economic crisis, at which the speaker

⁷⁶ "Kurze Übersicht," *Der Orden Bne Briss. Mitteilungen d. Großloge für Deutschland* 2 (February 1931), 35.

⁷⁷ 1910 hatte der Ort einen jüdischen Bevölkerungsanteil von 16,3 %: Ludwig Patryn, *Die Ergebnisse der Volkszählung vom 31. Dezember 1910 in Schlesien*, ed. Landesstatistisches Amt des schlesischen Landesausschusses (Troppau: Schlesischer Landesausschuss, 1912), 8-9.

⁷⁸ *Die Wahrheit* 8, February 20, 1931, 9.

⁷⁹ Gerhard Schacher, "Die wirtschaftliche Lage der jüdischen Minderheiten in Südosteuropa," *Der Morgen. Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland* 6 (1930-1931), no. 6 (February 1931), 579-590; 7 (1931-1932), no. 1 (April 1931), 102-109. Bereits 1930 hatte Schacher eine wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Studie über diesen Raum veröffentlicht: Gerhard Schacher, *Der Balkan und seine wirtschaftlichen Kräfte*, (Stuttgart: Enke, 1930).

⁸⁰ *Die Wahrheit. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für jüdische Interessen* 18, May 1, 1931.

⁸¹ "Die Juden in Ungarn. Ein Interview mit dem Ministerpräsidenten Graf Bethlen," *Die Wahrheit. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für jüdische Interessen* 18, May 1, 1931.

Aron Singalowsky, Berlin board member of the association⁸², emphasised “that the process of loss of the Jewish middle class masses of Eastern Europe, which must be prevented, is a problem affecting the entire cultural world.”⁸³ However, the German-Jewish press was not only interested in Eastern Europe, but also in America, as an article in the *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung* in April 1933 shows. The global economic crisis had also left its mark on Argentina, “a country that is rich in itself.” Unemployment was also increasing there “to an alarming extent.”⁸⁴ Finally, in 1935, the Orthodox *Israelit* published an article about Vilnius and Kaunas, which stated: “The economic situation of Lithuanian Jews has become quite critical in recent years under the impact of the global economic crisis.”⁸⁵ In November 1936, Eva Reichmann-Jungmann described the desolate situation of Poland and Polish Jewry in *Morgen*. “Horrific mass misery” had gripped Poland and Polish Jewry, and because the “Jews are a minority, they are the first to be dragged down in the maelstrom of economic decline.”⁸⁶

Simon Dubnow, who as the author of a world history of the Jewish people (completed in 1929) was very familiar with the lives of European Jews⁸⁷, also closely followed the effects of the economic collapse in his diaries: “Economic crisis everywhere in Europe, terrible unemployment,”⁸⁸ he noted in January 1930, and in February 1932 he added that the Great Depression had gripped the whole world.⁸⁹

Even if the two contemporary sociological studies on the economic situation of the Jewish population in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s mentioned in the

⁸² On Aron Singalowsky see: *Jüdisches Adressbuch für Gross-Berlin*, Ausgabe 1929/1930 (Berlin: Goedega, 1931), 313 and 416. Singalowsky had published a study on the economic conditions of the Eastern European Jews in 1928 already: Aron Singalowsky, *Aufbau und Umbau. Zum Problem des jüdischen Wirtschaftslebens in Osteuropa* (Berlin: Philo, 1928).

⁸³ *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde Dresden* 7, no. 11 (November 1931), 8-9.

⁸⁴ *Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung* 1, April 1, 1933.

⁸⁵ *Der Israelit* 35, August 29, 1935, 5-6.

⁸⁶ Eva Reichmann-Jungmann, “Eine Million zuviel,” *Der Morgen. Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland* 12 (1936/1937), no. 8 (November 1936), 337-343.

⁸⁷ Viktor E. Kelner, *Simon Dubnow. Eine Biographie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

⁸⁸ Simon Dubnow, *Buch des Lebens. Erinnerungen und Gedanken. Materialien zur Geschichte meiner Zeit*, ed. Verena Dohrn, trans. Barbara Conrad, vol. 1, (1860-1903), vol. 2 (1903-1922), vol. 3, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 145.

⁸⁹ S. Dubnow, *Buch des Lebens*, 156.

newspapers did not address the Jewish experience and the socio-psychological effects of the Great Depression on German Jewry, the press coverage shows how accurately these were perceived in their time.⁹⁰ After the Shoah, however, the memory of the Great Depression tended to be forgotten, and historically-minded Jewish studies did not take up this topic either.

The Conception of this “Focus”

If we acknowledge that the impact of the depression on European Jewry is underexplored, this is even more true in the case of the Jewish experiences of the depression in East Central Europe, where around 46% of the world’s Jewish population lived at the time.⁹¹ This is despite the fact that the impact of the Great Depression on the fragile sovereign states of this region was particularly harsh if compared to other parts of Europe.⁹² Apart from Czechoslovakia, all remaining democracies in the region were replaced by authoritarian regimes. Minority policies were increasingly reshaped through pressures from the extreme right. In Poland, the government’s right-ward turn led to tacit political support for economic boycotts of Jews.⁹³ International influence on East Central Europe, epitomized by the League of Nations’ efforts of financial reconstruction, gave way to an aggressive Nazi policy of exerting economic hegemony over the region.⁹⁴ In

⁹⁰ Alfred Marcus, *Die wirtschaftliche Krise des deutschen Juden. Eine soziologische Untersuchung* (Berlin, 1931); Jakob Lestschinsky, *Das wirtschaftliche Schicksal des deutschen Judentums* (Berlin: Stikle, 1932).

⁹¹ *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 32 (1930-1931), 225.

⁹² Iván T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 253; Hans Raupach, “The Impact of the Great Depression on Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 4 (1969): 75-86.

⁹³ William W. Hagen, “Before the ‘Final Solution’: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996): 351-381.

⁹⁴ Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Nathan Marcus, *Austrian Reconstruction and the Collapse of Global Finance, 1921–1931* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Klaus Richter, “The Catastrophe of the Present and That of the Future: Expectations for European States from the Great War to the Great Depression,” *Contemporary European History* (2023), doi:10.1017/S096077732200100X: 1–19.

international historical scholarship, the Great Depression of Europe's peripheries is gradually shifting back into focus.⁹⁵ Hence, this special issue will focus on the experiences and perceptions of the Jewish population of East Central Europe during the Great Depression, which are represented here by two successor states of the Habsburg Empire (Czechoslovakia and Hungary) and two of the Russian Empire (Lithuania and Latvia). These four contributions provide fundamentally new insights into how Jews experienced the Great Depression in a region that had undergone—and was still undergoing—a profound geo-political, political, social, and economic transformation, as the Great War had reshaped statehood itself, but also the relationship between states and societies and between the national groups contained within these states.

In their article “The Great Depression and its Effect on Hungarian Jews,” Ágnes Katalin Kelemen and Péter Buchmüller put the focus on Jewish university students and lawyers. Through these case studies, they discern both direct and indirect consequences of the Great Depression on Hungary's Jewry and reconstruct how far the Great Depression catalysed political antisemitism to enable the rise of far-right extremist politicians. Daniel Bartáková studies “Jewish News and Reflections on the Great Depression in Czechoslovakia” and argues that the crisis aggravated disparities between the industrialised Czech lands and rural Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus, with significant implications for the Jewish minority more broadly. Through a close reading of the Zionist periodical *Židovské Zprávy* (Jewish News), Bartáková identifies how Jews made sense of both domestic and international events—e.g. in the case of Palestine—during the depression. In his contribution on “Jews and the Great Depression in Lithuania,” Klaus Richter zooms in on the impact of the depression on the relationship of Jews with both the Lithuanian majority population and with the Lithuanian state. His article

⁹⁵ See, for instance, the project *The Liminality of Failing Democracy: East Central Europe during the Interwar Slump*, funded by the Gerda-Henkel Foundation, and one of its key outputs: Klaus Richter, Jasmin Nithammer, and Anca Mandru, eds., *The Great Depression in Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Central European University Press, in print); Jerzy Łazor, *The Political Economy of Interwar Foreign Investment: Economic Nationalism and French Capital in Poland, 1918-1939* (London: Routledge, 2024); Catherine P. Brégianni, *The Great Depression and Greece: Monetary and Economic Perspectives in a Transnational Context* (Athens: Alfeios Editions, 2023); Gérard Béaur, Francesco Chiapparino, eds., *Agriculture and the Great Depression: The Rural Crisis of the 1930s in Europe and the Americas* (London: Routledge, 2023).

argues that the depression reshaped the lives of Lithuanian Jews, dramatically transforming the predominantly Jewish towns economically, socially, and culturally. At the same time, the rise of the Nazis in Germany made Lithuanian Jews more dependent than ever on the existence of an independent Lithuania. Finally, Paula Opperman argues that Jews were disproportionately affected by the depression because of their strong representation in those economic sectors that were particularly hard hit. This was aggravated by increasingly exclusionary politics after the authoritarian coup of 1934. In her contribution, “The World Economic Crisis: Jewish Experiences and Responses in Latvia,” she also argues that Latvian Jews, who, for historical reasons, were a highly heterogeneous group, responded to the depression with a sense of unity.

How little attention the depression has received in historical research to date is reflected in the editors’ difficulties to find authors for contributions to this issue, as well as in the cancellation of two essays that had already been promised shortly before the editorial deadline. These were intended to address to Poland and Romania, the two largest countries of East Central Europe, without which the Jewish history of the region remains incomplete. This leaves a serious gap. For this reason, the editors stress that this issue is merely a starting point and hope that it will inspire further research into other parts of the region and of Europe more broadly.

Concluding Remarks

A study on the situation of the Jewish minorities in Eastern Europe, commissioned by the World Jewish Congress and published shortly before the beginning of the Second World War, stated that “it is common knowledge that Jewish homes have suffered far more from the crisis than non-Jewish ones.” In Poland, the depression in the countryside had pushed peasants into predominantly Jewish towns, exacerbating unemployment and ethnic tensions. In Bulgaria, government responses to the depression had resulted in the bankruptcy of Jewish shopkeepers. Jews in the Free City of Danzig, whose economic livelihood depended on international trade, felt they were “caught between Germany and Poland, abandoned by the League of Nations, as helpless victims of the prevailing politics

in their homeland and neighboring countries.” Across several states in the region, the proliferation of clearing trade, especially with Nazi Germany, led to the exclusion of Jews from the commercial sector.⁹⁶

In their precise observations of the social hardship that the economic crisis inflicted on the Jewish population, the German-Jewish media did notice the extent to which antisemitism had been exacerbated by the economic collapse. In the aforementioned report on the meeting of the interest group of Jewish unemployed people in January 1931, the *Leipziger Gemeindeblatt* wrote that the Jewish employees “were unable to resist the antisemitic economic boycott.”⁹⁷ Leopold Plaschkes, chairman of the Association of Radical Zionists, said in 1931 that “Jewish hardship [...] is part of the general hardship, but for us Jews it is considerably exacerbated by political and economic Antisemitism [...]”.⁹⁸ The magazine of the Jewish workers’ organisation Poale Zion, *Der Jüdische Arbeiter*, emphasised that the economic crisis was compounded by “the recent rise in Antisemitism, which threatens the physical existence of Jewry in most capitalist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.”⁹⁹ At the opening of the Hechaluz movement’s youth centre in Vienna, the chairman described “the catastrophic situation of Jewry” during the global economic crisis and the “new flare-up of Antisemitism” as a result.¹⁰⁰ According to Kurt Wongtschowski, the special situation of the Jews was exacerbated by “the Antisemitism that has become extraordinarily strong today.”¹⁰¹ The Anglo-Jewish Association’s annual report on the year 1930, which described the impact of the global economic crisis on Jews in all countries, already stated for Germany “that the tremendous success of the National Socialists in the Reichstag elections in September 1930 had caused great concern among German Jews.”¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Congrès Juif Mondial. Département Économique, *La Situation Économique des Minorités Juives*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1938), 22, 39, 58, 69 and 82.

⁹⁷ *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* 3, January 16, 1931.

⁹⁸ “Die Wirtschaftsnot der österreichischen Juden,” *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 197, August 15, 1931, 2.

⁹⁹ *Der Jüdische Arbeiter. Organ der jüdischen sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterorganisation Poale Zion* 19, December 18, 1931, 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Die Stimme. Jüdische Zeitung* 208, December 31, 1931, 9.

¹⁰¹ *Jugend und Gemeinde. Beilage zum Frankfurter Israelitischen Gemeindeblatt* 7 (March 1933), 176-179.

¹⁰² *Die Wahrheit. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für jüdische Interessen* 18, May 1, 1931.

While in the United States, the American Jewry, as Beth S. Wenger has shown, created a new self-confidence through creativity and innovation and the adoption of the language of the New Deal. In Germany, in contrast, the National Socialists came to power and brought death and destruction to European Jewry, which was to eclipse all the experiences that Jews in Europe had to make in the course of the Great Depression.¹⁰³

Klaus Richter is a professor in Central and Eastern European History at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on nationalism and the social and economic history of Poland and the Baltics. Among his publications are a book on antisemitism in Lithuania during the late Russian Empire: *Antisemitismus in Litauen: Christen, Juden und die "Emanzipation" der Bauern, 1889-1914* (Berlin: Metropol, 2013) and *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Ulrich Wyrwa retired Professor of History at the University of Potsdam and Fellow at the Centre for Research on Antisemitism at the Technical University of Berlin. His field of work was originally in the area of historical consumer research and shifted to Jewish history and the history of antisemitism in 19th and 20th century Europe, with a particular focus on Italy and Germany. Publications (until 2021) under: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/hi-wyrwa/schriftenverzeichnis>.

Keywords: Great Depression, Economic Crisis, Europe, Eastern Europe, Historiography

How to quote this article:

Klaus Richter and Ulrich Wyrwa, "Introduction," 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/15659

¹⁰³ Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 206.

The Great Depression and its Effect on Hungarian Jews

by Péter Buchmüller and Ágnes Katalin Kelemen

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of the Great Depression on Jews in Hungary, with a specific focus on university students and lawyers—two fields in which the presence of Jews was highly contested. Instead of focusing on the Jewish economic elite, we discuss two groups that were targets of the most vehement attacks of the antisemitic middle class. Our aim is to present the direct and indirect consequences of the Great Depression on Jews, as well as its impact on the rise of political antisemitism. We also explore how far it can be understood as a catalyst of radicalization, as the Hungarian economy's deterioration led to the swift rise of the radical right-wing into power.

Introduction

Jewish Life

Antisemitism and the Crisis

The Example of the Lawyers

Hostility Against Jewish Students

Interpretations of the Crisis in the Jewish Press

Conclusion

Introduction

The 1929 economic crisis affected the entire society and made almost everyone more vulnerable. It would certainly be misleading and probably impossible to sharply divide any society into Jews and non-Jews based on their involvement in such a crisis. Therefore, the current paper focuses instead on how the crisis influenced Jewish life and the opportunities in Hungary. The paper presents specific segments of society in which Jews played a key role and, through these examples, investigates the connection between the economic depression and the radicalization of politics, and the rise of far-right ideologies and openly antisemitic parties alongside with Jewish reactions to and interpretations of the crisis and its consequences. The first anti-Jewish legislation of the era, a *numerus clausus*, was introduced in 1920 with the explicit goal of diminishing the number of Jewish students in higher education and indirectly among the intelligentsia in which Jews had been represented in much higher numbers than their general proportion in society. Therefore, we will focus on these groups, rather than the elites, which have been subjects of multiple studies in historical sociology and social history.¹ Through the case of university students and lawyers, we will present how the economic crisis further aggravated the circumstances of Jews. We will show that the Hungarian Jewish press closely followed the events leading up to and following Hitler's rise to power in Germany and that many authors identified the Great Depression as the primary cause of this disastrous process.

The Great Depression of 1929 struck Hungary in an already troubled economic situation. Certainly, the lost war and the consequences of the Versailles peace treaties produced challenging circumstances. At the same time, as Béla Tomka argues, the negative impact of the peace treaty on the Hungarian economy should not be exaggerated. Tomka underlines that economic growth was comparable to

¹ Such as Gábor Gyáni, "A Magyar polgári elitek értékrendszere és regionális változatai" (Values and Regional Varieties of the Hungarian Bourgeois Elites), *Tér és Társadalom* 24, no. 2 (2010): 5-16; Viktor Karády, *Allogén elitek a modern magyar nemzetállamban. Történelmi-Szociológiai Tanulmányok* (Allogene elites in the modern Hungarian nation state. Historical-Sociological studies) (Budapest: Wesley János Lelkészképző Főiskola, 2012); Viktor Karády and Péter Tibor Nagy, "Culturally Composite Elites, Regime Changes and Social Crises in Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Confessional Eastern Europe. (The Carpathian Basin and the Baltics in Comparison – cc. 1900–1950)," research project supported by the European Research Council with grant agreement Nr. 230518 between 2009 and 2011, accessed September 2, 2024, <http://eliteso8.uni.hu/>.

the prewar years. Therefore, the concept of the destructive impact of the peace treaty, as applied by contemporary politicians and scholars and generally widespread in Hungarian historiography, is not convincing.² Nevertheless, the exceptional difficulties post-war Hungary had to deal with should not be neglected, for instance, the case of 426.000 Hungarian refugees who moved from neighboring countries to Hungary.³ This factor put additional pressure on the state to deal with the situation of an already problematic tumult of the intelligentsia, which aimed to get positions in the bureaucracy of a country severely reduced in size. Consequently, state bureaucracy became uniquely expensive, and a huge proportion of the population slipped into dependence on the state. The nature of state bureaucracy can be crucial during an economic crisis when states must reduce their expenses. Even between 1935 and 1937, expenditures for the administration of the central government were 31.4 percent in Hungary of all government spending, while they were between 15 and 18 percent in other countries of the region.⁴

As a regional condition, the entire area of East Central Europe was more affected by the crisis than Western countries. According to Iván T. Berend, there were three critical characteristics of the region that made it more vulnerable to potential economic turmoil. First, the agrarian crisis was more crucial for countries that were almost exclusively dependent on agrarian exports. Secondly, the credit crisis made these countries unable to repay their loans, and capital abroad became unavailable. Finally, the general backwardness of these economies made it extremely difficult to adapt and react to the new economic circumstances.⁵

In general, the political system of interwar Hungary and the inflexibility of its more and more state-controlled economy surely did not make it easier to provide sufficient answers to an economic crisis. In 1926 already, the contemporary

² Béla Tomka, "A trianoni béke gazdasági hatásai Magyarországon" (The Economic Impacts of the Trianon Peace-Treaty in Hungary), *Korunk* 31, no. 5 (2020): 73-84.

³ István I. Mocsy, *The Effects of World War I. The Uprooted: Hungarian Refugees and Their Impact on Hungary's Domestic Politics 1918-1921* (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1983), 10-12.

⁴ Andrew C. Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 137.

⁵ Iván T. Berend, "A világgazdasági válság (1929-1933) sajátos hatásai Közép- és Kelet-Európában" (The particular impacts of the economic crisis (1929-1933) on Central and Eastern Europe), *Történelmi Szemle* 25 (1982): 44-66.

economist László Ádám stressed that one of the worst consequences of the World War in Hungary was the disappearance of an independent economy and that the idea of the omnipotent state replaced the creativity of individuals.⁶ To summarize the impact of the depression, Janos argues that the gross national product of Hungary diminished by 55.2 percent between 1929 and 1932.⁷ György Kövér also argues in one of his recent works that the Great Depression in Hungary fits well into the trend that economic depressions in Hungary had always been preceded by a smaller crisis in the nineteenth century. The lost war and the consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty can be considered an impetus for the economic crisis of the early 1930s.⁸

Jewish Life

According to the 1930 census, Jews of interwar Hungary accounted for 5.1 percent (444,567) of the total population. Their demographic structure was unique in that almost half of them (45 percent) were concentrated in the capital city, which was 23.2 percent of Budapest's total population.⁹ Since 43.6 percent of Jews were engaged in trade and 31.2 percent in industry and crafts, they were very much associated with these sectors. At the same time, almost 60 percent of Christians were working in agriculture,¹⁰ which, as mentioned above, was the first sector that was negatively affected by the crisis in 1928 already.¹¹ József Hasznos, president of the Community of Szolnok, observed one of the most striking consequences of the crisis. Since the economic situation worsened in the countryside, competition became more troublesome for local Jews who decided to move to major cities.

⁶ Péter Krisztián Zachar, *Gazdasági válságok, társadalmi feszültségek, modern válaszkeresetek Európában a két világháború között* (Economic crises, social tensions, modern answers in Europe between the Two World Wars) (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2014), 49.

⁷ Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World*, 137.

⁸ György Kövér, *A növekedés terhe* (The Burden of Growth) (Budapest: Osiris, 2018), 19.

⁹ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 99.

¹⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹¹ Ágnes Pogány, "A nagy gazdasági világválság" (The Great Depression), in *Magyarország globális története 1869–2022* (Global History of Hungary 1869–2022), eds. Ferenc Laczó and Bálint Varga (Budapest: Corvina, 2022), 189–192.

Consequently, the situation in these cities became more difficult due to the rivalry between Jews in the economy, not to mention that the synagogues grew in numbers but not financially, which was yet another problem for the urban Jewish communities.¹²

The situation affected every segment of society; it had an impact on how people experienced their conditions, and, more importantly, on their relationship with government and politics. As József Vonyó stresses, from 1930 onwards, significant changes happened both on the right and the left. Through an example of Zala county, Vonyó convincingly shows that while in 1930 there had only been a crisis of the governing party, a year later both the social democratic party and, as a novel phenomenon, far-right Nazi-type parties were established or re-established and became gradually more popular.¹³

Antisemitism and the Crisis

Even though an economic depression on its own explains neither the manifestation of antisemitism nor its rise, the impact of such a crisis cannot be neglected. Similarly to the 1873 crisis, an economic depression could function as a catalyst of political antisemitism, as Hannah Arendt¹⁴ and Eva Reichmann¹⁵ stressed. Competition and rivalry become more crucial during a crisis, and the fear of losing status becomes a more palpable experience, which can lead to the rise of hostility towards Jews.¹⁶ It is crucial to underline that the contemporary expert, Count Imre Károlyi, emphatically stressed the seriousness of the crisis in 1931.

¹² *Az Egyenlőség jubilumi száma* (Special Issue of *Egyenlőség* for its 50th anniversary), January 1930, 65-66.

¹³ József Vonyó, *Jobboldali radikálisok Magyarországon, 1919–1944* (Right-Wing Radicals in Hungary, 1919–1944) (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2021), 287.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego-New York-London: Harvest Book, 1973), Chapter 1 “Antisemitism as an Outrage to Common Sense,” 11-53.

¹⁵ Eva G. Reichmann, *Flucht in den Hass. Die Ursachen der Deutschen Judenkatastrophe* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969).

¹⁶ Helen Fein, “Explanations of the Origin and Evolution of Antisemitism” in *The Persisting Question. Social Perspectives and Social Contexts of Modern Antisemitism*, ed. Helen Fein (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 3-23.

According to Károlyi, its intensity and possible consequences were incomparable to previous crises.¹⁷

Those with savings were able to make use of this opportunity to buy estates at a lower price. Certainly, *unfortunate social encounters* (that non-Jews only came into contact with Jews when they were in economic trouble, hence they perhaps unconsciously linked the two) happened during the crisis, especially when small landholders, unable to pay taxes, had to put up their land for auction, and both buyers and lawyers were, in many cases, Jews.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in agreement with Jacob Katz,¹⁹ we would instead consider an economic depression as a useful tool for antisemites to blame Jews through the symptoms of a crisis based on existing stereotypes and tensions. Generally, during a crisis, both on the left and the right, radical groups and their proposals of how to solve social problems become more attractive and popular.

András Kovács convincingly emphasizes that whether antisemitism becomes a political factor depends on the social elites.²⁰ It is obvious that István Bethlen, who had been prime minister between 1921 and 1931 and was considered a key person in consolidating Hungarian politics in the 1920s, resigned due to the economic crisis.²¹ After the short-lived premiership of Gyula Károlyi, the former minister of national defense, Gyula Gömbös, became prime minister. We will present his role in more detail; for the time being it is enough to stress that with Gömbös, a new group of politicians came to power, who were much more radical than the previous generation. These people strongly supported antisemitic legislation (in 1925 already, Gömbös himself had helped to organize an international antisemitic conference in Budapest)²² that, of course, affected the bureaucracy and the

¹⁷ György Kövér quotes Károlyi In Kövér, *A növekedés terhe*, 255.

¹⁸ Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege* (Evaluation of the Horthy-system) (Budapest-Pécs: Jelenkor, 2012), 53-54.

¹⁹ Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

²⁰ András Kovács, *A modern antiszemitizmus* (Modern Antisemitism) (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1999), 32.

²¹ Nathaniel Katzburg, *Zsidópolitika Magyarországon 1919-1943* (Jew-Politics in Hungary, 1919-1943) (Budapest: Bábel Kiadó, 2002), 76.

²² Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 113.

conditions of the liberal professions as well.²³ This is important to note for many reasons, most importantly because Jews represented a much higher share in the liberal professions than their overall proportion in society. Secondly, as Peter Pulzer highlights, from the late nineteenth century, antisemitism was an exclusively attractive ideology for the middle class and the intelligentsia.²⁴ This tendency fits nicely into the Hungarian environment, too, particularly in the interwar years. Far-right physicians, lawyers, and engineers were inclined to support or even initiate antisemitic legislation in high numbers. The misconception that educated people were immune to antisemitism or radical far-right ideology has been long refuted. Recently, László Karsai proved that in Budapest, 5.6 percent of Arrow-Cross Party (Hungarian Nazi party) members held a diploma, while the proportion of diploma holders in the capital city was 5 percent.²⁵ This means that Jews encountered antisemitism in educated, elite circles as well, especially after the economic crisis. Economic antisemitism, as contemporary Jews already experienced it, became increasingly widespread.²⁶ Articles by *Egyenlőség* (Equality) published long lists of people who converted to be able to get a proper job.²⁷

The Example of the Lawyers

The economic crisis had a negative impact on liberal professions, but those who were employed by the state were more affected compared to those who maintained private offices. Since Jews had been generally represented in much higher numbers in the private sector of liberal professions, they were less vulnerable than their

²³ Mária M. Kovács, *Liberal Professions & Illiberal Politics* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 82.

²⁴ Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), Chapter 29 “The Sociology of the Anti-Semitic Movements,” 272-281.

²⁵ Based on 28,000 membership cards of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. László Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc: Politikai életrajz* (Ferenc Szálasi: A Political Biography) (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2016), 157.

²⁶ Pál Sándor, “A zsidógyűlölet új formája: a gazdasági antiszemitizmus” (The New Form of Jew-hatred: economic antisemitism), *Egyenlőség*, September 19, 1930.

²⁷ *Egyenlőség*, December 7, 1929, and March 22, 1930.

Christian colleagues. Moreover, these colleagues, who were mainly Christian physicians and engineers employed by the state, could not maintain private offices.²⁸ Regarding the Hungarian environment, István Bibó stresses that we should not underestimate the influence of the middle classes on public opinion, particularly in the interwar years when the petty bourgeoisie successfully transmitted the values of the elites to the masses.²⁹ Certainly, the economic crisis was used to justify the initiation of antisemitic legislation.

The case of lawyers is a proper example of how Jews of liberal professions were concerned by the crisis and what sort of situation it created. In Budapest, both before and during the interwar period, Jews were represented in the Bar Association in much higher numbers than they were in Hungarian society. In interwar years, their proportion was between 50 and 60 percent.³⁰ For the far-right organization of lawyers called MŰNE (National Association of Hungarian Lawyers), established in 1927, this was a key factor as their main aim was to diminish the number of Jews in the profession. The association had hitherto been a negligible, moderately antisemitic group of lawyers, but in 1932, a process of radicalization started, and the association gradually became more popular and powerful.

Gyula Gömbös, a central figure of the antisemitic radical right-wing since 1919, became Minister of Defense in 1929 under the premiership of István Bethlen. In this period, Gömbös' communication was more moderate than before, and a part of the liberal elite took this at face value. In late August 1930, he received a delegation of different denominations, including a Jewish delegation, and according to the memoir of Jewish journalist Lajos Szabolcsi, declared that "I invite the Jewish Hungarians alongside to the Catholics and Protestants, [because] I believe we all live and fight for the great cause of the nation."³¹ Szabolcsi depicts this occasion as a bright moment when dark clouds—represented by news about

²⁸ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege*, 53.

²⁹ István Bibó, "A békeszerződés és a magyar demokrácia" (The Peace Treaty and Hungarian Democracy), in *Bibó István összegyűjtött írásai I* (Collected Writings by István Bibó Vol. I.), ed. Iván Zoltán Dénes (Budapest: Kalligram, 2016), 891-914; 893.

³⁰ Mária M. Kovács, *The Politics of the Legal Profession in Interwar Hungary* (New York: Institute on East Central Europe, Columbia University, 1987), 40.

³¹ Lajos Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő. Az Egyenlőség évtizedei (1881–1931)* (Two generations. The decades of Egyenlőség (1881–1931)) (Budapest: MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1993), 427.

the rise of the Nazis in Germany—had disappeared from above Hungary. It is noteworthy that he wrote his memoir in even darker times, between 1940 and 1942. According to him, the liberal part of the country celebrated and addressed thankful messages to Gömbös. Szabolcsi adds that within two weeks, Hitler's party gained 107 seats in the German Parliament, although the greatest pessimists had expected 50. And yet the Jewry of Pest continued to build and renovate its synagogues and other buildings. Samu Stern's presidency in the Israelite Congregation of Pest (Pesti Izraelita Hitközség known by its acronym PIH)³² was characterized by new ideas and initiatives as if the perceived liberal (liberal in comparison to the early 1920s in Hungary and Germany of the early 1930s) era would last forever.³³

Others, however, recognized Gömbös' friendlier attitude for what it was: camouflage. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Sándor Kálnoki Bedő, the former relatively moderate president of the MÜNE, resigned a few weeks after the inauguration of Gyula Gömbös as Prime Minister in 1932. Gömbös originally had a huge influence on creating the organization itself exactly when the numerus clausus law—which introduced a Jewish quota at universities—was jeopardized (according to antisemites) by an amendment in 1928 by the Bethlen government.³⁴ It is also telling that after the resignation of Kálnoki Bedő, Aladár Krüger³⁵ and Lajos Szabó (who had been the leader of Magyar Ügyvédek Nemzeti Pártja (National Party of Magyar Lawyers)) became more influential within MÜNE, who represented a much more radical, racial antisemitism among lawyers as it will be presented.

By 1935, Gömbös prepared a bill that included a paragraph that aimed to apply a numerus clausus to the Board of the Budapest Bar as well.³⁶ Gömbös intended to prevent the alleged pauperization of Christian lawyers, as was the leitmotif of the

³² Budapest is geographically divided by the Danube river into Buda and Pest and the two parts have historically separate identities—Óbuda on the Buda side has yet another one—not being united until 1873. Hence, they also had separate Jewish *kehillot*. Before the Holocaust, there were two separate *kehillot* on the right bank of the Danube: the congregations of Buda and Óbuda and one on left side in Pest.

³³ Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 428.

³⁴ Kovács, *Liberal Professions & Illiberal Politics*, 78.

³⁵ Aladár Krüger (1878-1952) was also a PM from 1926 in Egységes Párt (Unity Party); during the coup of the Arrow Cross Party, he was the first officer of the Upper House (Karsai, *Szálasi*, 481).

³⁶ Kovács, *Liberal Professions & Illiberal Politics*, 98.

far-right's narrative, particularly after the economic crisis, by discriminating Jewish lawyers, hence solving a socio-political question with denominational discriminative legislation.³⁷ Nevertheless, as Mária M. Kovács underlines, the economic circumstances of lawyers, even after the economic crisis, were relatively good, especially compared to physicians.³⁸ Therefore, the importance of Gömbös in the history and radicalization of MÜNE cannot be underestimated. Still, it would be misleading to claim that the association existed exclusively on his own volition. It rather seems they found allies in each other, and both Gömbös and MÜNE needed support to accomplish their aspirations.

By 1939, around 47% of Christian lawyers joined MÜNE. If we disregard baptized Jews (17.3% of lawyers in 1941) as potential MÜNE members who would and could not join the association, their proportion among Christians is as high as 57%.³⁹ In the election of the general assembly in October 1941, when Jewish lawyers were already deprived of the right to vote in the Bar, 559 lawyers voted for MÜNE while 531 for the rivaling Christian party, which aimed to oppose its radical colleagues.⁴⁰ The radicalization of non-Jewish lawyers was not a unique phenomenon but fitted into the region's history. During the short-lived second republic of Czechoslovakia (between 30 September 1938 and 15 March 1939), "Aryan" barristers also tried to exclude their Jewish colleagues from the Bar.⁴¹ The first attempt to initiate a numerus clausus in the Czechoslovak Bar happened only two weeks after the declaration of the second republic, in October 1938.⁴² After the collapse of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the newly formed Slovak state did not hesitate to introduce antisemitic legislation. Jews were excluded from professional associations such as the Bar. In Bratislava, 93 of 274 lawyers were immediately

³⁷ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege*, 414.

³⁸ Kovács, *Liberal Professions & Illiberal Politics*, 97.

³⁹ *Ügyvédi Határidőnapló az 1940. Szökőévre* (Calendar for lawyers for 1940) (Budapest: MÜNE, 1939).

⁴⁰ *Ügyvédi Kamarai Közlöny* (Gazette of the Lawyers' Bar), November 1, 1941.

⁴¹ Jakub Drápal, *Defending the Nazis in Postwar Czechoslovakia – The Life of K. Resler, Defence Counsel Ex Officio of K.H Frank* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017), 67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 69.

barred.⁴³ In Austria, the rule of law came to an end in 1931 already, and from 1933 onwards Bars had to fight for their autonomy against the state.⁴⁴

Finally, after the 1938 Anschluss, Jews were not allowed to continue their profession as lawyers, doctors, and teachers. This was in line with exclusionary policies in Nazi Germany, where Jewish lawyers were gradually excluded from 1933 already, so before the 1935 Nuremberg laws, which finally barred them completely from these professions. Nevertheless, in the case of Hungary, the support MÜNE received from Gömbös (who probably would not have become prime minister without an economic crisis) had a key impact on its strengthening and the radicalization of Hungarian lawyers. On 22 March 1944, the Gestapo started to arrest Jewish lawyers and other mainly Jewish civilians of Budapest for blackmailing the Jewish population of Budapest by using these people as hostages.⁴⁵ The process went smoothly, not least because the Budapest Bar Association submitted a list of Jewish lawyers to the Gestapo, which most likely happened at the initiative of a lawyer, who was a member of MÜNE. It would be inappropriate to draw a clear line between the economic crisis and the arrest of Jewish lawyers by the Gestapo 15 years later. Still, the impact of the Great Depression on the radicalization of lawyers and other groups in Hungary cannot be underestimated either.

Hostility Against Jewish Students

Antisemitism at universities was a particularly sensitive topic in Hungary due to the country's nature as "pioneer" regarding the process of de-emancipating Jews

⁴³ *Advokátske komory na Slovensku (1875–1950)* (Bar associations in Slovakia (1875–1950)), Slovensky Narodny Archiv, Bratislava.

⁴⁴ Ernst Jahoda, *Geschichte der österreichischen Advokatur 1918–1973* (Wien: Österreichischer Rechtsanwaltskammertag, 1978), 34.

⁴⁵ Ákos György Bálint, *Sziget a mérgezett tengerben* (An island in the poisoned sea) (Budapest: Budapesti Ügyvédi Kamara, 2013), 43; Jenő Lévai, "...csak ember kezébe ne essem én..." *Deportáció, Télach, Schutzpass – Napló, 1944–1945* ("...please just spare me from humans..." Deportation, Télach, Schutzpass – Diary, 1944–1945) (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő), 19; Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság (DEGOB, National Committee for Attending Deportees), Jegyzőkönyv (Minutes) 3627, accessed September 2, 2024, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showjk=3627>; Kovács, *Liberal Professions & Illiberal Politics*, 132.

by limiting their access to higher education with a Jewish quota since 1920.⁴⁶ As it has been argued elsewhere in detail, philanthropy and fundraising for the Jewish youth who emigrated to study abroad following the Jewish quota in Hungary became ultimately a cause around which a new Hungarian Jewish community of fate and identity was built—an identity extensively demanded after the shocks of the Trianon Treaty which territorially separated half of Hungarian Jewry from the core country and the *numerus clausus* which excluded Jews from the Hungarian nation by attributing the notion of “nationality” to the denominational label of “Israelites.”⁴⁷

The *numerus clausus* law (1920) stipulated that Jewish enrollment as first-year students should not exceed the Jewish proportion in the general population (6 percent). Since in the last academic year during the Great War (when all secondary school graduates were entitled to university enrollment) Jews constituted over one-third (34 percent) of university students,⁴⁸ the new quota meant a grave limitation of the formerly free and large-scale educational mobility of Hungarian Jewry. From 1920 onwards, two-thirds of Jewish applicants were turned down each year. One of the characteristic responses by Jewish youth was peregrination: migration to foreign universities. Fundraising efforts in their support often referred to them as “wandering students” and “*numerus clausus* exiles.” This became a central issue of Hungarian Jewish public life in the interwar period.

Before the global economic crisis, the *Central Jewish Student Aid Committee* supported up to 700 students abroad; in 1929, they helped 500 students.⁴⁹ Between 1920 and 1937, an average of 1,310 Hungarians studied abroad, four fifths

⁴⁶ For details see Mária M. Kovács, *The Beginnings of Anti-Jewish Legislation. The 1920 Numerus Clausus Law in Hungary* (Budapest-Vienna-New York: CEU Press, 2023) and for the interpretative framework of de-emancipation: Guy Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation: Jewish History, Memory, and the Rise of Fascism in Germany, France, and Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Ágnes Katalin Kelemen, “The Role of Emigrating Students in Reshaping Hungarian Jewry in the Interwar Period,” *Jewish Studies at the Central European University* 9 (2017-2019): 121-127.

⁴⁸ Mária M. Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva: A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920–1945* (Smitten by law. The *numerus clausus* in Hungary, 1920–1945) (Budapest: Napvilág, 2012), 135.

⁴⁹ “Báró Kohner Willy felel a Névtelen Diák levelére” (“Count Willy Kohner Responds to the Letter by the Anonymous Student”), *Egyenlőség*, September 21, 1929.

of whom were Jewish.⁵⁰ This demonstrates that a considerable part of the *numerus clausus* émigrés were supported by the *Committee*; however, approximately 350 students per year studied abroad without it.

The years of the economic depression coincided with a short period when the Jewish quota was less strict at Hungarian universities (1928-1932) due to the amendment of the *numerus clausus* law under international pressure. For a long time, this amendment was referred to as the abolition of the *numerus clausus* in Hungarian historiography, but a monograph by Mária M. Kovács⁵¹ proved clearly and in detail that this was far from the truth. Contemporaries—neither Jews nor antisemites—actually did not consider the amendment an abolition at all. In reality, the principle of discrimination was not revoked by the amendment,⁵² merely the method of singling out Jews was changed: instead of a “racial group,” the new proxy was the father’s profession.⁵³ It was impossible to perfectly operationalize this new criterion which opened the road to arbitrary decisions about whom to admit and whom to exclude from admission to universities. Nevertheless, due to the occupational structure of Hungarian society it was predictable which occupations should be advantaged (civil servants) for the sake of privileging non-Jewish students, and the law indicated the professions keeping the professional statistics in mind.⁵⁴ Reports by the British diplomat Lucien Wolf explaining how the amended law continued to contribute to discrimination against the Jews notwithstanding, the *League* was uninterested in pursuing the issue any further. As one would expect, within Hungary, public intellectuals and politicians often clarified that the purpose of the amendment of the *numerus clausus* was to keep the Jewish quota without the implications that the explicit Jewish quota of the original law had for Hungary’s international relations.

⁵⁰ For the number of Hungarian students abroad in different academic years see Alajos Kovács, “Magyarországi zsidó hallgatók a hazai és külföldi főiskolákon” (Hungarian Jewish students at Hungarian and foreign colleges), *Magyar Statisztikai Szemle* 9 (1938): 897, and the volumes of the *Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyvek* (Hungarian Statistical Yearbooks) between 1920 and 1938. Although these calculations by state authorities are probably imprecise, since they had to rely on data received from foreign universities over which they had no control.

⁵¹ Kovács, *The Beginnings of Anti-Jewish Legislation*.

⁵² Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, 196-197.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 200-202.

⁵⁴ Nathaniel Katzburg, *Hungary and the Jews: Policy and Legislation, 1920–1943* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981), 77-78.

As a result of the new quota, the proportion of Jews among university students was higher (10-12 percent) between 1928 and 1932 than in 1928 when it was also somewhat above the quota (8,8 percent).⁵⁵ Yet, the intensity of Jewish students' emigration did not decrease for two main reasons. First of all, most faculties in Hungary still rejected over half (but some over four-fifths) of Jewish applicants. In addition, however hypocritical the amendment of the *numerus clausus* was, antisemitic student associations responded to it with an intensification of violence on campuses.⁵⁶ Even when Prime Minister István Bethlen announced the government's intention to amend the *numerus clausus* in October 1927, 174 wounded Jewish students were taken to hospital by ambulance in Budapest due to their injuries from antisemitic attacks of their fellow students.⁵⁷

The impact of the crisis on the volume of Hungarian Jewish migration can only be demonstrated after 1932. Thus, it took a few years until the well-to-do families were no longer able to support their children's studies abroad, and fundraising for the sake of migrant students of poorer backgrounds was successfully maintained for a while. To be sure, this achievement took great effort. In 1930, Leo Fellner, the president of the Association of Jewish Students, anxiously emphasized that Jewish students all around Europe needed immediate financial help due to the gradually deteriorating conditions. He stressed that various support options for students, such as paying the enrollment fee in installments, were no longer an option.⁵⁸ Very likely, his distress signal had a significant effect as *Egyenlőség*, a very popular Jewish weekly magazine edited by Neolog intellectuals,⁵⁹ published the reply of a lawyer, Aladár Grünbaum, who sent a support of 100 Pengő,⁶⁰ most probably to underscore to its readers how important it was to support Jewish students abroad financially.

⁵⁵ Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, 205.

⁵⁶ Róbert Kerepeszki, "A *numerus clausus* 1928. évi módosításának hatása Debrecenben" (The impact of the 1928 amendment of the *numerus clausus* in Debrecen), *Múltunk* 50, no. 4 (2005): 42-75.

⁵⁷ Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 506.

⁵⁸ *Egyenlőség*, May 31, 1930.

⁵⁹ See a more detailed description of this publication in the next section of this article.

⁶⁰ *Egyenlőség*, June 14, 1930.

However, the economic crisis brought not only financial difficulties but legal ones as well. In 1931 and 1932, the Hungarian National Bank repeatedly banned the transfer of foreign currency. The *Central Jewish Student Aid Committee* tried to capitalize on this and assume a new function as a lobbying body to pressure the National Bank, as now even well-to-do parents who funded the studies of their children abroad by themselves turned to the *Committee* for legal help.

A group of *numerus clausus* exiles from Vienna argued in a letter to the Hungarian Minister for Religion and Public Education that they should be exempted from the ban on foreign currency transfer because

Since we did not come to study abroad for our own choice, but were forced to do so by the *numerus clausus*—which is especially detrimental for the poor and is still in operation—we find our wish that we should be able to receive enough currency for the purposes of our studies most justified.⁶¹

In the end, it was the president of the *Israelite Congregation of Pest*, Samu Stern, who achieved the lift of this ban in November 1932. The *Committee's* presidency nevertheless used this occasion to scold those wealthy parents who, in the previous twelve years, had ignored the *Central Jewish Student Aid Committee* and had not contributed to the effort of enabling poor Jewish youth to study abroad, but only took care of their own children. Emigration was not a problem to solve on the individual and family level, but it was a common cause of Hungarian Jewry as a whole, the *Committee's* leaders claimed.⁶²

Interpretations of the Crisis in the Jewish Press

This section is based on a systematic overview of the most popular Hungarian Jewish media of the period with regard to articles mentioning “crisis” in their title or text. We have reviewed publications representing the different intellectual and

⁶¹ *Bécsi magyar diákság állásfoglalása. Deviza és numerus clausus* (Resolution by Hungarian Students in Vienna. Foreign currency and *numerus clausus*), 1932, Hungarian National Archives, Ministry of Religion and Public Education, K-636/box 671/65-65-61.

⁶² “Bujdosó fiaink” (Our Wandering Sons), *Egyenlőség*, November 19, 1932.

ideological streams of Jewry: the weekly *Egyenlőség* which was popular among assimilated Jews, the Zionist cultural journal *Múlt és Jövő* (Past and Future), the *Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat* (Yearbooks of the Israelite Hungarian Literary Society, known by its acronym IMIT), which focused on Jewish religious life and Jewish literature.

In 1930 the editors of *Egyenlőség*, a popular (possibly the most popular) Jewish journal, initiated a discussion about the effects of the economic crisis on Jewry. *Egyenlőség* was edited by Neolog Jewish intellectuals who represented the perspective of assimilated Jewry. Their discourse was underpinned by an assumption that only once everyone fully understood the great extent of the contribution of Jews to the Hungarian economy, culture, and society, would antisemitism decrease. Such an assumption was connected with optimism concerning enlightenment, modernity, and the power of education and the dissemination of correct information. The history of the journal itself seemed to confirm such an assumption. *Egyenlőség's* establishment was related to the Tiszaeszlár Affair, a blood libel accusation case of 1882, and the following court process, which motivated Miksa Szabolcsi, a Jewish journalist, to enlighten Hungarian public opinion about the innocence of the accused Jews in the particular case as well as the falsity of blood libel accusations in general. He had written for other newspapers, too, but after *Egyenlőség* lost much of its appeal and readership when the court case ended with the official recognition of the accused Jews' innocence, Szabolcsi took on the position of the responsible editor and provided *Egyenlőség* with a new function: a regular weekly to discuss political and cultural topics of Jewish interest with Jewish as well as non-Jewish intellectuals. The journal's name means "equality," one of the cherished values of enlightenment.

Egyenlőség was owned by the Szabolcsi family (since 1886) and edited by them until the very end of its publication (1938). After the death of Miksa Szabolcsi in 1915, his son, Lajos Szabolcsi, took over and remained editor-in-chief until he had to discontinue its publication due to the post-1938 new antisemitic laws. Thus, the Szabolcsis had great power over the content of *Egyenlőség*. The Zionist journalist and writer József Patai for instance left because of *Egyenlőség's* assimilationist stance and went on to edit the Zionist cultural and political monthly *Múlt és Jövő* in 1912. Nevertheless, Miksa, as well as Lajos Szabolcsi, did provide space to authors

with different perspectives from their own, including famous (non-Jewish) poet Dezső Kosztolányi and Calvinist bishops Gábor Pap and Dezső Baltazár as well as Jewish politicians and everyday people such as Jewish university students.

In the introduction of *Egyenlőség*'s aforementioned discussion about the Great Depression, the argument put forward and later often repeated was that “besides the general crisis of world economy and the agrarian crisis of Hungary there is yet another crisis: the specific economic crisis of Hungarian Jewry.”⁶³ In addition, the entire Hungarian middle class was ruined, according to the author.

This introductory article was followed by 16 contributions, mainly by presidents and rabbis of *kehillot*. According to Gyula Adler (president of the Chevra Kadisha of Pest), Jews lost the most in the crisis because their savings were in banks (mostly in stocks) in contrast to real estate. This common assumption is not confirmed historically: as early as 1910 almost a fifth (19,9 percent) of large estates were owned by Jews.⁶⁴ It may have been the case that most Jews who had savings had them in stocks, but in any case a significant number of Jews had invested in real estate for decades. Nevertheless, Adler proposed to Jewish parents on this basis that they send their children to artisan professions so as to put them in a good position to earn good salaries.

Zsigmond Deutsch, the president of the Jewish community of Pécs, argued that the unemployed Jewish masses should be encouraged to move back to the provinces. Béla Alapi, the director of a savings bank, declared that at the end of the day, Jewish economic collapse was caused by antisemitism, which destroyed commerce, on which the livelihood of so many Jews depended. Prominent rabbis of the countryside all emphasized the need to unite Hungarian Jews. On a similar note, Rabbi Benjamin Schwarcz warned that silent, economic antisemitism can be more dangerous than loud, aggressive antisemitism.⁶⁵ It is noteworthy, for instance, that at times even companies owned by Jews discriminated against Jews and kept an implicit Jewish quota in fear of antisemites attacking them for favouring Jews. Ernő Winkler, Chief Rabbi of Nagykanizsa, in another issue of

⁶³ “Lehet-e még segíteni a magyar zsidóságon” (Is it still possible to help Hungarian Jewry?), *Egyenlőség*, April 12, 1930.

⁶⁴ Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, 438.

⁶⁵ “Lehet-e még segíteni a magyar zsidóságon,” *Egyenlőség*, April 12, 1930.

Egyenlőség two weeks later, underlines that Hungarian Jews had been in crisis already before the economic depression, a spiritual crisis.⁶⁶

Three years later, Samu Stern, the president of PIH (which represented 40 percent of Hungarian Jews)⁶⁷ said in this community's yearly general assembly that “unfortunately, this grave crisis is still going on and afflicts our entire economic life, but even more the Jews.”⁶⁸ A year later, in November 1934, the vice president of the PIH and, at the same time, member of parliament, Samu Glücksthal said at a public event that “the economic forces of Hungarian Jewry cannot unfold, willingness for entrepreneurship is gone, the painful consequences of unemployment and lack of income are felt everywhere, the whole country is suffering, but first and foremost is Hungarian Jewry.” In light of this, the PIH leadership was proud of the kehillah's deficit-free budget and closing account in 1934 “when everyone is acting in a rush and drowning.”⁶⁹

Like elsewhere, many cultural and social initiatives in Hungary and among its Jews depended on charity and philanthropy practiced by the middle and upper classes. The Great Depression weakened the middle class to a great extent, and this led to a “crisis of philanthropy,” as Mrs. Fabriczky, the co-chair of the Israelite women's association of Budapest's 7th district (the city's historical Jewish quarter is here) put it in the Jewish Yearbook of 1929-1930.⁷⁰ Some Jewish institutions introduced surprising austerity measures. The Jewish boys' orphanage in Budapest made boys do the job of overseeing their younger peers in order to save money that should have been spent on the salaries of employees. Instead of traditional fundraising events, the Hungarian Jewish Educational Association (Országos Magyar Izraelita Közművelődési Egyesület), known by its acronym OMIKE, organized an

⁶⁶ *Egyenlőség*, April 26, 1930.

⁶⁷ Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, 506.

⁶⁸ “A magyar zsidóság, az antiszemitizmus és a gazdasági krízis. Hivatalos elnöki deklaráció a pesti hitközség közgyűlésén” (Hungarian Jewry, Antisemitism and The Economic Crisis. Official Presidential Declaration at the Meeting of Pest Synagogue), *Egyenlőség*, January 14, 1933.

⁶⁹ Quoted in “A Magyar zsidóság nagy problémái” (The great problems of Hungarian Jewry), *Egyenlőség*, December 1, 1934.

⁷⁰ Vilmos Kecskemét, “Mi a legsürgősebb teendő a zsidó női munka terén?” (What is the most urgent to do in terms of Jewish female work?), *Zsidó évkönyv 1929-1930 (Jewish yearbook 1929-1930)*: 129-138; 131.

“invisible Mensa ball” to support students. People could buy entrance tickets to support Jewish students, but no ball took place physically.⁷¹

The Israelite Hungarian Literary Society (IMIT) published an annual summary of the situation of Jews all over the world. As Ferenc Laczó has demonstrated in detail, Hungarian Jewish intellectuals closely followed the events taking place in the Third Reich and were very much aware of the alarming transnational situation Jews were in.⁷² In the 1933 yearbook of IMIT, an exciting aspect was added to the discussion of the above-mentioned specific crisis of Jews, namely that “the American economic situation compounds the misery in Eastern Europe: Money is not coming any longer.” The misery of American Jewry was illustrated with data of 50,000 unemployed Jews in Chicago.⁷³

It is noteworthy that the popular weekly journal *Egyenlőség* also suffered greatly due to the crisis because its funding depended on a complicated and vulnerable construction of loans, debts, and incomes. The latter was provided by advertising. Due to the crisis, several companies and businesses gave up on advertising or functioning at all, and many partners of the journal had severe liquidity problems. The editor-in-chief, Lajos Szabolcsi, had more and more debts towards the printing houses, which he could not pay off because many of the journal’s former readers discontinued their subscriptions. Szabolcsi stated that *Egyenlőség* sold 40,000 copies in 1921.⁷⁴ The historian Miklós Konrád estimates its readership at 15,000 in 1915.⁷⁵ It is possible that due to the dramatic rise of antisemitic politics and violence after WWI the interest of Jews in reading Jewish press grew significantly and hence the readership of *Egyenlőség*, too. Regrettably, there is no data for what the decline induced by the economic crisis meant in terms of the number of copies. We know about the gravity of how it was affected by the Great

⁷¹ László Harsányi, *A fényből a sötétbe – Az Országos Magyar Izraelita Közművelődési Egyesület évtizedei 1909–1950* (From light to darkness – The decades of the Hungarian Jewish Educational Association 1909–1950) (Budapest: Napvilág, 2019), 134.

⁷² Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide. An Intellectual History, 1929–1948* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

⁷³ Bertalan Edelstein, “Az 5692. és 5693. év” (The 5692nd and 5693rd years), *Az Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat Évkönyve, 1933* (*Yearbook of the Az Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat, 1933*): 210–247; 236. The publication is henceforth abbreviated as *IMIT Évkönyv*.

⁷⁴ Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 342.

⁷⁵ Miklós Konrád, “A neológ zsidóság útkeresése a századfordulón” (Neolog Jewry’s Soul-Searching at the Turn of the Century), *Századok* 139, no. 6 (2005): 1335–1369; 1365.

Depression from the Introduction that the son of the editor-in-Chief wrote for Szabolcsi's memoirs.⁷⁶ *Egyenlőség* survived the crisis and was published until 1938, but the debts of the Szabolcsi family continued to grow.

Conclusion

Overviews of the twentieth-century history of Hungarian Jews have paid little attention to the Great Depression, even though contemporaries saw it as highly relevant to their situation. First of all, the crisis instigated a radicalization of antisemitism as well as a mainstreaming of radical right-wing politics. This was not merely wisdom in hindsight: Hungarian Jewish publications paid substantial attention to the strengthening of the Nazi movement in Germany and decisively attributed this alarming development to the Depression.

A few phenomena may have suggested that Hungarian Jewry was, on the surface, not in great economic trouble. Firstly, the Israelite Congregation of Pest (PIH) undertook several endeavors to build, enlarge, and renovate synagogues and other institutions, such as the Jewish hospital in Budapest during the crisis. Among the synagogues, the newly erected impressive Heroes' Temple (1931) is the most noteworthy, commemorating the ten thousand Jewish soldiers who fell for (Austro-)Hungary in WWI. Thus, it represents a Jewish request to the country to recognize Jewish contribution to the nation at a time when Jews were increasingly excluded from society.

Secondly, Jewish youth's migration to foreign universities did not diminish in these years, even though it was a tremendous financial burden on their families and on student aid committees who supported them. Every academic year, over a thousand Hungarian Jews enrolled in universities abroad in the same period when the Jewish quota was mitigated in Hungary (1928-1932). However, Jewish migration as well as the return to the harsh Jewish quota of the early- and mid-1920s was linked to the strong presence of antisemitic violence in Hungarian universities. In addition, the moderately antisemitic Prime Minister István

⁷⁶ Miklós Szabolcsi, "Apámról és Emlékirtairól" (About my father and his memoirs) in Szabolcsi, *Két évtized*, 7-19; 14.

Bethlen (1922-1931) stepped down because of the consequences of the crisis. Thus, due to the worsening of the Hungarian economy the “race defender” radical right-wing soon came to power in the person of prime minister Gyula Gömbös (1932-1936).

This paper examined how the Great Depression affected the Jewish community in Hungary by analyzing two groups of intellectuals—lawyers and university students. During the interwar period, antisemitism was largely centered around the Jewish population in these professions. However, this obsession with the problems of the intelligentsia ultimately led to the genocide of all segments of Jewry within a short period of just over a decade after the Depression. Even though, there were no antisemitic legislations introduced under the prime premiership of Gömbös, he had a clear impact on the radicalization of Hungarian society, which we have showcased here using the case study of lawyers.

Péter Buchmüller is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the Central European University. He has previously studied sociology, history, and Jewish studies. His dissertation focuses on the history of Jewish lawyers in Hungary and the issue of antisemitism within the profession. He has published several peer-reviewed articles on this topic and is currently co-editing two volumes on the history of the Holocaust in Hungary. In the academic year 2023-2024, he taught two courses on the history of Jews in Central Europe at Eötvös Loránd University. He has been awarded the Saul Kagan Claims Conference Academic Fellowship in Advanced Shoah Studies for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Ágnes Katalin Kelemen is a social historian specializing on East Central European Jewish history, refugees, and academic migration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She currently coordinates the “Democracy in History” workgroup at the CEU-Democracy Institute in Budapest and is writing a monograph on interwar student migration. Previously she has worked as Hungary expert in the “Unlikely refuge?” research project on refugees in twentieth-century East Central Europe, hosted at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and supported by the European Research Council with a consolidator grant. Ágnes holds a Ph.D. in comparative history from Central European University and she has also studied Jewish Studies, Nationalism

Studies and Religious Studies. She has published numerous peer reviewed academic articles and book chapters in Hungary, Italy and the Czech Republic.

Keywords: Great Depression, Jews, Hungary, Antisemitism, Radicalization

How to quote this article:

Péter Buchmüller and Ágnes Katalin Kelemen, “The Great Depression and its Effect on Hungarian Jews,” 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/15654

Jewish News and Reflections on the Great Depression in Czechoslovakia

by Daniela Bartáková

Abstract

The article explores how the Great Depression was reflected in Jewish newspapers, particularly the Czech-language Zionist periodical Židovské Zprávy (Jewish News). It highlights the key issues that Zionists considered crucial during the economic crisis. Additionally, the article provides an overview of the status and economic situation of the Jewish minority in the former Czech lands, including their integration into the Czechoslovak economy. The crisis exacerbated disparities between the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus, as well as between internal and border regions. Alongside topics related to the impact of the crisis and the differing conditions of the Jewish minority in various regions of Czechoslovakia, Zionists also addressed the effects of the crisis on Palestine.

Introduction

The Jewish Minority in the Czech Lands: General Patterns

The Great Depression and Jewish News

Conclusion

Introduction

In the autumn of 1929, during the crisis on the New York Stock Exchange, there was little indication of the catastrophe the world was heading towards. Yet the Great Economic Depression undoubtedly contributes to understanding the events and processes that led to the radicalization of societies in the second half of the 1930s. Even in Czechoslovakia, no one anticipated such a development. We still lack a clear consensus on its exact causes or the appropriate economic policies that could have successfully confronted it, despite this topic being extensively explored in Czech historiography.¹

The global economic crisis in Czechoslovakia is typically defined by the symbolic “Black Thursday”—the crash on the New York Stock Exchange in the autumn of 1929 and 1934. The peak of the crisis in Czechoslovakia was in 1933, when unemployment reached its maximum in February, with 920,000 people unemployed. In the following years, the unemployment rate gradually declined, albeit slowly.²

The “Great Crisis” caused a decline in the banking sector, industry, and agriculture, affecting the entire society and shaping its future course. The following text will focus on the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia during the 1930s. It will lay out the economic situation of Jews, their religious and socio-cultural composition, and their integration into society. The analysis primarily focuses on the territory of Bohemia and the eastern part of the country. While I am aware of the differing political-historical contexts, varying demographic dynamics, economic developments, and linguistic, national, and cultural differences within individual regions of the entire Czechoslovak territory, it is impossible to provide a thoroughly detailed analysis of all the regions. Last but not

¹ Vlastislav Lacina, *Velká hospodářská krize v Československu 1929-1934* (The Great Depression in Czechoslovakia 1929-1934) (Praha: Academia, 1984). Jakub Rákosník and Jiří Noha, *Kapitalismus na kolenou. Dopad velké hospodářské krize na evropskou společnost v letech 1929-1934* (Capitalism on its Knees. The Impact of the Great Depression on European Society, 1929-1934) (Praha: Auditorium, 2012). Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky (1918-1938)* (The Czech Lands in the Era of the First Republic (1918-1938)) (Praha: Libri, 2002).

² Respectively, in 1935, when GDP in Czechoslovakia reached its bottom, while in other countries, based on the decline in production, it was in 1932. Rákosník and Noha, *Kapitalismus na kolenou*, 86-88.

least, it will delve into the topics that the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia followed and reflected upon in the Czech journals that wrote about the crisis.

The Jewish Minority in the Czech Lands: General Patterns

In Bohemia, the second half of the 19th century ended the legal constraints on the economic activities of the Jewish population. This granted them full civic equality and helped to transform the Habsburg Monarchy into a relatively liberal environment, facilitating the free movement of goods, capital, and labor. During this period, various regions within the Monarchy experienced significant industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and disproportional economic development. Hungary witnessed a surge in agriculture and the food industry. At the same time, Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia experienced a boom in the textile, engineering, and metallurgy sectors, as well as in mining for raw materials. Vienna and Budapest emerged as pivotal commercial and financial centers in the Monarchy. Consequently, many people, including Jews, migrated from impoverished, predominantly agricultural regions to urban and industrial areas.³ Education and migration had significantly impacted the socio-economic status of Jews since the second half of the 19th century, and the Jewish community in Bohemia opened up to Czech and German cultures. The Czech Lands experienced an economic and social boom and became the industrial center of the Habsburg Monarchy. The successful participation of Jews under the new conditions can be further traced at several levels, including their linguistic and ethnic affiliation, their attendance at educational institutions, and their involvement in the economic and social structures.⁴ The urbanization of the Jewish, Czech, and German populations accompanied this process. The increasing concentration of Jews in cities led to their gradual but significant decline in small towns and the countryside, culminating in the 1930s, when only about 17 percent of Bohemian and 15 percent of Moravian Jews (of a total of almost 80,000 Jews in Bohemia and

³ Jana Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde: Jews in Bohemia between the Enlightenment and the Shoah* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 146.

⁴ Ibid., 127.

Moravia) were settled in countryside.⁵ We can observe both economic success and social prosperity of the Jewish minority even during the interwar period, however, with some obstacles.⁶

The society's dual Czech and German natures shaped the position of Jews in Czech society.⁷ The inclination of Jews towards German culture and language affiliation was a natural outcome of the prevailing prominence of German culture in the region during that period, and of the Germanization of Jewish education starting from the era of Joseph II. However, most Jews in Bohemia also regularly interacted with the Czech language and individuals. The growing Czech national revival in the nineteenth century posed a challenging dilemma for Jews, as they had to decide whether to embrace a linguistic identity that non-Jews regarded as a patriotic statement. Regardless of the choice made by Jews, assimilation into a society with two cultural and linguistic affiliations was not easy. With the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, Jews retained their previously acquired rights and generally benefited from the country's stable, democratic, and prosperous environment. Nevertheless, ethnic identity remained a constant tension in the newly formed multiethnic state, although it was a less significant issue in Bohemia than in Slovakia or Ruthenia.⁸

Following the First World War, the collapse of the extensive, integrated market of the Habsburg Monarchy had a negative economic impact on all the successor states. The Bohemian lands, primarily focused on exporting their production, faced setbacks as neighboring countries implemented protectionist policies, losing their traditional Central European markets. They had to adapt and redirect their

⁵ Ines Koeltzsch, Michal Frankl, and Martina Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," in *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands*, eds. Kateřina Čápková and Hillel J. Kieval (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 157–195; 173.

⁶ Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde*, 127; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 131–170.

⁷ For more information about history of the Jews in Czechoslovakia see Kateřina Čápková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Tatjana Lichtenstein, *Zionists in Interwar Czechoslovakia: Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Belonging* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016). Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 131–170. Kateřina Čápková and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

⁸ Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde*, 128.

trade towards other parts of Europe and the world. In contrast to the macroeconomic situation, the social status of Jews in Czechoslovakia after 1918 was highly favorable. Their civic rights were guaranteed, and the state authorities actively condemned and tried to suppress any expression of anti-Semitism. As a consequence, Jews were able to continue their economic activities without interruption during the establishment of the new state.⁹

Thanks to its multinational composition and foreign policy, Czechoslovakia was well-connected with the outside world. However, the image of Czechoslovakia as an “island of democracy,” in contrast to other, less tolerant, European countries, especially its neighbors Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, was dubious. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that “the Jews were actively engaged in these processes, opening up and using the new possibilities and dynamics of political, social, and cultural commitments to Czechoslovak society.”¹⁰

When focusing on the Jewish general economic situation of the Jews and their professional structure in Czechoslovakia, the best data set is provided by Jana Vobecká. The censuses conducted in 1910, 1921, and 1930 offer compelling evidence of the enduring stability in Bohemia’s occupational composition of the Jewish community. Approximately half of the Jewish population in Bohemia derived their primary income from trade and finance. They were four times more likely than the general population to be engaged in trade for livelihood. A significant majority of those involved in trade, accounting for 87 percent, were employed in trading goods. According to Vobecká, there was a positive correlation between the economic advancement of a country and the higher representation of Jews engaged in trade. This trend, specific to the Jewish population, was not observed among the non-Jewish population. This suggests that Jews were able to benefit from the increased job prospects in the commercial sector, which resulted from industrial expansion.¹¹

Between the two world wars, about half of Bohemian Jews working in the industry were employed in the chemical, garment, leather, and food industries. Similar patterns were characteristic for Jews in Austria, Germany, and Poland. The

⁹ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, “Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38,” 160–161.

¹¹ Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde*, 148–153.

occupational and sector distribution among Jews differed significantly from the majority population. Over half of Jews were business owners or co-owners, and approximately ten percent practiced a free profession. A higher proportion of Jews held white-collar positions, comprising around one-fifth of the working Jewish population. Manual laborers accounted for only about six percent of Jews in 1930. The census data from 1910 to 1930 consistently portrayed Jews in Bohemia as primarily belonging to the middle and upper classes.¹²

Additionally, more than half of Jewish households had at least one house servant, indicating their relatively higher social status. The occupational profiles and employment sectors of Jews in Bohemia closely resembled those of Jews in Germany and Austria.¹³

Taking a closer look at the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia, several other characteristics can be examined simultaneously. The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia consisted of 355,000 Jews by religion, i.e. 2.6 percent of the total population, with crucial socio-economic differentiations.¹⁴ There were differences between the Jewry of the Czech Lands (Moravia, Bohemia, and Silesia), representing an example of the West-European type; the Jews of Subcarpathian Rus of a typical East-European type; and the Jews of Slovakia were characterized as an intermediary case.¹⁵ Among these Jewries existed demographic, socioeconomic, and religious differences, as well as differences in terms of national affiliation. The demographic, social, and economic situation of the Jews of the Eastern part of the Czechoslovak Republic, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus differed significantly from Bohemia-Moravia. The region was one of the most backward territories in Europe, with a significantly lower degree of cultural, economic, and political development. Here, the Jewish population was quite strong, mostly orthodox and ultraorthodox. According to the census of 1930, there were 136,000 Jews in Slovakia and about 100,000 Jews in Subcarpathian Rus.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 172; Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 131.

¹⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 132–133.

¹⁶ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 174; Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 145–146.

The national affiliation in the census mentioned caused intense debates.¹⁷

A positive tendency toward Jewish nationality in 1930 did not automatically mean a growing allegiance to Zionism or Jewish nationalism. It also offered an opportunity to express the everyday bonds to Jewish culture and tradition, or to avoid declaring another nationality, or both. In contrast to the Jews of Bohemia, nearly half of the Moravian-Silesian Jews thus declared Jewish as their nationality, a third declared German, and 17 percent declared Czechoslovak.¹⁸

In Slovakia, in the 1930 census, approximately half of the Jewish population identified themselves as Jewish by nationality. Another third declared Czechoslovak nationality, while only seven percent identified with Hungarian or German nationality.¹⁹

Thus, the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia did not represent a homogeneous entity. It was internally divided along linguistic lines regarding their perception of national identity, inclination towards Zionism, or the Czech-Jewish program.²⁰ These currents naturally reflected and interpreted contemporary political events and focused on the mutual relationship of their supporters to opposing movements and their stance towards the Czechoslovak Republic and its political representatives.

In the early stages of consolidating the new state, Jews defined their political agenda by establishing the Jewish National Council, representing various political and religious orientations. This council aimed to achieve recognition of Jewish nationality and equal civil rights.²¹ The council was a Jewish voice against anti-Jewish violence as well as for a humanitarian approach to Jewish Refugees from

¹⁷ For the topic see Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*.

¹⁸ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 175.

¹⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 131-170; Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 176.

²⁰ Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, 27-28.

²¹ Ibid.; Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 161-165.

Subcarpathian Rus.²² Later on, Židovská strana (the Jewish Party) became the leading political representative of the Jews, whose liberal program appealed to Jewish voters of both Zionist and non-Zionist inclinations.²³ However, Orthodox Jews in the eastern part of the republic rejected it.

Only in 1929, and in a coalition with three Polish minority parties, did the Jewish Party manage to win two seats in the Czechoslovak parliamentary elections, which they kept until the end of the First Republic. In 1935, the party abandoned neutrality and joined the Social Democratic faction in the parliament. Although the Jewish Party was supported by many German-speaking Jews, its deputies were chosen from people who were fluent in Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Yiddish, and Russian.²⁴

There was also a certain level of interconnection among Jewish representatives with both the members of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party.²⁵

One of the main focal points of the Jewish political agenda, as well as Jewish community life, was social welfare. It was significantly challenged several times in the course of the first republic. The first time was during World War I when Jewish refugees came from Galicia and Bukovina due to the shifting front of the war; then during economic and social crises in interwar Europe; and last but not least, in the 1930s, as a means of flight from Nazi Germany.²⁶ The social help for the Jewish refugees was predominantly in the hands of Zionist women organizations and their female representatives. Since the late 1920s, these Jewish welfare organizations

²² Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 165.

²³ Marie Crhová, "Jewish politics in Central Europe: The Case of the Jewish Party in Czechoslovakia" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2006), http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/o2_crhova.pdf, accessed September 2, 2024.

²⁴ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 167.

²⁵ Ibid.; Vít Strobach, *Židé: národ, rasa, třída. Sociální hnutí a „židovská otázka“ v českých zemích 1861-1921* (Jews: Nation, Race, Class. Social Movements and the Jewish Question in Czech Lands in 1861-1921) (Praha: NLN, 2015).

²⁶ Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 181-183.

mostly focused on the territory of Subcarpathian Rus and Slovakia because of the poor living condition of the Jewish population.²⁷

The Great Depression and Jewish News

At the outset, I will mention the story of an extraordinarily successful Jewish entrepreneur, whose name is still known today and who remained untouched by the Great Economic Crisis. His tale underscores the profound diversity of fates among Jewish entrepreneurs and the broader Jewish population during the Great Depression.

At the turn of the century, one of the most famous industrialists of Jewish origin was Emil Kolben, an electrical engineer and entrepreneur, founder of the world-famous Kolben and Co.²⁸ In his student days already, Kolben was highly successful and managed to study in Zurich, Paris, and London. Soon after that, with his wife Malvina (née Popper), he traveled to the United States to work for the Edison General Electric Company. Kolben met with Edison several times in the United States and Prague. His encounter with Nikola Tesla and his Tesla Electric Company was no less important for his business career.²⁹

After his time in the United States, Kolben returned to Prague, where he and several partners opened an electrical engineering factory in Vysočany called Kolben and Co. The factory grew dynamically. By 1910, it had produced tens of thousands of electrical machines and equipment for factories in this country and worldwide. After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the company transformed several times until finally a new engineering company, Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk (ČKD), was established. The company produced turbines, aircraft, and trolley cars for Prague and participated in electrification. Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk had a significant share in making interwar Czechoslovakia one of the most

²⁷ Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, 235-240.

²⁸ Kolben Emil Collection, Inventory No. 271, Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

²⁹ Koben Emil Collection, Business Correspondence, Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague; see also Ivo Kraus, *Vědci, vynálezci a podnikatelé v českých zemích: Škoda, Křižík, Kolben, Klement, Baťa* (Scientists, inventors, and entrepreneurs in the Czech lands: Škoda, Křižík, Kolben, Klement, Baťa) (Praha: Jonathan Livingston, 2007), 93-119.

developed countries in the world and one of the largest arms manufacturers.³⁰ These were mainly armored vehicles, trucks, and tanks. At the height of the boom, twelve thousand employees worked at ČKD.³¹ As the rich archival holdings and literature show, the Great Depression hardly affected ČKD.³²

During the economic crisis, stories of prominent and successful entrepreneurs indeed were not a topic that the press or the populace dwelled on unless they directly sparked labor strikes and exacerbated unemployment. For the further analysis of the Great Depression in the Jewish press, I have chosen the Czech-language Jewish periodical *Židovské zprávy* (Jewish News), published by the Central Zionist Association from 1918 until 1938.³³ The newspaper had both a news and an editorial section, focusing not only on current political, economic, and social issues of the time but also on philosophical, religious, linguistic, national, and sociological questions. It included cultural and literary content and reports from the world of sports. Among the most influential editors of the *Židovské zprávy* was Emil Waldstein, later correspondent for *Lidové Noviny* in Mukačevo. Jewish periodicals associated with the Zionist or Czech-Jewish movement also paid attention to intra-party events and provided detailed information, particularly on organizational life and related issues. So, which topics were reflected on in connection with the Great Economic Depression?

In August 1931, a series of articles titled “On State Capitalism” were published in the *Židovské zprávy*, written by Zdeněk Landes. The series addressed another

³⁰ Ibid., 101

³¹ Ibid.

³² After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Germany in 1939, Kolben had to resign from his position at ČKD. The company was soon transformed into Böhmisches-Mährische Maschinenfabrik, A.G., and Wehrmacht confiscated hundreds of tanks produced for the Czechoslovak army. Emil Kolben was allowed to live in his family villa in Prague’s Vinohrady district until June 1943, when he was transported to the Terezín ghetto, where he died of mental and physical exhaustion on 3 July 1943. Dr. Emil Kolben, <https://www.holocaust.cz/databaze-obeti/obeti/101454-emil-kolben/>, accessed September 2, 2024.

³³ Indeed, there were several other publications as well, such as the Zionist German magazine *Selbstwehr* (Self-Defense), the magazine *Rozvoj* (Progress), and *Česko-židovské listy* (Czech Jewish Letters) of the integrationist Czech-Jewish movement, as well as the *Česko-židovský kalendář* (Czech-Jewish Calendar). In the following analysis, however, I only touch upon them peripherally, as the topics covered in the press often overlapped. Avraham Greenbaum, “Newspaper and Periodicals,” https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Newspapers_and_Periodicals#idobqh, accessed September 2, 2024.

important topic related to the crisis: economic anti-Semitism. While not a new phenomenon in Czechoslovakia, the subject was approached with greater caution than the general topic of anti-Semitism in neighboring countries.³⁴

In one of the articles, the author stressed that Jewish capitalists are equally affected by the crisis as non-Jewish ones.³⁵ However, in the subsequent series, the same author warned of the danger that threatened Jews: “State capitalism will be, and already is, politically accompanied by exclusionary nationalism. Every state will seek to exclude non-national elements from its business. Among others, Jews will be considered non-national elements, which will be the case worldwide, wherever they reside in larger numbers.”³⁶ The author also referred to a negative example in the Czechoslovak Republic, where Jews were dismissed from companies at first. “A delegation from Vítkovice came to former Minister and Member of Parliament Stárek for support. According to the press, the minister responded: ‘Get rid of the Jews and Germans, and we will help you!’”³⁷

The topic was also mentioned in relation to municipal elections and the Jewish parliamentary representation of the Jewish Party. The economic crisis was seen as the cause of the breakdown of thousands of Jewish families and the damage to the Jewish middle class. The fact that many Jewish officials and employees lost their jobs was also a consequence of economic antisemitism. In their rhetoric, some political parties and anti-Semites referred to the large share of Jews in the country’s economic life and their high concentration in trade and crafts. For parts of the population, anti-Semitism became a weapon in the competitive struggle and helped to develop and explain social, political, and cultural issues. Similarly, banks and industrial companies refused to hire Jewish applicants, and Jews were the first to be dismissed.³⁸

Jews and Jewish politicians were concerned about the deteriorating economic situation of the Jews. The economic crisis in the territory of Subcarpathian Rus

³⁴ Michal Frankl and Miloslav Szabó, *Budování státu bez antisemitismu? Násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa* (Building a state without anti-Semitism? Violence, the Discourse of Loyalty, and the Creation of Czechoslovakia) (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015).

³⁵ Zdeněk Landes, “O státním kapitalismu” (On State Capitalism), *Židovské zprávy* (Jewish News), August 18, 1931, (XIV), 34: 1.

³⁶ Zdeněk Landes, “O státním kapitalismu,” *Židovské zprávy*, August 21, 1931, (XIV), 33: 1.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Židovská strana–volby” (Jewish Party–votes), *Židovské zprávy*, September 11, 1931, (XIV), 36: 1.

became a pressing issue, and it was not surprising that it received significant attention among the Jewish political representation due to the high percentage of Jews in that area. Even one of the deputies of the Jewish Party, Julius Reisz, spoke about the poor economic situation of Jews in the parliamentary chamber. He addressed an equally important topic that strongly resonated in the Jewish press. He criticized the high unemployment rate in Subcarpathian Rus and called for tax exemptions for new constructions and a flat-rate textile tax on turnover in the textile industry to improve economic conditions in Slovakia.³⁹

As mentioned earlier, the eastern part of the republic had been in the spotlight of Zionist organizations since World War I, when thousands of Jewish refugees arrived on Czech territory. In the 1930s, a large number of refugees from Germany came to Czechoslovakia once again. They were assisted by the Jewish Central Welfare Office (*Židovská ústředna pro sociální péči*), Jewish charitable associations, B'nai B'rith, and especially Zionists affiliated with international organizations such as HICEM (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society), the Jewish Colonization Association and Emigration Direction. Additionally, women from the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), led by Marie Schmolková and Hanna Steinnerová, played a significant role. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, WIZO also organized assistance for Jews from the eastern part of the republic regarding emigration, focusing on aiding Jews from Subcarpathian Rus, partly financed by the Jewish Distribution Committee.⁴⁰

By the late 1920s, the situation in Subcarpathian Rus caught the attention of Vally Waldsteinová, the former wife of a correspondent for the newspaper *Lidové noviny* (*The People's Newspaper*) in Uzhhorod. She cared for the material needs of local Jews living in extreme poverty. The collection and redistribution of material and financial aid was directed both to the poorest Jewish population and to the population of the eastern part of the country, which was poverty-stricken as a result of the crisis. Later, however, it gradually began to turn into aid to Jewish refugees fleeing Germany for Czechoslovakia. Schmolková and Steinnerová further contributed to the redistribution of aid and the procurement of material resources. Hanna Steinnerová herself served as the Jewish Women's Relief

³⁹ "Poslanec dr. J. Reisz o hospodářské krizi" (Deputy J. Reisz on the economic crisis), *Židovské zprávy*, March 20, 1931, (XIV), 8: 3.

⁴⁰ Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, 235-240.

Committee chairwoman for Subcarpathian Rus. Their assistance to German refugees in the 1930s seamlessly continued based on these experiences.⁴¹

In the early 1930s, the Jewish (Zionist) press was filled with articles about the dire economic and social situation in the eastern part of the republic, along with calls for food, financial, and material collections for Subcarpathian Rus. The press stressed that unemployment, hunger, and poverty were particularly severe in the eastern part of the country due to the economic crisis. If help did not reach the local Jews, Jewish families would die of starvation.⁴² Appeals for solidarity with Eastern Jews were directed at both the Jewish and non-Jewish public with the slogan “Hunger knows no political differences.”⁴³ These appeals were made by the Aid Committee of Jewish Women for Subcarpathian Rus (Pomocného výboru židovských žen pro Podkarpatskou Rus).⁴⁴

Due to the duration of the crisis, the eligibility criteria for state unemployment benefits became more stringent. For instance, the requirement for trade union membership, a prerequisite for receiving support, was extended, the maximum daily support amount reduced, and active employee care programs were introduced. The state established an emergency public community service system, and unemployed individuals were not allowed to refuse it, unless they would lose their entitlement to assistance. Another prerequisite for receiving support was registration with a labor agency. Consequently, public collections, soup kitchens, and other charitable events played a crucial role. Jewish aid understandably did not focus solely on the eastern region of the republic. In December 1930, the Society for Assistance to the Unemployed (Pomoc nezaměstnaným) was established in collaboration with six German and Jewish humanitarian organizations to provide meals to the unemployed. An article titled “Note on Jewish Humanity” mentioned that during November and December 1931, 192,512 meals were served

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Proti bídě a hladu” (Against poverty and hunger), *Židovské zprávy*, February 2, 1932, (XV), 8: 1.

⁴³ “Židovská fronta humanity” (The Jewish humanity front), *Židovské zprávy*, February 2, 1932, (XV), 8:1.

⁴⁴ The Aid Committee was headed by Hana Steinerová, see also “Podkarpatoruské problémy” (Problems in Subcarpathian Rus), *Židovské zprávy*, February 26, 1932, (XV), 9: 1; “Další výzvy proti bídě a hladu” (Another appeals against poverty and hunger), *Židovské zprávy*, May 13, 1932, (XV), 20: 2.

to those in need in four kitchens operated by the society, regardless of their religious affiliation. The food was cooked by the wives of members of the founding organizations (Lodge Odd Fellows, B'nai B'rith, Hort, Societa, and Confraternity, Usneseno (Resolved)). The article's authors wanted to emphasize that solidarity and assistance were part of Jewish nature, although the government and municipalities should primarily organize this aid.⁴⁵

The newspapers also addressed demographic issues related to the crisis. As mentioned earlier, there was a gradual migration of Jews from rural areas to cities, which was evident in the official census of 1930. In an article titled "How Jews Disappear from Czech Countryside", an unknown author discussed the decrease of the Jewish population its causes were discussed. There was a decrease of 3,476 individuals or 4.36 percent since the last census in 1921, while the overall population had increased by 6.58 percent. The most significant change was expected to occur in rural areas, where the number of Jews decreased by a quarter in several districts. In Prague, however, the Jewish population grew from 31,751 to 35,425 individuals (out of 76,301 Jews in Bohemia).⁴⁶ Similarly, Dr. Josef Nechamkis discussed in his article "Decline in Birthrate among Jews in Western and Central Europe" that the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia had the lowest birthrate, expressing concerns about the future of Jews in Europe. He further stated that declining birthrates were evident in all European countries and among all nations. He identified two reasons for this phenomenon: "1. Familiarity of all population strata with means of contraception; 2. Unfavorable social and economic conditions that lead to the use of these means."⁴⁷

The impact of the Great Economic Depression on man became a comprehensive, multilayered topic, as shows the analyses of this issue which can be found in the *Česko-židovský kalendář* (Czech-Jewish Calendar) by Dr. Otakar Guth, titled "Towards the Current Moral Crisis." Dr. Guth addressed not only the declining sales of goods, high unemployment, financial difficulties, and the increasing

⁴⁵ "Poznámka o židovské humanitě" (A note about Jewish humanity), *Židovské zprávy*, May 1, 1931, (XIV), 16: 6.

⁴⁶ "Jak mizejí Židé z českého venkova" (How Jews are disappearing from the Czech countryside), *Židovské zprávy*, January 20, 1933, (XVI), 3: 2.

⁴⁷ Dr. Josef Nechamkis, "Pokles porodnosti u Židů v západní a střední Evropě" (Declining birth rates among Jews in Western and Central Europe), *Židovské zprávy*, September 9, 1931, (XIV), 36: 2.

bankruptcies of companies and shops that affected various segments of the population—workers, traders, industrialists, lawyers, doctors, and engineers.⁴⁸ Dr. Guth also pointed out that society was experiencing a moral crisis alongside the economic crisis, in Czechoslovakia as well as worldwide. This crisis entailed increasing crime rates, a rising number of divorces, the loosening of social morals, and an increasing number of suicides. He provided statistics from Vienna, where 3,083 individuals attempted suicide in 1931 and 2,875 in 1932. The leading causes were poverty, unemployment, job loss, family disputes, illness, and unhappy love.⁴⁹ The author also identified the moral crisis in the cultural sphere.

Dr. Guth strongly warned of the consequences of high unemployment, which could lead to increased crime rates, and addressed another phenomenon of the time, the endless list of job-seeking advertisements in newspapers, using current advertisements of job seekers:

Can I find a compassionate person? My many advertisements in this section have yet to bring me the desired position, with so far only some occasional earnings that barely support myself and my family! However, as my situation has become highly critical, where I cannot find even the tiniest income, I return to compassionate gentlemen and strongly request any position (due to family reasons!) in Prague! I am a chemist with excellent experience, outstanding editorial skills, and most importantly, I am willing to work honestly. Being married and a father, without means.⁵⁰

In a similar vein, “a young writer severely affected by the crisis humbly requests esteemed gentlemen for any employment [...] Incredibly grateful for the bare minimum to survive.”⁵¹ Guth saw the roots of the current economic and moral decline in World War I and warned that the economic crisis revealed a dark side of mankind. “[...] Unemployment, poor business, and insolvencies generate envy,

⁴⁸ Dr. Otakar Guth, “K současné mravní krizi” (On the current moral crisis), *Kalendář česko-židovský*, (LIII), 1933-1934: 150. The author lists the number of companies that went bankrupt by years: 1932: 1216 companies, 1931: 1033 companies, 1930: 885 companies, 1929 646 companies, 1928: 527 companies.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁵¹ Ibid.

anger, and hostility. Suddenly, a neighbor still doing somewhat well in business, who owns a car or bigger house, becomes the target of gossip and slander. Family life is being tactlessly disrupted.”⁵²

In Czechoslovakia, unemployment was indeed high, and the state had significant shortcomings in caring for the unemployed; unemployment support was not provided to many of them at all. By the end of 1930, there was a recorded unemployment rate of 58 percent in the territory of Czechoslovakia (including children and elderly individuals), with the eastern part of the republic contributing significantly to this statistic.⁵³ Numerous strikes and concerns about societal radicalization were integral parts of the social and economic fabric, which the Communists and Fascists, for instance, naturally exploited. They aimed to radicalize society, gain followers, and destabilize the democratic state.⁵⁴ Therefore, warnings about threats and deficiencies of democracy were frequently issued.

In the aforementioned article, Dr. Guth further warned against false euphoria about democracy, its ambition, corruption, intolerance, and hypocrisy. “Democracy is a good thing. Let us be glad that we have it but let us not elevate it to the status of a deity; let us not believe in some miraculous power and supernatural ability it possesses.”⁵⁵ What did he see as the roots of the current moral crisis and its solution? “In the fact that a large part of humanity has lost religion but has not found a compensation.”⁵⁶ Further, he added that socialism may have seemed like an adequate substitute, but had led to disappointment: “[...] the key to solving the moral crisis is a return to oneself. [...] Until the economic crisis subsides, the moral crisis will not subside. Some also say the opposite: the moral crisis must subside first, and then the public economy will recover.”⁵⁷

The author saw the major problem in the increased departure from the churches, especially those requiring religious taxes, such as the Israelite Church. Taxes were too high for many members since people were cutting down on expenses due to the depression. Dr. Guth concluded:

⁵² Ibid., 153-154.

⁵³ Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky (1918-1938)*, 100.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 100-101

⁵⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 156-157.

The remedy is this: Find inner balance within ourselves and help others maintain it. [...] The worst thing in the world is fear. It is an old experience that fear of catastrophe is worse than the catastrophe itself. Some people fear losing money; others fear the arrival of Bolshevism; others fear losing their jobs. But to live in perpetual fear is worse than living in prison.⁵⁸

The author thus saw the situation as a vicious circle, in which the moral decline went hand in hand with the economic crisis.

And last but not least, there were occasional newspaper articles that warned about physical illnesses related to the economic crisis, such as rheumatism, gout, influenza, headaches, and muscle pain. “It is precisely the current economic crisis that places the greatest demands on every worker and requires work efficiency and, consequently, earning potential maximized to the extreme.”⁵⁹

Jewish Zionist periodicals primarily focused on the Great Depression and its impact on the territory of Palestine. Zionists were most concerned about the impact of the economic crisis on the project of building Palestine, and it is not surprising that this topic frequently appeared in their journals. There were persistent and frequent calls to support the Zionist project, despite the economic depression.⁶⁰

In the article “The Global Crisis and the Building Project,” an unknown author expressed concerns about how the economic crisis in the United States, the vast unemployment there, and the bank failures would impact Eretz and the insufficient funding of local social enterprises. “If the whole world is suffering, old states such as England, Central Europe, and powerful entities like America facing catastrophic crises, it would be a miracle if the Zionist project remained unaffected,” the author worries.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁹ “Krise a nemoc” (Crisis and the illness), *Židovské zprávy*, April 21, 1933 (XVI), 16: 4. The text also served as a hidden advertisement offering the drug Tegal.

⁶⁰ See appeals to support Karen Hayesod due to the economic crisis in Jewish News, e.g., *Židovské zprávy*, January 23, 1931, (XIV), 4: 1.

⁶¹ “Světová krise a budovací dílo” (The Global Crisis and the Building Project), *Židovské zprávy*, January 16, 193, (XIV), 3: 2.

“Palestine itself, the Jewish undertaking, has not yet been affected by the economic crisis like Czechoslovakia, England, or other countries. The decline in grain prices has placed a significant part of the Arab population in dire straits, but the Jewish community has not been shaken to that extent so far.”⁶² Concerns primarily arose due to the financial difficulties of the Jewish Agency related to the depression. In line with supporting the Zionist agenda, the article concludes with a proposal to address the poor economic situation of Jews in Europe, suggesting that they should seek new economic opportunities and emigrate to Palestine. Among the reasonable arguments for emigration was the construction of the Baghdad-Haifa railway, offering advantageous and profitable job opportunities.⁶³

Reflections on the global economic crisis and its contextualization with Palestine were widespread. Moreover, as already mentioned, it was an explicit part of Zionist propaganda, which necessarily included a recapitulation of the achievements of Zionist philanthropy.⁶⁴ Prominent Jewish philanthropists, their targets achieved, and their economic successes in Palestine were highlighted.

In March 1931, the critical economic situation of the Jews of Poland resonated in *Židovské zprávy*. As the newspaper stressed, around 9,000 predominantly Jewish businesses were liquidated, and the collapse of at least 20,000 more seemed imminent. The traditional Jewish business sectors, such as furriers, haberdasheries, shoemakers, and milliners, were the most gravely threatened. The article titled “Severe Economic Crisis in Poland,” however, was linked to the aforementioned topic, the economic crisis in Palestine. The article called for economically conscious behavior among Jews, which meant supporting their market—the so-called *Toceret Haaertz* in Palestine. Consumers were encouraged to be aware of the need to reject foreign products to avoid harming the Palestinian economy. The article also referred to the well-known Czechoslovak shoe company, Baťa, stating, “Industrial growth will undoubtedly eliminate political disagreements, as

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See appeals to support Karen Hayesod due to the successes of Montefiore, Alliance Israélite Universelle, as well as the current construction of Jewish factories in Palestine and their ability to employ 11,000 workers, were highlighted. Nellie Mochenson, “Vývoj židovského průmyslu” (The development of the Jewish industry), *Židovské zprávy*, March 13, 1931, (XIV), 11: 1.

demonstrated by the recent joint statement of Jewish and Arab shoemakers against Baťa.”⁶⁵

If the economic situation in Palestine was associated with those in the USA and Europe, newspaper authors usually expressed optimism that the depression in Eretz Israel was not as catastrophic as expected, the financial situation was stable, and the Jewish population’s unemployment was not excessively high. “There is a severe economic depression in the world, but the domestic economy continues to grow in Palestine. It is the only country where Jews are gaining economic positions. The unemployment of approximately 3,000 people can easily be eliminated by spring for 30,000 pounds.”⁶⁶

Articles in the Jewish press that covered topics of the Great Depression were usually also linked to other subjects that the authors regarded crucial. The depression was intertwined with themes of Palestine, (economic) antisemitism, or the escalating poverty in the eastern part of the republic, and often interwoven with the dissemination of ideas and opinions and efforts to maintain support or gain adherents to the agendas that the respective periodical traditionally upheld.

As previously mentioned, due to turbulent social and economic changes, authors of the Jewish press expressed their concern about the radicalization of society and the strengthening of fascism and communism, as it had occurred in neighboring states. The Jewish Calendar addressed propaganda and many other aspects at a broader level in an article by Vilém Práger titled “About State Propaganda.” The author delved into the utilization of scientific knowledge in propaganda, not only in industrial sectors, as the title suggests, but primarily in the realm of the state. He discussed the necessity of state propaganda in a democracy: “The times are exceptional, and therefore democracy must not neglect any means by which its position can be fortified.”⁶⁷

The goal of propaganda, tailored to the broad layers of society, was to strengthen the belief in democracy, the Czechoslovak Republic, and its brighter economic future. In this regard, the article’s author mentioned the successes of Goebbels’

⁶⁵ “Těžká hospodářská krize v Polsku” (Severe economic crisis in Poland), *Židovské zprávy*, March 13, 1931, (XIV), II: 1.

⁶⁶ “Zasedání Jewish Agency” (Jewish Agency Session), *Židovské zprávy*, July 14, 1931, (XIV), 29: 4.

⁶⁷ Vilém Práger, “O státní propaganda” (About State Propaganda), *Židovský kalendář*, 1934-1935: 82-92; 84.

propaganda in Nazi Germany or Trotsky's in Russia, as well as the successful economic propaganda of Roosevelt. However, he emphasized the necessity of thoroughly analyzing the environment in which propaganda operated – capturing the population's mindset, its weaknesses and problems, interests, desires, and needs. For this purpose, the efforts of teachers, journalists, scouts, the Red Cross, police, and, last but not least, women and mothers were to be utilized.⁶⁸

The intended goal was also to be achieved with the help of an economic measure from 1933, an investment loan aimed at addressing the economic crisis in 1933-1934, known as the "Labor Loans." This initiative was associated with the slogans of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk: "If people want to work, money must not idle."⁶⁹ Using the example of the "Labor Loans," Vilém Práger highlighted a successful propaganda practice aimed at preserving democracy in Czechoslovakia. He advocated for a clear timeline for promotion according to a system and plan, including advertising through radio broadcasts, films, and songs and through all community, minority, and educational associations.⁷⁰ And, last but not least, following the example of the renowned American Ford corporation, humor was also to be employed.⁷¹ A Central Office was to be established to promote Czechoslovak democracy proactively, and every Czechoslovak citizen should be made aware that they were the cornerstones.⁷²

Conclusion

In Czechoslovakia, the Great Economic Depression manifested itself with a delay, but ultimately, the crisis became significantly deeper than in most countries. The unfavorable industrial structure, dependence on foreign trade, and often

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85 and 88.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 88-92.

⁷¹ The battle was to be fought using humor, taking a cue from Ford, who collected all jokes aimed at his factory, published them collectively, and personally announced that his favorite anecdote was: "Someone tried in vain to sell his old Ford. After several unsuccessful ads, he announced in the newspapers that at 3 o'clock, he would place his Ford in front of the Statue of Liberty, and the first person to arrive would get the Ford. For free. When he arrived precisely at 3 o'clock with his Ford at the designated spot, he found 120 waiting there – old Fords." Ibid., 88-89.

⁷² Ibid., 92.

technological deficiencies in production were to blame, as well as specific agricultural developments, where the global downturn pushed prices down. Particularly in the eastern part of the republic, the situation was dire due to an extensive agrarian crisis.

Moreover, the crisis significantly deepened the disparities between the Czech lands and Slovakia, as well as Subcarpathian Rus, and between the interior and the border regions. It should be noted that a German minority mostly inhabited these border areas, and these were also industrial regions of great importance for the entire Czechoslovakia. Given that these regions suffered greatly from the severe economic crisis, ideal conditions began to emerge here for anti-Czechoslovak resentments and the escalation of social and national radicalism, gradually leading to the emergence and success of the Sudeten German Party led by Konrad Henlein.

The Czechoslovak economy focused on the textile industry, glassmaking, distilleries, construction industry, engineering, power plants, mining, and industrial enterprises, often situated in border areas. The crisis most severely affected small and medium-sized businesses, and because banks owned many conglomerates, Czechoslovakia experienced an accelerated process of capital concentration. All of this had a profound impact in 1938.

The impact of the Great Depression on the Jewish minority was very uneven, as it was on all the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. As the analysis in Jewish News shows, it was possible to reflect crisis on many levels.

It was central for Zionists to inform readers about the economic situation in Palestine, which was not as catastrophically affected by the crisis as the US and many European states. In the press, one could observe the unceasing calls for financial aid to Eretz and active involvement in building the Promised Land. Therefore, it was unsurprising that these appeals were linked to the issue of the rise of economic anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia and its possible impact on the Jewish population.

Economic anti-Semitism was another topic widely reflected in the Jewish press from the time of the establishment of the new state. It was connected to a difficult situation of the Jewish population in the economically backward and unprosperous eastern part of the country. Therefore, the crisis's effects were more tangible, and the press wrote of a humanitarian catastrophe in the area. Naturally,

this theme was also reflected in the political agenda of Jewish parties and politicians and on the radar of Jewish aid societies and organizations.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, the Jewish minority entered the new Czech state emancipated and well-educated, and they had participated abundantly in the economic growth of the Habsburg monarchy associated with the Industrial Revolution would later continue to do so in the dynamic economic development of interwar Czechoslovakia.

Daniel Bartáková is a researcher at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences. She is working on the project “Felix Weltsch, Jindřich Kohn, and the intellectual history of interwar Czechoslovakia (2021–2024),” funded by the Czech Science Foundation. She teaches Modern Jewish History at the CET Academic Programs, Prague.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, Jews, Jewish News, Great Depression, Zionism

How to quote this article:

Daniel Bartáková, “Jewish News and Reflections on the Great Depression in Czechoslovakia,” 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/15652

Jews, the Great Depression, and the “Lithuanianisation” of the National Economy

by *Klaus Richter*

Abstract

The article examines how the Great Depression affected the Lithuanian Jews, their relationship with ethnic Lithuanians, and their relationship with the Lithuanian state. It places particular emphasis on how the depression shaped the state’s core project—the “Lithuanianisation” of the national economy. Through case studies ranging from Jewish agricultural credit across labor migration to Klaipėda to the Lithuanian Businessmen’s Union’s (LVS) efforts to strengthen ethnic Lithuanians economically, the article argues that both the government’s and the LVS’s responses to the depression dramatically reshaped the lives of Lithuanian Jews. The “Lithuanianisation” of the national economy transformed formerly predominantly Jewish towns economically, socially, and culturally. However, as Jewish migration to Klaipėda shows, Lithuanian economic nationalism also provided opportunities for Jews seeking a livelihood outside of the shtetls. At the same time, the rise of the Nazis in Germany made Lithuanian Jews more dependent than ever on the existence of an independent Lithuania.

Introduction

The Crisis of Jewish Agriculture and the Revival of Folkism

Economic Empowerment and Jewish-Lithuanian Relations

The Decline of Jewish Businesses

Assessing Jewish-Lithuanian Relations after the Depression

Conclusion

Introduction

In 1935, a Jewish newspaper asked former Lithuanian president Kazys Grinius about his views on the relations between Lithuanians and Jews. Grinius responded that these had deteriorated considerably since the Lithuanian Republic had achieved independence. In the first years after the end of the First World War, he argued, Lithuanians and Jews had been on good terms. Both had developed a “common language and organic connection” from the shared experience of the struggle against Tsarist oppression. However, this harmony, Grinius warned, was not to last:

[...] the urbanization of our cities had not yet begun, there had not yet been such a rush from the countryside to the city, the economic crisis had not yet occurred [...]. But then, when chauvinism took the place of true positive patriotism, when the economic situation deteriorated, when the countryside was pushing more and more into the city, and when the great regrouping of the Lithuanian nation began, the Lithuanians saw that many of the positions in the free professions, in commerce and in industry, were taken by other nations, and they thought to themselves: Why “he” and not “me”? And since people usually take the path of least resistance, that is where the antisemitism and patriotic hooray slogans started.¹

In this article, I will to explore how the economic crisis that Grinius refers to—the Great Depression—affected the Lithuanian Jews, their relationship with ethnic Lithuanians, and their relationship with the Lithuanian state. I will place particular emphasis on how the Great Depression shaped the Lithuanian state’s core project—the “Lithuanianisation” (*sulietuvinimas*) of the national economy, which Grinius frames here as the “great regrouping of the Lithuanian nation,” and how Jewish communities experienced and responded to this policy. Lithuanian scholars have stressed the significance of this “Lithuanianisation” for interwar Lithuanian-Jewish relations, but we know little about how it interacted with the

¹ “Žydai neturi būti dirbtinai išstumti iš prekybos. Pasikalbėjimas su Doktoru K. Griniu apie Lietuvių Žydų santykius,” *Apžvalga*, July 21, 1935.

challenges of the Great Depression and how Jews experienced it.² This requires looking closely at the momentous socio-economic changes that Grinius alludes to: urbanization, the “push from the countryside,” the efforts of Lithuanians to take up urban professions that were hitherto primarily held by the country’s ethnic minorities, and predominantly by Jews.

Like the other states that emerged from the collapsed Romanov and Habsburg empires in East Central Europe, Lithuania was a “nationalizing state” (Brubaker), meaning it was a multi-ethnic state that its leadership aspired to transform into a homogenous nation state.³ Lithuanian politicians were thus keen to strengthen the economic position of Lithuanians vis-à-vis the national minorities—primarily Poles, Jews and Germans—who they regarded as representatives of the *ancien régime* and as having enjoyed excessive privileges under former Russian imperial rule. This economic empowerment became the key project of Lithuanian state building, reflecting in a sweeping agrarian reform, in policies designed to encourage Lithuanians to take up urban professions, in the exclusion of minorities from the state bureaucracies, and in efforts to buy up struggling enterprises that belonged to minorities. Regarding Jews, the main arena for economic nationalism was trade. Jews constituted only 7.5 per cent of the population, but accounted for 77 per cent of all trade activities (1923 census) and owned 83 per cent of all commercial and retail enterprises. Commerce was thus regarded as an almost entirely Jewish sector and as a sector the control of which was crucial to sustain national independence.⁴ The dependence of foreign trade on the mediation of

² Gediminas Vaskela, “Lietuvių ir žydų santykiai visuomenės modernėjimo ir socialinės sferos politinio reguliavimo aspektais (XX a. Pirmoji pusė),” in *Žydai Lietuvos ekonominėje-socialinėje struktūroje: Tarp tarpininko ir konkurento*, eds. Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas (Vilnius: LII Leidykla, 2006), 133-176; Hektoras Vitkus, “Smulkiojo verslo lituanizacija tarpukario Lietuvoje: Ideologija ir praktika,” in *Žydai Lietuvos ekonominėje-socialinėje struktūroje*, eds. Sirutavičius and Staliūnas, 177-216.

³ Rogers Brubaker, “National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe,” *Daedalus* 124, no. 2 (1995): 107-132; Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79-106.

⁴ Gediminas Vaskela, “Jews in the Economic Structure of Lithuania,” in *The History of Jews in Lithuania: From the Middle Ages to the 1990s*, eds. Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, and Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 292-307; 293; Saulius Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism in Lithuania and Jewish-Lithuanian Relations during the

Jewish merchants was regarded as a threat to sovereignty, as Jews were regarded as notoriously disloyal to the Lithuanian cause, thus allegedly handling them a weapon which they could readily wield to choke Lithuania off the international markets.⁵ For this reason, Lithuanian politicians pursued a policy of monopolization, which they initiated in the early 1920s and escalated as a response to the Great Depression's catastrophic impact on foreign trade.⁶

For the Lithuanian Jews, these efforts to strengthen ethnic Lithuanians at the expense of the minorities represented an increasing limitation of their own economic agency, threatening the livelihood of families and the very existence of Jewish communities.⁷ When the depression struck and the state accelerated the centralization of foreign trade, the Jewish communities already felt under siege in the face of the economic ascent of the Lithuanians. From the perspective of Lithuanians, this, of course, looked different: Economic empowerment had always been a fragile project, which had to be carried out against the vested powers of conservative minorities that would continue to fight the new Lithuanian state to restore their old powers and against Lithuania's powerful, hostile neighbors (Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union), which supported these minorities. The Great Depression, which deprived both the state and ordinary Lithuanians, many of whom were indebted peasants, of access to loans, came to be regarded as an existential threat to—and an opportunity for—economic empowerment.

Virtually no studies exist that reconstruct the impact of the Great Depression on Lithuania. This is despite the fact that the depression struck Lithuania severely. As four fifths of the population depended on agriculture, the global collapse of agricultural prices and the loss of access to loans had a catastrophic impact, particularly on smallholders, aggravating social tensions and deepening the divide

1930s,” in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2004), 119-154; 125.

⁵ Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas, eds., *A Pragmatic Alliance: Jewish-Lithuanian Political Cooperation at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2011).

⁶ Klaus Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 157-203.

⁷ Vladas Sirutavičius, “‘Close, but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbour’: Outbreaks of Antisemitism in Inter-War Lithuania,” *Polin* 25 (2013): 245-266; Vygantas Vareikis, “Žydų ir lietuvių susidūrimai bei konfliktai tarpukario Lietuvoje,” in *Kai ksenofobija virsta prievarta: Lietuvių ir žydų santykių dinamika XIX a. – XX a. Pirmojoje pusėje*, eds. Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas (Vilnius: LII Leidykla, 2005), 157-180.

between towns and the countryside.⁸ By 1935, Lithuania's income from wheat sales was at little more than 10 per cent of its 1929 value. However, as elsewhere across Eastern Europe, there was little sense of a profound economic crisis before 1931. Lithuania was the only East Central European state to benefit from a surge in trade relations with Germany in the late 1920s.⁹ Although prices on international markets slumped in 1929, leading to a collapse in the sale of some of Lithuania's most significant export commodities, such as wood pulp, flax, and grain, this was offset by gains in the export of fresh meat, bacon and butter—a result of an economic policy developed in the late 1920s to compensate for the loss of traditional trade routes, hinterlands and markets after the First World War. By 1933, the share of flax in Lithuania's total export turnover had dropped from 15 per cent before the crisis to 3.3 per cent, while the share of bacon had surged from 0.02 per cent to 27 per cent.¹⁰

Yet these figures could not conceal the disastrous impact of the collapse of overall exports. Income from exports fell from more than 533 million Litai in 1930 to merely 160 million Litai in 1933. Adding to the agricultural crisis, the Great Depression dealt Lithuania another blow summer 1931 in the wake of the collapse of the Austrian Creditanstalt and the German Danat Bank. As Germany introduced exchange controls in the same year, Lithuanian foreign trade slumped, with exports to Germany dropping from 200 million Litai in 1930 to 50 million in 1931.¹¹ This was aggravated by Britain's 1931 departure from the Gold Standard and its 1932 introduction of imperial preference.¹² Lithuania came under additional pressure following the government's trial against local Nazis in the Klaipėda region in 1934-1935.¹³ German economic sanctions further damaged Lithuania's economy. Ironically, this prompted the government to finally depart from the Gold Standard in October 1935, which it had maintained for almost 14 years—longer

⁸ Klaus Richter, "Lithuania: The Great Depression, Social Divisions and Economic Nationalism," in *The Great Depression in Eastern Europe*, eds. Klaus Richter, Jasmin Nithammer, and Anca Mandru (Vienna: Central European University Press, in print).

⁹ "Ekonominis krizis Vokietijos-Pabaltės ir Rytų Europos prekyboje," April 25, 1931, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA), f. 383, ap. 4, b. 80, l. 15-17.

¹⁰ *Statistikos biuletenis* 2 (1930): 10-12; *Statistikos biuletenis* 2 (1931): 10-12; *Statistikos biuletenis* 2 (1932): 10-12; *Statistikos biuletenis* 2 (1933): 10-12; *Statistikos biuletenis* 1 (1934): 10-12.

¹¹ *Statistikos biuletenis* 1 (1939).

¹² "Byla apie eksportą prekių." 1933. LCVA, f. 605, ap. 2, b. 22.

¹³ "Eltos pranešimas apie įvykius Suvalkijoje," *Lietuvos ūkininkas*, August 29, 1935.

than almost any other country in East Central Europe. Lithuania's tenacious commitment to the Gold Standard was the main reason for the long duration of the country's economic crisis, and its abandonment ushered in a period of recovery.¹⁴

Not least, the depression struck a severe blow to the legitimacy of dictator Antanas Smetona's rule. Mass unemployment, bankruptcies, and the general fall in living standards led to an unprecedented level of criticism of Smetona and his government. Inspired by the successful coups in Latvia and Estonia in spring 1934, officers and soldiers sympathetic to the incarcerated fascist Augustinas Voldemaras, who had been the main instigator of the 1926 coup that had brought Smetona to power, launched a coup in June 1934 to oust the government of prime minister Juozas Tūbelis.¹⁵ The coup failed, but brought the fragility of Smetona's system to light. Still, Smetona's sixtieth birthday was celebrated in September 1934 with mass festivities across all Lithuanian cities, towns and villages.¹⁶ Yet a year later, in August 1935, discontent in the depressed countryside culminated in rural strikes that quickly spread throughout the whole of southern Lithuania. After a violent police crackdown that resulted in the shootings of rioters, the strikers went underground, carrying out acts of terrorism and sabotage across the following twelve months. Until 1938, more than 250 persons were convicted, with 19 strikers sentenced to death, tarnishing Smetona's rule further, which survived the depression, but never recovered its popularity.¹⁷

When the Great Depression reached Lithuania, it affected a Jewish community that was largely disillusioned with the direction that the Republic of Lithuania had taken. The beginnings had been promising: The Lithuanian Republic, despite its aspiration to be a nation state for ethnic Lithuanians, was built on a compromise to garner the widest possible support in a hostile environment in which Lithuanian statehood was threatened by German Freikorps reluctant to

¹⁴ Richter, "Great Depression."

¹⁵ Andriejus Stoliarovas, "Vidiniai neramumai Lietuvos Respublikoje 1919-1940 metais," *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 32 (2016): 99-117.

¹⁶ Klaus Richter: "Der Kult um Antanas Smetona in Litauen (1926-1940): Funktionsweise und Entwicklungen," in *Der Führer im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Benno Ennker and Heidi Hein-Kircher (Herder-Institut, Marburg, 2010), 124-129.

¹⁷ Sigita Černevičiūtė, "Mirties baismės taikymo praktika: 1935-1936 m. Suvalkijos ūkininkų streikas," *Istorija* 92, no. 4 (2013): 22-31.

withdraw, Poles refusing to recognize the existence of Lithuania as a nation, and Bolsheviks who regarded independent statehood in the former Russian Empire's periphery as merely a transitory phase towards world revolution. To make sure Lithuania appeared to the Western Entente as a benevolent alternative to pogrom-ridden Poland, Lithuania provided Jews and Belarusians with cultural autonomy safeguarded by these minorities' own dedicated ministries.¹⁸ Yet once Lithuania's statehood had consolidated—and once it became clear there was no clear Western support in favor of Lithuania's claim on Vilnius—the Ministry for Jewish Affairs was quickly dismantled.¹⁹

The democratically elected Lithuanian governments of the 1920s (most of which were led by Christian Democrats) pursued policies that were designed to strengthen ethnic Lithuanians, who, they claimed, had been historically disadvantaged through centuries of Polish and Russian rule, and who had to be raised to the socio-economic level and prosperity that the ethnic minorities allegedly long enjoyed. A sweeping land reform law was passed to break the power of the Polish-speaking gentry. Universities and vocational schools were founded to pave the route for the children of Lithuanian peasants to assume urban professions. Loan banks and cooperatives were founded to support Lithuanian businesses.²⁰ After the authoritarian coup of Smetona, the ruling Lithuanian Nationalist Union (*Lietuvos Tautininkų Sąjunga*) declared that the government's task was to support only those companies through loans, public contracts and licenses that “conceive of themselves as Lithuanian” and that employed Lithuanian workers.²¹

¹⁸ Šarūnas Liekis, *A State Within a State? Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania 1918-1925* (Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2003).

¹⁹ Klaus Richter, “ ‘Eine durch und durch demokratische Nation’: Demokratie und Minderheitenschutz in der Außendarstellung Litauens nach 1918,” *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 64, no. 2 (2015): 194-217.

²⁰ Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe*, 157-203 and 252-302.

²¹ “Klaipėdos krašto reikalais rezoliucija,” 1928, LCVA, f. f. 554, ap. 1, b. 37, l. 134.

The Crisis of Jewish Agriculture and the Revival of Folkism

It is no surprise that Jewish community leaders were disillusioned. Not least, this disillusionment fed into the revival of the Folkism movement, as the Jewish middle class became convinced that the Lithuanians were no longer interested in a shared future based on equal rights and equal opportunities. Due to its middle-class base and emphasis on Yiddish culture, Folkism differed notably from the other two main secular Jewish ideologies, Zionism and Bundism. Given its rejection of a Jewish state and its embrace of diaspora life, support for Folkism was probably the clearest barometer for the quality of the relationship between the Jewish minority and the Lithuanian state.²² To understand this relationship, it is important to bear in mind the scale of the disaster of the First World War for Lithuanian Jews. As most Jews had been expelled from Lithuania in 1915 by the retreating Russian Army, both the Lithuanian Republic and the Bolsheviks made it difficult for Jews to return from Civil War Russia. This had led to a drop in the proportion of Jews in Lithuania's population from ca. 13 per cent before the war to 7.5 per cent after (at the same time, the proportion of Lithuanians rose from two thirds to 84 per cent).²³ Moreover, the war had led to a further concentration of Jews in the petty trade—a “hypertrophy” that the Ministry for Jewish Affairs regarded the main obstacle towards the future well-being of Lithuanian Jewry.²⁴ The Ministry thus stipulated the socio-economic stratification of the Jewish community by educating Jews to engage in those professions they were less represented in, especially agriculture.²⁵ Yet these efforts clashed with the efforts of the Lithuanian state to empower Lithuanians and marginalize the minorities.

²² Yaacov Iram, “The Persistence of Jewish Ethnic Identity: The Educational Experience in Inter-war Poland and Lithuania, 1919-1939,” *History of Education* 14, no. 4 (1985): 273-282; Marcos Silber, “Lithuania? But Which? The Changing Political Attitude of the Jewish Political Elite in East Central Europe toward Emerging Lithuania, 1915-1919,” in *A Pragmatic Alliance*, eds. Sirutavičius and Staliūnas, 181-206.

²³ Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe*, 59.

²⁴ “Monographie über die ökonomische Lage der litauischen Juden,” May 1920, LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32: 31-44.

²⁵ “Memorandum,” November 12, 1923, LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32, l. 17-22; “Memorandum,” 1922, LCVA, f. 1129, ap. 1, b. 32, l. 23-30.

In February 1930, in the first issue of the new *Folkist* newspaper of the Lithuanian Jews (*Folksblat*), the lawyer and former Seimas delegate Ozer Finkelstein painted a bleak picture:

Seven years of the old regime and three of the new [...]. What have they given to us, to the Lithuanian Jews? [...] We were once told we are shopkeepers. There are too many shops for our small country. But we haven't been given the opportunity to establish crafts shops and deal with productive things [...]. Were we given land? Not everyone can be a cobbler or a furrier [...]. Open the paper. Is there a Jew—an official? A Jewish girl—a telephone operator at the post office? A Jew—a porter at a train station? Equality obviously also means equal rights to work in all branches of work! [...] The Christian Democrats brought us to the old broken water trough and left us in a completely demoralized state. Even what history has produced for us in Tsarist Russia, they have destroyed.²⁶

In a sense, the Great Depression fell together with this crisis in the relationship between Jews and the Lithuanian state. Many middle-class Jews, who had studied the Lithuanian language in the expectation that they would form a coherent Lithuanian society together with their ethnic Lithuanian counterparts, started to look inwards, embracing Folkism's focus on Yiddish culture. "Where are you, the old illusions about arranging a happy cultural life here together, shoulder-to-shoulder with that people, freed from Russian despotism, with which we have lived for more than seven hundred years," Finkelstein demanded to know: "Where are you, the dreams to build up here in Lithuania our life on the foundation of our own culture?"²⁷

As Finkelstein stressed, hardly any Jews had received land as part of the sweeping land reform of 1922. Yet the small-scale involvement of Jews in agriculture is nonetheless a telling case study of how the impact of the Great Depression on Jews was aggravated by government policies, but also of how resilient the support was that Jewish agricultural organizations offered to Jewish farmers. Jews were

²⁶ Ozer Finkelstein, "Di iluzyes zaynen tserunen," *Folksblat*, February 14, 1930.

²⁷ Ibid.

predominantly engaged in urban professions. Before the depression, Jews constituted 77 per cent of those engaged in trade, 21 per cent of those engaged in industry, 18 per cent of those working in the transport sector, and 9 per cent of those working in state institutions.²⁸ During the Great Depression, these urban groups were affected by the crisis of the Jewish Folksbanks (*Liaudies bankai*), a network of cooperative banks established in 1919 to support Jews engaged in commerce.²⁹ In 1931, the director of the Kupiškis branch fled Lithuania, taking all deposits with him, which resulted in the ruin of local Jewish shopkeepers and craftsmen.³⁰ The shareholders' equity of the Central Jewish Bank (*Centralinis Žydų bankas*), the majority of which was owned by the Folksbanks, dropped from 22.4 per cent of the overall balance in 1929 to 14.6 per cent in 1930 and further to 14.3 per cent in 1931. In 1931, deposits fell by 44 per cent, loans by 41 per cent, and balance by 38 per cent.³¹

In stark contrast with urban professions, Jews accounted for only 0.46 per cent of all Lithuanian citizens engaged in agriculture. So, who were these less than 500 Jews who worked in agriculture? The largest share of these were civil servants (1.66 per cent of all civil servants working in the Lithuanian countryside), such as assessors, followed by landowners (0.63 per cent) and rural workers (0.19 per cent). However, among those categorized as "landowners," only few actually owned the land they worked on. Jewish landowners were largely a unique relic from the Russian imperial past, existing in discrete settlements where they had been allocated land in the Eighteenth century. Most of those subsumed in this category rented land rather than own it.³² By tying the allocation of new land to previous agricultural activity and by specifically barring those engaged in professions that

²⁸ Gediminas Vaskela, "Žydai Lietuvos ūkio struktūroje," in *Lietuvos Žydai. Istorinė studija*, eds. Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, and Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2012), 323-347; 332.

²⁹ Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2000), 139.

³⁰ Simonas Jurkšaitis, "Kupiškio žydų bendruomenės istorija iki Antrojo pasaulinio karo," *Lietuvos lokaliniai tyrimai. Istorija*, https://lt.lt/pdf/kupiskis/kupiskis-6_istorija-2015.pdf. Accessed September 1, 2024.

³¹ Irena Čepienė and Vladas Terleckas, "Koooperatinės bankininkystės sektorius Lietuvoje 1918-1940 m.," *Ekonomika* 47 (1999): 30-39; 31; Vladas Terleckas, *Lietuvos bankininkystės istorija, 1918-1941* (Vilnius, Lietuvos Banko leidybos ir poligrafijos skyrius, 2000), 68 and 72-83.

³² Vaskela, "Žydai Lietuvos ūkio struktūroje."

were “harmful” for peasants (such as tavern owners) from applying for land, the Lithuanian land reform law of 1922 had effectively made it impossible for Jews to apply for the purchase of land.³³ This consolidated the demographic structure of the Lithuanian Jews, who had mostly been barred from land ownership under Russian imperial rule.

The small number of Jewish farmers were organized in the United Jewish Agricultural Credit Society (Suvienyta Žydų žemės ūkio kredito draugija), which was established in 1928. The impact of the economic crisis on the society’s finances was strongest at the Great Depression’s peak in 1931. At its general assembly in 1931, the society still rejoiced that its 1930 turnover had almost doubled from the previous year. Although Jewish farmers were squeezed by the slump in agricultural prices, no farms had to be liquidated yet, no farmers emigrated, no bankruptcies were declared. The society announced it would for the first time in its young history, pay out dividends to shareholders. However, the dramatic change in export opportunities reflected in a sense of foreboding in the society’s assembly: All members had to “better organize themselves in order to overcome the current general crisis with united forces, to try to find new markets for products and to gradually intensify and modernize their farms to keep up with the current pace of life, which is moving forward by leaps and bounds.”³⁴ The society’s board acknowledged that the agricultural sector had been under pressure for the past four or five years already, aggravated by the “chronic, fatal even” collapse in prices and by the tensions with Germany, reflecting in the German import tariff increases of 1930.³⁵

The society warned that the crisis of Lithuania’s agriculture had specific implications for Jewish farmers. Loans by the Lithuanian Land Bank (Žemės bankas) were inaccessible to 90 per cent of Jewish farmers and to all horticulturists. This was particularly true for those who rented land, which concerned all Jewish farms around the capital city of Kaunas. The Land Bank often cited that the Jewish farmers’ “property documents are in disarray” as a pretext to withhold loans, not recognizing deeds and leases from the era of Russian imperial rule. The United Jewish Agricultural Credit Society repeatedly submitted complaints to the

³³ Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe*, 282.

³⁴ “Protokolo nuorašas Nr. 2,” May 10, 1931, LCVA, f. 1142, ap. 1, b. 3, l. 2-2ap.

³⁵ Ibid., l. 10.

Agricultural Bank but never received a response. The Lithuanian Central Bank (Lietuvos bankas) had granted loans only to a small number of provincial branches, but never to the society itself and never to individual members.³⁶

The following year, the society's chairman Salo Goldberg stated that "the society has successfully and honorably emerged from the unfortunate situation that was brought about by the crisis," yet warned that the Land Bank still remained inaccessible to Jewish loan-starved farmers. As the society had also failed to raise a loan with the Lithuanian Agricultural Bank (Lietuvos žemės ūkio bankas), it was unable to step in.³⁷ In 1933, the society conceded that the previously tolerable situation had taken a dramatic turn for the worse: "We must look to the future with great concern."³⁸ The society—as well as the numerous Jewish and non-Jewish small credit unions—were severely harmed by a series of laws that the Lithuanian Government had passed to regulate the foreclosure of bankrupt farms and to subject any farmers who were incapable of paying off loans with a monthly fine of a half percentile of the value of the whole loan.³⁹ This led to a dramatic series of bankruptcies, resulting in the losses of farms as the new laws made "the most credit-worthy elements of the country, the farmers, uncreditworthy." Since the laws were passed, the society argued, the granting of loans to Jewish farmers had collapsed entirely. This frustrated the society, which resolved to try to prevent any foreclosures on Jewish farms:

we have always had in mind not to destroy the farms of our members, because rebuilding destroyed farms is not an easy matter—and despite the fall in agricultural prices, new farms are not being created every day, especially Jewish farms, but unfortunately, not all the other banks where our Society lends have shown the same kind of goodwill and understanding to the farmers, and that is something which is not quite comprehensible to us. After all, it is an indisputable fact that, as farmers' incomes fall, the situation of trade and industry naturally deteriorates. The maintenance of real assets such as houses, and especially farms, is a matter

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Protokolas, I Nr.," May 16, 1932, LCVA, f. 1142, a. 1, b. 4, l. 4, 6-7.

³⁸ "Protokolas 2 Nr.," March 26, 1933, LCVA, f. 1142, ap. 1, l. 5, l. 2-2ap.

³⁹ "Žemės ūkio melioracijos įstatymo pakeitimas," *Vyriausybės žinios* 381 (1932).

of necessity for the general economy of the country, in which all the banks and farm organizations must have an interest.⁴⁰

Against this background, the society decided, for the first time in its existence, to write off a series of loans as losses to prevent a deluge of foreclosures. In the long run, however, Jewish agriculture largely survived the depression and remained one of the few sectors in which Jewish numbers did not decline vis-à-vis those of ethnic Lithuanians.⁴¹ Although the crisis had specific implications for Jewish farmers, there is little indication that their troubles were deliberately exploited for the purpose of strengthening their—numerically vastly superior—Christian counterparts.

Economic Empowerment and Jewish-Lithuanian Relations

Historians have noted the marked rise in antisemitic rhetoric and incidents in Lithuania across the 1930s. Mostly, this rise has been attributed to the strengthening of right-wing extremism and Nazi influence, whereas the Great Depression is rarely mentioned as a major cause. Yet, as I argue, the depression was a crucial factor, as it led to a dramatic intensification of political efforts to economically strengthen ethnic Lithuanians at the expense of minorities and especially of Jews. Lithuanian historians have emphasized the crucial role of the Union of Lithuanian Tradesmen, Industrialists and Craftsmen (*Lietuvių prekybininkų, pramonininkų ir amatininkų sąjunga*, often called simply *Lietuvių verslininkų sąjunga*—the Lithuanian Businessmen’s Union—LVS) in this rise of antisemitism, but never linked it to a broader trajectory of ethnocentric socio-economic policy.

Founded in 1930, the union’s declared agenda was to protect Lithuanians from the “slavery imposed by alien merchants” as their main mouthpiece—the newspaper *Verslas* (Business)—declared. For this purpose, it urged the Lithuanian public to boycott Jewish traders and lobbied aggressively with the government to actively

⁴⁰ “Protokolas 2 Nr.” March 26, 1933, LCVA, f. 1142, ap. 1, l. 5, l. 2-2ap.

⁴¹ Vaskela, “Žydai Lietuvos ūkio struktūroje,” 346.

support Lithuanian businesses and—by legal means, if necessary—restrict those of minorities.⁴² Existing studies tend to stress the opposition between the anti-Semitic Union and the moderate Smetona regime, which tenaciously resisted the temptations of political antisemitism, promoting “moral competition” between the nationalities instead.⁴³ However, contrary to the historiography, the LVS’s leading personnel was heavily involved with the ruling political party, the Lithuanian Nationalist Union (Lietuvos Tautininkų Sąjunga or Tautininkai). The deputy director of the LVS, Vincas Rastenis, also acted as general secretary for the Tautininkai. Deputy Finance Minister Julius Indrišiūnas regularly gave talks at LVS assemblies. The influential economist Kayzs Sruoga worked both for the LVS and for the Ministry of Finance—and the list goes on.⁴⁴ Thus, the LVS should not be considered a fringe movement. Rather, it directly spoke to power and, from its inception, was at the core of political decision making and of the formation of economic policy.

Folkist activist L. Verzhbovits realised in 1930 that the Great Depression was about to change the economic relationship between Jews and Lithuanians by functioning as a crucial catalyst for economic empowerment. “As always, the Jews are the barometer of political and economic complications,” Verzhbovits wrote in *Folksblat*: “The more sensitive the response to them, the greater Lithuania accelerates its strides towards ruin. And the harder the Jewish struggle for rights becomes in Lithuania.”⁴⁵ And indeed, the proponents of Lithuanian economic empowerment quickly realized that the destructive force of the Great Depression offered the possibility to dramatically reconfigure the country’s socio-economic structure. In February 1932, Vincas Rastenis proclaimed:

⁴² Sirutavičius, “Outbreaks”; Vincentas Lukoševičius, “Lietuvių verslininkų sąjungos susikūrimas, jos tikslai ir idėjinės nuostatos,” *Pinigų studijos* 2 (2008): 61–72.

⁴³ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources,” 127.

⁴⁴ “II-ojo Lietuvių verslininkų kongreso 1933 metų spalio 7–8 dieną Kaune protokolas,” LCVA, f. 605, ap. 2, b. 10, l. 3, 6–7, 13.

⁴⁵ Dr. L. Verzhbovits, “Di idishe privilegyes fun Vytavt dem groysn, III,” *Folksblat* 171, September 10, 1930, 4. See also Verzhbovits, “Di idishe privilegyes fun Vytavt dem groysn, I,” *Folksblat* 169, September 5, 1930, 4; Verzhbovits, “Di idishe privilegyes fun Vytavt dem groysn, II,” *Folksblat* 170, September 8, 1930, 4. Cit. op. Michael Philips Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners: The Politics of Jewish Belonging in Lithuania, 1914–1940* (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2019), 206.

We are undaunted by the fact that we are embarking on this difficult work at a time of severe crisis. On the contrary, this latter circumstance even encourages us. Times of general upheaval sometimes shatter convictions that, until recently, seemed indisputable truths, but that now appear merely windswept. And these times of crisis have already revised more than one of yesterday's truths, which now seem a handful of sand.⁴⁶

Lithuania's future, Rastenis claimed, lay in its towns and cities. This was where commerce, industry and crafts were located, and these offered the largest possibility for expansion once the depression was over. "There are almost no limits to the city's development," Rastenis enthused: "It is expanding in what seems like a vertical direction. It is not usually the surplus urban population that seeks to apply its strength in agriculture, but the surplus agricultural population that seeks happiness in the city. However, this happiness of life has turned away from the Lithuanian people across many centuries."⁴⁷ The LVS were the pioneers of this economic project: "We have resolved to organize an economically strong Lithuanian townspeople."⁴⁸ As a major milestone, and to the great satisfaction of the LVS, the government passed a law in 1932 that prohibited the use of any languages except for Lithuanian in business dealings. Primarily designed as a law to break the power of Jewish cooperatives, the law dramatically curtailed the economic agency of Lithuania's minorities.⁴⁹

One project that harnessed the depression's "general upheaval," as Rastenis stipulated, was the 1930s transformation of the Klaipėda region and the creation of a Lithuanian urban stratum in the city of Klaipėda itself. The region, annexed to Lithuania in 1923, had long been a thorn in the side of Lithuanian nationalists. The city was economically highly idiosyncratic. It was mostly inhabited by German speakers, who showed little enthusiasm for the fate of the Lithuanian Republic. At the same time, as the city's timber industry had collapsed as a result of the closure of the river Nemunas in the wake of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict around Vilnius, there was little desire among Lithuanians to move into the crisis-

⁴⁶ "Ko mes norime?" *Verslas*, February 25, 1932.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 231.

stricken city.⁵⁰ However, this changed with the Great Depression. As agricultural prices collapsed, farmers around Klaipėda withdrew savings from the city's banks to keep their farms afloat. The city of Klaipėda itself received a major economic blow in the aftermath of the Central European banking crisis of July 1931. The German banks in Klaipėda immediately had to take extraordinary measures to maintain liquidity. Growing mistrust in Klaipėda's banks led to the collapse of a private bank in autumn 1931, which in turn led to mass withdrawals of funds from other banks.⁵¹

The Lithuanian central bank, Lietuvos bankas, implemented two mechanisms to facilitate both the integration of the Klaipėda region into the Lithuanian State and to further the economic empowerment of ethnic Lithuanians. Lietuvos bankas specifically targeted agricultural and commercial businesses that were struggling economically and provided loans at rates that the Klaipėda-based banks could not afford to. In the views of their German-speaking owners, they were thus sliding into dependence on the Lithuanian bank. The second mechanism was to provide inexpensive loans to Lithuanians from "Greater Lithuania" to buy up businesses that had been foreclosed. These loans in turn stipulated that the new owners should hire only workers from "Greater Lithuania."⁵²

In 1928 already, unemployment rates in the Klaipėda region had dropped in line with the broader economic recovery across Europe. As wages were a third higher than in Lithuania Major, i.e. in the rest of Lithuania, Klaipėda was increasingly regarded as a "Lithuanian America," i.e. as a desirable destination for labor migration. As the depression struck, the Lithuanian Government carried out a targeted policy to create jobs for Lithuanian day laborers through ambitious public works in those areas of the city that were under their direct control—the port and the railways.⁵³ Accordingly, labor migration to Klaipėda increased. Over

⁵⁰ "Niederschrift über das Ergebnis der Besprechung über Kreditgewährung an die memelländische Wirtschaft im Auswärtigen Amt am 21. Februar 1925," The National Archives, Kew (TNA), GFM 33/3667, KO912018- KO912024.

⁵¹ Polizei-Direktion des Memelgebiets, "Bericht über die öffentliche Versammlung des Verbandes der Landwirtschaft," January 21, 1932, LCVA, f. 1636, ap. 1, b. 96, l. 37.

⁵² "Die wirtschaftliche Lage des Memelgebiets," March 16, 1932, TNA, GFM33, 3483, E683723-E684692.

⁵³ Julius Žukas, "Soziale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklungen Klaipėdas/Memels von 1900 bis 1945," *Nordost-Archiv* 10 (2002): 75-115; 95.

the course of the depression, 8,000 day laborers migrated from “Greater Lithuania” to the Klaipėda region. Through an active cooperation with hiring agencies, the Lithuanian Government, while taking no official stance on this issue, encouraged the migration of ethnic Lithuanians into Klaipėda with the aim to integrate the region deeper into the Lithuanian state. Klaipėda’s senate tried to restrict the arrival of new workers.⁵⁴ To mitigate social conflicts, the city’s leadership refused unemployed day laborers from Lithuania Major the right of residence, yet the Lithuanian Government declared these regulations illegal.⁵⁵ As unemployment soared among Klaipėda’s workers, this unemployment was masked by the creation of jobs that were almost entirely filled by Lithuanian-speaking—and some Jewish—workers.⁵⁶

Data on the success of urbanization as a component of economic empowerment varies. Studies indicate that the population of the city of Klaipėda increased as a consequence of labor migration from 32,000 in 1920 to more almost 52,000 in 1939.⁵⁷ Estimates of Lithuanians moving from Lithuania major to the Klaipėda region between 1923 and 1938 range from 21,000 to 30,000. The share of Lithuanian speakers in the total population of the city of Klaipėda thus increased from merely 3 per cent in 1920 to between 35 and 38 per cent in 1938. In 1937, for the first time, the majority of those born in Klaipėda were registered as “Lithuanians.”⁵⁸

What makes the case of Klaipėda so interesting was that the process of economic empowerment detailed here also increased the Jewish population by the factor five to six. Across the interwar period, between 5,000 and 6,000 Jews migrated to the Klaipėda region to seek employment. Before the war, less than 1,000 Jews had lived in Memel. Thus, the city became a lynchpin for Jewish communities who had begun to see the region’s German character increasingly as a threat after Hitler

⁵⁴ Giedrė Polkaitė-Petkevičienė, “Urbanizacija 1918-1940 metais: Modernaus miesto ženklai Lietuvoje,” *Lietuvos istorijos studijos* 39 (2017): 64-83.

⁵⁵ Žukas, “Soziale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung,” 95.

⁵⁶ Polizei-Direktion des Memelgebiets, “Stellungnahme zur Arbeitslosenfrage,” July 4, 1932, LCVA, f. 1636, ap. 1, b. 96, l. 74-75; Kriminalpolizei des Memelgebiets, “Versammlung der Arbeitslosen der Stadt Memel,” February 5, 1936, LCVA, f. 1636, ap. 1, b. 96, l. 261-262; Žukas, “Soziale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung,” 95.

⁵⁷ Vasilijus Safronovas, *Klaipėdos miesto istorija* (Klaipėda: Antroji laida, 2021), 170.

⁵⁸ Žukas, “Soziale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung,” 95.

seized power in 1933. An article published in the Jewish newspaper *Apžvalga* in 1935 referred to the labor migration to Klaipėda as a “colonization,” carried out by urban workers who “carried the Lithuanian national idea.” The breakthrough, the article argued, had come on the eve of the depression, “as the Lithuanian nation was consolidating more and more”:

Not only small merchants from the surrounding towns began to move to Klaipėda, but also large entrepreneurs full of initiative, thanks to whose efforts a whole series of new businesses, factories, workshops, warehouses and offices were established. The colonization of Jews, which did not stop until 1932, created favorable conditions for the elimination of unemployment and provided inexpensive labor from Lithuania Major. Thus, as the number of Jewish residents increased, the number of Lithuanian workers in the city of Klaipėda also grew continuously, and by the end of 1931 they already formed the core of Klaipėda’s industrial proletariat.⁵⁹

The article also noted how closely the Lithuanian government’s push to increase the influx of labor was tied to the Great Depression, and how closely it was linked to Lietuvos bankas’s policy to establish control over businesses and farms owned by German speakers. It is against this background that we have to view genuine joint ventures between the Lithuanian state and Jewish entrepreneurs. Jewish timber merchant Nathan Nafthal, for instance, was among the founders of the Memel Timber Syndicate (Memeler Holzsyndikat), which was established in 1930 on the initiative of the Lithuanian Forestry Department.⁶⁰ In 1928 already, the Israel brothers, after their return from Bolshevik Russia, had established the textile factory Liverma, which would turn become Klaipėda’s largest employer. In total, between 1925 and 1935, Jews from “Greater Lithuania” founded nine textile companies in Klaipėda.⁶¹ “After the crisis, the development of industrialization

⁵⁹ “Lietuvybės politinė įtaka kaime ir mieste – miesto kolonizacija – žydų vaidmuo,” *Apžvalga*, July 21, 1935.

⁶⁰ Žukas, “Soziale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung,” 94.

⁶¹ Ruth Leiserowitz, “Memel Territory,” in *The Greater German Reich and the Jews: Nazi Persecution Policies in the Annexed Territories, 1935-1945*, eds. Wolf Gruner and Jörg Osterloh

suddenly stopped, and the colonization of the city stopped at the same time,” the *Apžvalga* article observed. Jews thus did not only “objectively facilitate the colonization of the Lithuanian city, but also, if necessary, showed determination to sacrifice their own national affairs for the affairs of the state, especially when the interests of the state strictly require unity”—the transformation of Klaipėda was thus conceived of as a joint project of Jewish-Lithuanian cooperation, harkening back to the founding years of the Lithuanian Republic.⁶²

The Decline of Jewish Businesses

However, the impact of the Great Depression and the policies of economic empowerment had a mostly disastrous impact on Jewish communities. While the economic empowerment of ethnic Lithuanians progressed fairly slowly across the 1920s, the progress made in the early 1930s was profound. While Lithuanians accounted only for 13 per cent of all citizens engaged in trade in 1923, their share in 1935 was one third. In 1938, Albertas Tarulis, speaker of the Chamber for Trade, Industry and Crafts (*Prekybos, pramonės ir amatų rūmai*), gloated to a German readership that the share of the Jewish population had decreased from 7.5 to 6 per cent over the 1930s and continued to fall. 80 per cent of all emigrants from Lithuania were Jewish. While Jews continued to dominate domestic trade, the concentration of exports in the hands of the large cooperatives meant the de facto “elimination of the Jewish element.”⁶³ Jewish statistician Jacob Lestchinsky, one of the founders of the YIVO, travelled to Lithuania in 1936 and was struck by “a feeling of panic [...] among the Jewish artisans.” Moreover, he noted that the appearance of the Lithuanians shtetls had fundamentally changed over the course of the depression:

(New York: Berghahn, 2015), 136-156; 140; Gerhard Willoweit, *Die Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Memelgebiets, vol. 2* (Marburg: Herder Institut, 1969), 651.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Albertas Tarulis, “Die Juden im Wirtschaftsleben Litauens,” *Osteuropa* 13, no. 6 (1938): 383-392; 385.

During the '20s there were scarcely any Lithuanian-owned shops to be seen on the main streets of the average town in Lithuania. By 1936, however, during a tour of Shavli (Siauliai), Panevezys, Vilkaviskis, Kybartai and other towns, the writer was struck by the solid and secure appearance of the new Lithuanian business enterprises. The contrast between these vigorous, young proprietors and their worried, prematurely aged Jewish competitors, who had until recently monopolized the clothing trade, the wholesale business and others, symbolized the arrival of a new era. The Jewish merchants, with whom the writer talked, were by no means lacking in admiration for the skill and efficiency shown by the Lithuanian businessmen. They generally felt that the age when the commercial talent of the Jews was the basis of their political and economic status, in the eyes of the government, was gone; and that the country's masters no longer saw any particular reason to tolerate the existence of the Jewish minority.⁶⁴

Given the much larger catastrophe of the Holocaust, it is easy to forget the momentous consequences that the Great Depression and Lithuanian economic policies had for Lithuania's Jewish communities. At around the same time as Lestchinsky's visit, *Folksblat* published a series of reports on the transformation of Lithuania's previously predominantly "Jewish" towns. In Palanga, two fifths of inhabitants were Jews, but their number had been "greatly reduced" during the depression. Much of the local trade was carried out by the national cooperative Lietūkis. While Palanga used to have Jewish aldermen and a Jewish mayor, no Jews remained in employment in the municipality. "The economic situation of the Jews of Palanga is exceedingly depressing," *Folksblat* claimed:

The crisis has ruined the storekeepers and artisans. In addition, we have to cope with the agitation against buying from Jews. This is not carried out as openly as in other towns but the anti-Jewish "one hundred-percenters"

⁶⁴ Jacob Lestchinsky, "The Economic Struggle of the Jews in Independent Lithuania," *Jewish Social Studies* 8, no. 4 (1945): 267-196; 276 and 281.

persist at it. In consequence, a large number of Jewish storekeepers have already gone under while others have been pushed to the brink of ruin.”⁶⁵

As in Palanga, Lithuania’s largest federation of cooperatives, Lietūkis, had come to dominate the town of Utena with a new warehouse. The LVS had successfully made inroads and actively agitated for boycotting Jewish stores. In Kudirkos Naumiestis, the depression had wiped four brush factories, three flax factories and two lemonade and beer breweries, which had employed more than 100 Jewish workers, off the map. Instead, a new Lietūkis-owned flax factory employed dozens of non-Jewish workers. The towns successful Jewish merchants, who had exported and imported, had disappeared. Only small storekeepers were left. The only sector left undamaged was Jewish agriculture.⁶⁶ Mažeikiai, a thriving, predominantly Jewish town, had attracted Jewish entrepreneurs from the vicinity after the war. However, this stopped in 1930, when “the position of the Jewish population grew much worse.” The author attributed this to both the Great Depression and the effectiveness of LVS propaganda. Bankruptcies ensued and unemployment grew, leading to a wave of emigration to America, Africa and Palestine. As the state introduced new monopolies of liquor and matchmaking, the local distillery had to close, as did the match factory. Both factory buildings were sold to the LVS, who opened a new brewery with the slogan: “The first Lithuanian beer-brewery in Lithuania.” As Lietūkis lobbied with the government to introduce a flax monopoly, even the future of the two Jewish flax mills seemed in doubt.⁶⁷ In Balbieriškis, 10 Jewish stores closed over the course of the depression, and the remaining ones were occasionally empty of customers for weeks on stretch. The town’s famous Jewish carpenters had become unemployed during the crisis and turned into factory day laborers: “There is not a single Jewish blacksmith in town, not one house-painter, tinsmith or shoemaker (except for one cobbler). Their place has been taken in recent years by Lithuanians.”⁶⁸ Vaškai was considered a particularly paradigmatic case of a shtetl destroyed by the Great Depression: Once a home of 200 Jewish families and of a promising, economically active young

⁶⁵ Ibid., 290.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 290-291.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 292.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

generation the town was now “practically an old folks” home, economically ruined and literally almost without a single young person.”⁶⁹

Yet for the proponents of economic empowerment, the victims of economic competition were the Lithuanians, not the Jews. If anything, the dedicated support of the state for Lithuanian enterprises levelled the playing field, which had historically been tilted in the favor of the minorities. Jewish pleas for an economic policy that did not discriminate against minorities were insincere, as LVS deputy Rastenis argued:

We have nothing against you doing business, but don’t push us out, compete with us as equals with equals. These words sound really nice, but the editors of the Jewish newspapers are too naïve if they think the Lithuanians do not understand the truth [...]. And this is the following: Compete with us as equals with equals, because then we can be sure that you will not beat us; you will not beat us because we have capital and you do not, we have special banks and we can use loans from Lietuvos bankas—and where will you get your loans? We have the best houses in the city, but we will not rent you premises, even if they are empty; we have a clientele and we will keep it, because we will sell cheaper, and you will be driven to bankruptcy by the reduced prices; because we have the large warehouses in our hands, we will give you the goods later than we give them to our kin, we give you only the low-quality goods, we will give you neither credit nor discounts [...]. That is what your advice to compete “as equals with equals” actually means.⁷⁰

In 1935, the lawyer and leader of the Union of Jewish Army Veterans, Jokūbas Goldbergas, warned that the government tried to “artificially displace the Jews from their present economic position.” Although Jews accepted that “a body of Lithuanian townspeople and businessmen has been formed,” these entrepreneurs, the Lithuanian government, and especially the Verslininkai, “cloaked business in patriotism,” thus damaging Lithuania’s economic interests. Historically, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁰ Vincas Rastenis, “Prieš ką ir už ką mes kovosime?” *Verslas*, October 19, 1933.

displacement of Jews had always resulted in economic downturns, Goldbergas claimed:

If, for objective reasons of economic life, a certain number of Jews have to leave their current economic position, the state should be concerned about their future and help them to settle in other sectors of the economy so that they can remain useful and productive citizens. From some quarters, Jews are often accused of leaving Lithuania and taking their wealth with them. But who is to blame here. After all, it is not for pleasure that people leave their homeland and go in search of happiness abroad [...]. We live in difficult times. This may be the hour of destiny for Lithuania, and the slogan of unity must prevail in all our lives. Neither Lithuanians nor Jews must succumb to the agitation of hatred and antagonism.⁷¹

While the proponents of economic empowerment aimed to encourage Lithuanians to set up stores and workshops in the towns and cities, through their lens the largest domestic threat to Lithuania's sovereignty was the dominance of Jews in wholesale trade and in imports and exports. The depression had made a state's capability to control in-and outflows of currency and commodities seem a crucial marker of survivability within an increasingly protectionist international system. As Lithuania's trade balance turned negative after Germany imposed import restrictions, the dominance of Jews in the trade of some of Lithuania's most important export commodities seemed all the more unacceptable. This pertained particularly to flax and grain. In 1934, 100 per cent of flax trade and 96 per cent of grain trade were still in the hands of Jewish merchants.⁷² Behind these statistics were not a handful of wealthy merchants, but rather a large number of middle-income families. According to estimates of the Jewish newspaper *Apžvalga*, a total of 5-6,000 Jewish families depended on the income from grain trade alone.⁷³ By 1934, the government had already facilitated the transition of 60 per cent of all sugar sales, 70 per cent of all salt sales and 60 per cent of cement sales

⁷¹ "Bendras likimas mus riša." *Apžvalga*, September 8, 1935.

⁷² Lestchinsky, "The Economic Struggle," 275.

⁷³ "Javų pirklių memorandumas p. Ministeriui Pirmininkui," *Apžvalga*, July 28, 1935.

into the hands of Lietūkis.⁷⁴ If anything, a further centralization of foreign trade seemed most likely. As one of the final policies that the government designed to respond to the depression, the monopolization of both grain (primarily wheat in the first instance) and flax came under discussion.

The status of flax in the Lithuanian economy was almost iconic. It was the only product produced in Lithuania that had a prominent name on the world market. It was considered vastly superior compared to its counterparts from Poland and the Soviet Union. Yet flax trade had also suffered from the depression. In 1928, it had made up for 35 per cent of the value of all Lithuanian exports. By 1933, it had dropped to 5.5 per cent, as prices had collapsed from 210 Litai per centner to 45.⁷⁵ The response of the LVS was to blame Jewish flax merchants for spoiling prices by extracting excessive profits. Jewish merchants responded by claiming that the quality of Lithuanian flax had deteriorated, which was the fault of the producers rather than of the sellers:

The least to blame for all the defects in our flax is probably the middleman, even when he has a factory for processing flax fiber: He often receives a product so poor that there is nothing he can do to improve it [...]. It is only natural that, with the improvement in the situation of flax and the deterioration in the situation of most of our other export products, the relevant bodies have become concerned about flax farming and have begun to look for a way of remedying the state of affairs. However, they have not started from the main source of the deficiencies, the farmer, but from the roof, from the last resort, the last instance, which sells the goods abroad, and from the middleman, who buys the goods. It is from them that the reforms have begun, although they are mostly no longer in a position to repair what the producer has already damaged.⁷⁶

While the government ultimately did not centralize flax trade—only in 1939 was the cooperative *Linas* established that bought up struggling flax enterprises—it invested heavily into Lietūkis to centralize the trade of wheat. In July 1935, Jewish

⁷⁴ Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 229.

⁷⁵ *Statistikos biuletenis* 1 (1929); *Statistikos biuletenis* 2 (1933).

⁷⁶ “Linų eksportas,” *Apžvalga*, August 25, 1935

grain merchants organized a nationwide congregation to discuss the implications of this policy and asserted that hundreds of Jewish families would be deprived of their only source of income.⁷⁷ In a memorandum sent to prime minister Juozas Tūbelis, they demanded that their representatives should at least be consulted with regards to the specific nature of how the centralized wheat trade should be organized.⁷⁸ The government's proposals, based on the idea that the centralization of trade, supported by subsidies to reduce wheat prices, would make Lithuanian wheat competitive on the international market, were merely a cover-up for a further ethno-centric policy of economic empowerment, as the subsidies were paid by the government, not by Lietūkis. The narrative of trade mediation as an element harmful to economy and society had to be challenged. "We have begun to take too lightly the dangerous game of trying to displace whole occupational groups from their economic position," they claimed in *Apžvalga*:

The light-hearted preaching of the state-of-the-art science is that it is time to get rid of the middlemen, that there must be no intermediation between producer and consumer [...]. Meanwhile, the intermediary apparatus is not at all a thing of luxury or a parasitic institution, but performs a necessary social function by properly organizing the distribution of products.⁷⁹

Assessing Jewish-Lithuanian Relations after the Depression

Interestingly enough, the very establishment of the newspaper *Apžvalga* was a sign that many Lithuanian Jews, instead of being disillusioned, were actively seeking a better relationship with the Lithuanian state and society as the depression came to an end. Founded by the Society of Jewish War Veterans, *Apžvalga* was the first Jewish newspaper in Lithuanian language. Its editors opposed both Zionism, which they regarded as escapist, and Folkism, which they thought entrenched the status of Jews as outsiders in Lithuania's socio-economic structure. But even Folkists began to argue that Jews needed to adapt to the Lithuanian state's

⁷⁷ "Lietuvos žydų javų pirklių suvažiavimas," *Apžvalga*, July 7, 1935.

⁷⁸ "Javų pirklių memorandumas p. Ministeriui Pirmininkui," *Apžvalga*, July 28, 1935.

⁷⁹ "Javų pirkliai pavojuje," *Apžvalga*, July 21, 1935.

economic nationalism, which, in a world governed by tariff and trade wars, was bound to stay. “Not everyone can live for the tomorrow,” one of their protagonists claimed:

One must also see the today. Not everyone will be able, and not all will need, to emigrate. People in Lithuania will struggle to remain here. It is in our interests to diversify, as much as possible, our economic structure, to create it in a whole mosaic of possibilities, find new positions for the Jews here.⁸⁰

The reason for this was the realization that Smetona’s Lithuania, since 1933, was a vastly safer haven for Jews than Nazi Germany was (and Poland, for that matter). It is hard to overstate the impact that the moment when Hitler seized power had on the political subjectivities of Lithuanian Jewry. Unsurprisingly, the first Jewish school that taught all subjects in Lithuanian was founded in Kaunas in 1933, after the German High School, 40 per cent of the pupils of which had been Jewish, closed its doors to Jews.⁸¹ Jews increasingly spoke Lithuanian among themselves in the streets and familiarized themselves with Lithuanian cultural traditions. As the Nazis launched their boycott campaign against the stores of German Jews, more than 10,000 Jewish protestors filled the streets in Lithuania’s towns and cities on 7 April 1933.⁸² *Folksblat* wrote:

We, the Jews from Lithuania, who were driven from our homes by the Tsarist power 18 years ago over the false accusation over supporting Germany, the enemy at the time—we feel now with a distinct sorrow the Nazis’ disgusting, false accusation that world Jewry has allegedly taken control of Germany [...] Lithuanian Jewry, as an organic part of world Jewry, suffers and bruises together with our humiliated brothers in Germany, and strongly and seriously expresses the most urgent protest

⁸⁰ L. Verzhbovits, “Yidn af erd in Lietuva,” in *Tsum oyfkum durkh arbet: ORT almanakh* (Kaunas: ORT, 1935), 25-26. Cit. op. Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 214.

⁸¹ Benediktas Šetkus, “Kauno žydų gimnazija dėstomąja lietuvių kalba: vokiečių ir žydų konfrontacijos darinys,” *Lituanistica* 65, no. 2 (2019): 73-87.

⁸² Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 208 and 215.

against that which, with one fell swoop, robbed Jews in Germany of their struggle, over many years, to obtain rights as equal citizens; against that which has declared them to be abandoned to bands of pogromists; against that which drives them to starvation; against those who humiliate and spit on the Jew. Even though the German Jews, who find themselves in a medieval inquisitional prison, have not asked for help, even if they, spit upon and disoriented, turn against our protest, we send over our expression of sympathy and our word of encouragement.⁸³

Further support initiatives ensued. Lithuanian Jews established a Society to Aid German Jews; the German ORT branch sent Jewish students and professionals from Germany to train and work in workshops in Lithuania. Zionists established Kibbutzim for German Jews, first in Vilkaviškis (1933), then in Kaunas (1934). In 1934, ORT established agricultural colonies for German Jews near Marijampolė and Kaunas.⁸⁴ Jews further rallied behind Smetona after supporters of the imprisoned fascist politician Augustinas Voldemaras attempted to seize power in a failed coup in 1934. Smetona responded by assuring Jews—and other ethnic minorities—that his policy stood for the “equity and recognition of equality of all of Lithuania’s ethnicities (as opposed to democracy, which, Smetona claimed, stood for inequality and racism). In exchange, however, he demanded unconditional loyalty from the minorities, who must not “form a state within a state.”⁸⁵ Jewish societies enthusiastically expressed their support for Smetona on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, which was celebrated with mass festivities throughout the country. Jewish associations ranging from the Society of Jewish War Veterans to the Karaim sent letters of congratulations and wished the “Leader of the Nation” (*Tautos vadas*) luck in his efforts to recover Vilnius as capital for Lithuania.⁸⁶ Moise Bregšteinas of the Society of Jewish War Veterans claimed that Smetona “was sent by providence”:

⁸³ Yankev Gotlib, “Friling 1933,” *Folksblat* 78 (936), April 7, 1933, 3. Cit. op. Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 216.

⁸⁴ Casper, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 217.

⁸⁵ Richter, “Der Kult um Antanas Smetona,” 129.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

Remember that when our independence was threatened from all sides, the sons of Lithuania followed the call of His Excellency Antanas Smetona, without difference in nationality and confession [...]. Smetona fought against the Russians, against the Poles, but he never fought against the Russian, Polish or other national minorities.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The Great Depression had a profound impact on the socio-economic situation of Lithuania's Jewish communities, on the relationship between Jews and ethnic Lithuanians, and on the relationship between Jews and the Lithuanian State. As state responses to the depression focused on enhancing control over the economy and ramping up efforts to strengthen Lithuanians through ethno-centric policies of economic empowerment and trade centralization, Jews were increasingly marginalized in the national economy. Entrenched narratives that the country's economic problems could be solved by removing mediators from commerce legitimized policies that actively damaged the economic position of Jewish merchants, resulting in hardship for thousands of families. From testimonies from observers we learn that post-depression Lithuanian towns looked utterly transformed: Jewish businesses had largely disappeared, replaced by Lithuanian state-supported cooperatives; Jewish merchants and craftsmen had become day laborers, the younger generations left the towns. However, as the case of the Lithuanian "colonization" of the formerly Prussian city of Klaipėda (Memel) during the Great Depression shows, the impact of such ethno-centric policies of economic empowerment on Lithuanian Jewry was more ambiguous: As tens of thousands of Lithuanian workers moved into Klaipėda, essentially "Lithuanianising" the city, they were joined by thousands of Jewish workers, who also found in the city a necessary outlet to escape the poverty-stricken Jewish towns. Despite the state policies that clearly disadvantaged Jews, many Lithuanian Jews actively sought assimilation with Lithuanian society from 1933 and openly

⁸⁷ Moise Bregšteinis, *Antanas Smetona* (Kaunas: Žydų karininkų sąjunga, 1934), 6.

supported the authoritarian president Antanas Smetona as the country appeared a much safer home than its revisionist neighbor, Nazi Germany.

Klaus Richter is a professor in Central and Eastern European History at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on nationalism and the social and economic history of Poland and the Baltics. Among his publications are a book on antisemitism in Lithuania during the late Russian Empire: *Antisemitismus in Litauen: Christen, Juden und die "Emanzipation" der Bauern, 1889-1914* (Berlin: Metropol, 2013) and *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Keywords: Great Depression, Lithuania, Jews, Economic Nationalism

How to quote this article:

Klaus Richter, "Jews, the Great Depression, and the 'Lithuanianisation' of the National Economy," 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/15656

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 Mordechai 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: Mordechai 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 (Riga: 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 Ruvin 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 Rubin 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.

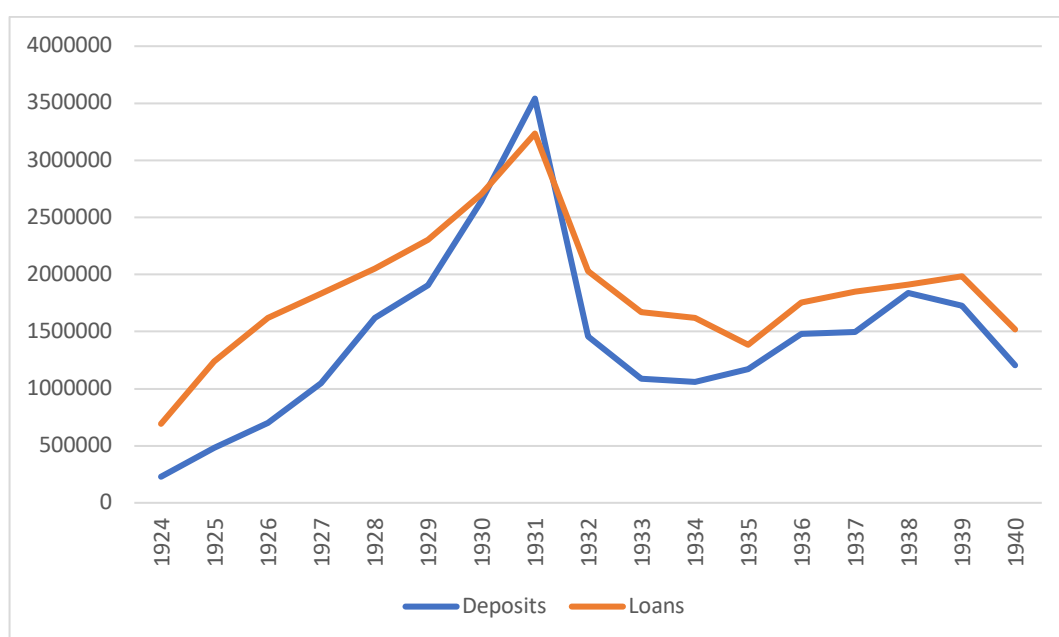


Fig. 1. Balance of the Jewish credit cooperative Union: Loans and Deposits

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 gezelschaft 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.

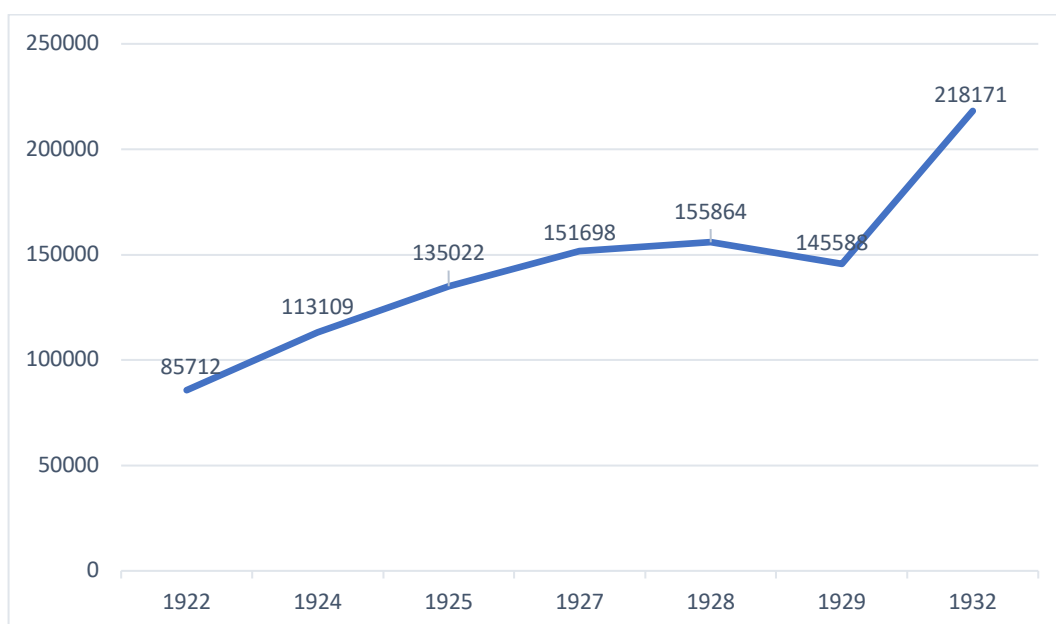


Fig. 2. Lunches provided by the ELENB

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 ceturtā 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 apmešanās 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).

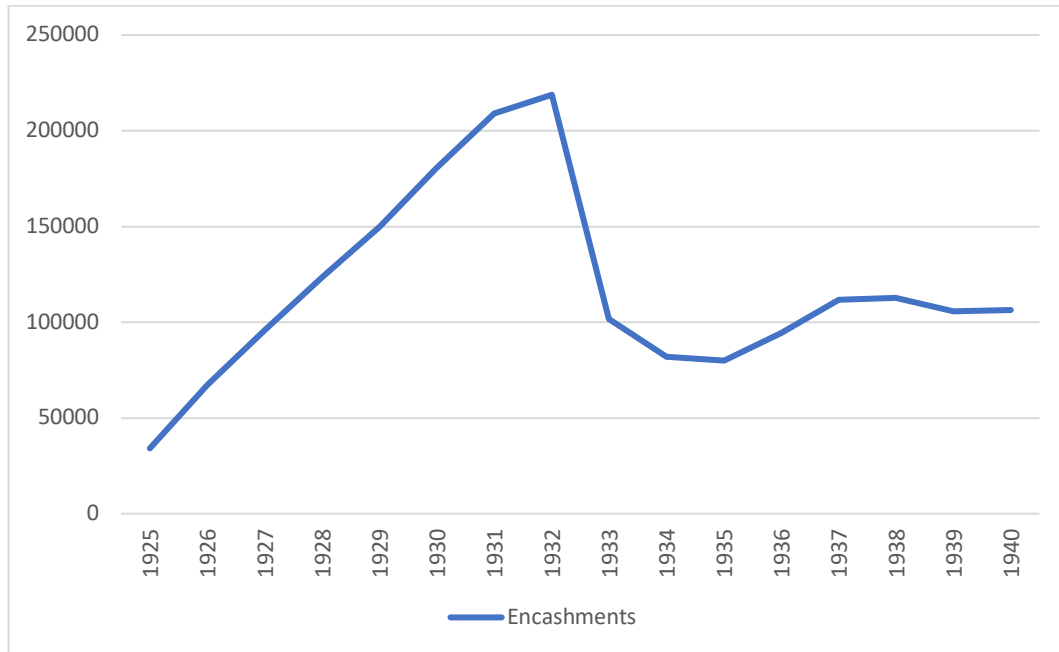


Fig. 3. Balance of the Jewish credit cooperative Union: Encashments

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,” *Latvian Vēstnesis*, January 4, 1937.

¹¹⁰ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība, 17 December 1937, LVVA F.F.3244, A.1, L.72, 157.

¹¹¹ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība, Rīgas Biržas BankaI, May 19, 1938, LVVA F.F.3244, A.1, 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

Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), pp. 200.

Where Do We Go From Here? The Time of Daniel Boyarin's Manifesto

by Arie M. Dubnov

Daniel Boyarin is the Bruce Springsteen of Jewish studies. Like the rock icon, this New Jersey boy brings to the stage a powerful voice and razor-sharp texts. While his career skyrocketed in the 1990s, he's still going strong and shows no signs of slowing down. However, unlike "The Boss" Bruce, celebrated for his all-American, working-class hero persona and praise of traditional family values, Boyarin is the rebellious and iconoclastic *enfant terrible*. Just as he would not hide his yarmulke, he does not conceal his anti-Zionist positions, his taste for expensive (kosher) wines, his attraction to feminist and queer theory, or the pleasure he takes in kicking the symbols of bourgeois respectability in the behind. I had the privilege of seeing him in action about a year ago at a research workshop held in Berlin, and the performance did not disappoint: "Jewish studies have lost their validity and become a field that does nothing beyond encouraging Jewish phalluses from going into Jewish vaginas!" the clever troublemaker declared to his audience, and one could see how much he relishes watching the German hosts turn pale and move nervously in their seats.

No wonder that he was the anchor of Joseph Cedar's movie *Footnote* (2011), a delightful parody on academic life, which opens with a scene mocking three young Talmudic scholars who argue passionately about Boyarin while chewing with equal vigor the appetizers served at an award ceremony:

- "Oh, oh! You're not talking like a scholar now. You're talking like an ideologue!"
- "What are you talking about? The guy [spends the day] sitting on manuscripts, he reads the texts closely. That's what Boyarin does all the time. What he's actually trying to do is derive anthropology from hermeneutics."
- "All his articles are the same..."

- “You missed the whole point of the article! Look, it's just...”
- “Boyarin’s whole corpus...”
- “Historically, Orthodox Christianity, all the discourse on gender and sexuality is metaphorical. It’s not concrete.”
- “But what do ‘body techniques’ have to do with interpretive practices!?”
- “It’s like this new story of defeminizing the Jewish man in the Talmudic period.”
- “Yes, but that’s an anti-colonialist argument!”
- “What are you talking about?”
- “What am I talking about?! What are *you* talking about!”
- “What he’s trying to do is defeminize the Jewish man in the Talmudic period, basically saying that this sissy man, compared to the virile and strong Roman man, with his iron helmet and nailed boots...”
- “Basically, he’s arguing that what Zionism did was turn the Jewish man from a feminine man to a macho man. And that's the destruction of Jewish history!”¹

It would be difficult to find any other living Jewish Studies academic, let alone a Talmudic scholar, whose densely theoretical writings invite such a wonderful blend of academic lingo and unbridled aggression. Boyarin, in short, is one of those *penseur provocateurs* with whom one can agree or disagree but one cannot ignore.

Boyarin brings this flamboyant persona to his latest book, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*. As its title suggests, the book does not pretend it is a traditional academic monograph. Published prior to the outbreak of the current Gaza war, the text summarizes long years of thought and is rich in insights and provocations. The book’s dual helix consists of two intertwined core arguments. The first argument is based on a fundamental rejection of the very use of the term “Judaism” (or *Judentum* in German). According to Boyarin, this category assumes that Judaism should be understood as a “religion” (*religio*) with features such as dogma (a religious doctrine whose dissenter is considered a “heretic”), a closed and agreed canon of sacred texts, and some equivalent to a “church” institution, as the one we find in Catholic and especially Protestant Christianity. This criticism may sound familiar to those following Boyarin’s writings from

¹ Joseph Cedar (director), *He`Arat Shulayim/ Footnote*. 107 mins. Israel: United King Films, 2011, opening scene.

previous stages and rehashes the move of his 2019 book, prepared for the Rutgers Series Keywords in Jewish Studies. The very category of “religion,” according to this critical approach, should be taken with a grain of salt since it is, essentially, a modern and Eurocentric construct. Imposing this category on non-Christian groups, including the Jews, helped the Europeans to put them into their neat classifications but damaged our ability to grasp the true meaning of Jewish life. Thinking through the prism of “religion,” in other words, proves to be a Procrustean bed: it violently hurts and restricts the range of motion of those subject to it. In the book at hand, Boyarin attempts one step further as he embarks on a journey to find an alternative to the concept of “Judaism.” During this journey, he tries to clarify and distill a broader and more inclusive notion of “Jewishness” (*Jüdischkeit* in German, *Yiddishkayt* in modern English transliteration) or *Jewissance*—a neologism Boyarin also introduced before, in his *Unheroic Conduct* (1997), echoing Jacques Lacan’s *jouissance* (an intense form of enjoyment, that may also include suffering) that aims to capture the joy rooted in an authentic Jewish experience over many generations.

The book’s second core argument follows this point: instead of talking about “religion” or an abstract notion of “fear of heaven,” we should rehabilitate the term “nation” (*am*, עַם) in its biblical sense and put it back in circulation. This term, Boyarin explains, includes collective features such as “shared [historical] narratives of origins and trials and tribulations, shared practices (including, but not limited to, “cultic” practices), shared languages,” and even “shared territory and power over that territory, a territory just for ‘us’ ” (p. x). The restitution of notions like “people” and “nation” may seem surprising and almost inconceivable given Boyarin’s public image as a fierce critic of Jewish nationalism. After many years in which it seemed that the very name Boyarin was synonymous with someone who had freed himself from the burden of belonging to a political community, suddenly we have a Boyarin 2.0 who is making new sounds, drawn to the unifying experience, as a person seeking a source of strength that comes after deconstruction. Dear Professor Boyarin: Have you turned into a Zionist in your old age? And if so, why do you so adamantly reject the idea of a Jewish state?

Evidently, Boyarin’s manifesto seeks to answer these questions, but I am not entirely sure he does so in a convincing manner. To his credit, he does score many points in his critique against the tendency to understand Judaism through “Protestant” lenses—a critical intervention that should be included

in the mandatory reading list for any student of Jewish history or religious studies. Indeed, it is worth reminding readers that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the word *'umma* (עַמָּה in Hebrew, أُمَّة in Arabic)—which could be translated as either “nation,” “people,” or “community” (Boyarin translates it as “people/peoplehood,” p. 94)—signifies a collective group of individuals bound together by common cultural, linguistic, religious, or historical ties, which is a far better category than “religion.” This assertion has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the scholarly debates in our current age of hyper-populism and increasingly authoritarian political culture. It is an important attempt to free Jewish identity from the iron grip of the Jewish state, which seeks to monopolize all discussions on Jewish identity, and an invitation to rethink diasporic Jewish nationalism. Not less significant, this is a desperate, perhaps futile, effort to offer an alternative vocabulary to North American Jews who feel increasingly alienated from the ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) or the Jewish Federations’ official line and to free Jewish studies from conservative groups like the Tikvah Fund, which conflates criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism, and haste to mark both as attacks on Western civilization’s core values. Also to his credit, Boyarin is not aiming his arrows only at the conservative right but also directs his critique at leftist scholars who impose ahistorical concepts like ‘church,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘faith’ to define the Jews. Indeed, this line of criticism allows Boyarin also to offer a powerful rebuttal of Shlomo Sand’s dogmatic anti-Zionist tracts, which fail to grasp that Jews are not a church but a national group (pp. 9-11).

However, it’s important to note that Boyarin isn’t the sole voice emphasizing the issues with this categorization. Leora Batnitzky’s aptly titled *How Judaism Became a Religion* made a similar argument, delving into debates over whether Judaism can align with the Protestant notion of religion as a private belief without reaching the same political conclusions.² Among the historians, Kerstin von der Krone provided a careful and highly detailed reconstruction of the emergence of state-sponsored German Jewish religious instruction “textbooks,” which included catechisms—a staple in Christian education, which had no significant Jewish equivalent until the 19th century—showing how the German state’s interest in Jewish education, driven by reforms and prejudices that viewed Judaism as morally inferior, catalyzed the writing of such books, that were modeled on

² Leora Faye Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Christian precedents.³ Nor is the problematics of “*religio*” and the search for “orthodoxia” (literally, the “correct belief”), that is the assumption that the faith community should be defined based on adherence to accepted creeds or doctrines, necessarily unique to Jewishness turning into “Judaism.” Richard W. Bulliet, a historian of early Islamic societies, had long ago insisted that “*orthopraxy*”—a term that highlights the correct conduct and practice of a member of an Islamic community, such as adhering to prescribed rituals, behaviors, and ethical practices—is more significant historically than “*orthodoxy*,” a category that focuses on “correct belief.” Just as Bulliet contends that many Islamic societies were more concerned with correct social and legal practices (*orthopraxy*) than with correct belief (*orthodoxy*), especially in the Ottoman Empire and the Shi'i orthopraxy in Safavid Iran, so we can think of the “corporate nature,” as the Israeli historian Israel Bartal called it, of Jewish communal life in Eastern Europe.⁴ In essence, while liberating ourselves from the “*religio*” lens is crucial and beneficial, this critique is not exclusive to Boyarin. Moreover, it does not inherently align with a specific ideological stance and could support both Zionist and anti-Zionist arguments equally.

The book's major weaknesses become visible when we approach it from the vantage point of Jewish history and historiography, especially one that is informed by the past decades' serious efforts to go beyond Zionist and “Ashkenormative” grand narratives of Jewish history. Jewish history provides a long list of different forms of *Golus* nationalism and diaspora nationalism—i.e. social formation, institutions, and organizations that could be called nationalistic or proto-nationalistic, that denied Jews as a national collective and were committed to maintaining Jewish identity, culture, and community life within the countries where Jews reside, rather than focusing solely on the “return to Zion.” Since 1897, many of these developed out of controversy with Zionism and as an attempt to offer it an ideological alternative. The platform of the Bund movement, which combined Marxism with nationalism (infamously denounced by Georgi Plekhanov, who described its members mockingly as “Zionists who are afraid of seasickness”), and so are the variety of ideas about national autonomism

³ Kerstin von der Krone, “Nineteenth-Century Jewish Catechisms and Manuals: Or What One Should Know About Judaism,” in *Religious Knowledge and Positioning: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Educational Media*, eds. David Käbisch, Kerstin von der Krone and Christian Wiese (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 85-104.

⁴ Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Israel Bartal, “From Corporation to Nation: Jewish Autonomy in Eastern Europe, 1772-1881,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 5 (2006): 17-32.

within a multi-national or imperial framework that Simon Dubnow and others developed, inspired by Austro-Marxists thinkers. In the USA as well, a thinker like Simon Rawidowicz, who quarreled with Ben-Gurion and the “negators of the diaspora” and insisted that Jewish existence outside of Israel has a central role in Jewish life, stands in the background of these discussions as well. Equally significant is the French-Tunisian writer and essayist Albert Memmi, who passed away in 2020, who was the first to propose the concept of *Judeity* (in the original French: *judéité*) as a Jewish parallel to the notion of “*négritude*,” developed by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as an attempt to capture the divided consciousness of the African intellectual trying to integrate into France while being asked to “overcome” his dubious origins.⁵

Surprisingly—and alarmingly—Boyarin mentions almost none of these individuals or movements (Césaire and Memmi’s names are mentioned in passing, incidentally, and in different contexts, despite the fact the book includes an entire chapter entitled “Judaïtude/Négritude”), nor the work of his UC Berkeley colleague Erich Gruen, who devoted an entire career to the study of the ways Jews maintained their diasporic collective identity vis-a-vis the Hellenic and Roman cultures (diaspora, after all, is a Greek word). More ironic, the inside cover of the book—a reproduction of a famous image taken from a Bund party poster produced as part of a political campaign—appears not only without any credit or explanation of the historical origin of the illustration but also without any hint that would tell the readers of the strong anti-clerical element if not even abhorrence of theology that were prominent features of the Bund’s ideology and practice (they were, after all, Marxists). The problem is not a lack of credit to predecessors and colleagues but the realization that what we have here is a graphic representation divorced from its original context, or what Jean Baudrillard would simply mark as simulacra and simulation: an image or semblance of something that can be artificially represented in a form that is either indistinguishable from reality or so distorted that the original meaning is lost.⁶

⁵ The famous essay appeared in English translation long ago: Albert Memmi, “Negritude and Judeity,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 3, no. 2 (1968): 4-12.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).



Fig. 1: The original Bund party poster, 1918, reproduced in Boyarin's book. The title in Yiddish reads, "Dorten vo mir leben — dort iz unzer land!" (Wherever we live -- that's our homeland). Public Domain.

Even more uncomfortable is the feeling that what we read here is a New Yorkcentric tract. It is masquerading as inclusive while being in praxis exclusive and rather narrow-minded in the way it defines “real Jews” with their “forms of life” and “Lebensformen.” Injecting himself into the story, Boyarin reminisces: “When I was a child, my parents spoke a language they called “Jewish”—translating the word “Yiddish” into English—when they didn’t want children to understand. I once asked them if a certain person who worked for them spoke “Christian”; they didn’t understand the question” (p. 112). If the Zionist poet laureate Hayim Nachman Bialik fled from the stifling atmosphere of the yeshiva study room, Boyarin, not hiding his sentimentality, longs to return to it and call upon us to mimic the mannerisms of the “poor yeshiva *bokher*,” emersed in learning with his “*Gemoro loshn* (Talmud lingo)” (p. 116). Not surprisingly, towards Hebrew Boyarin is ambivalent at best. Though he does not reject it categorically, he bitterly rejects the Zionist commitment to it and considers its transformation into a vernacular as a kind of historical accident. What to do with the millions of Jews who consider Hebrew today to be their mother tongue? Boyarin does not provide us with an answer. So who are Boyarin’s “real Jews”? The sociological category can be easily teased out: there are

basically third-generation descendants of East European immigrants to the New World, who are mostly mono-lingual American patriots today speaking English enriched with Yiddish expressions and idioms. The parents and grandparents of these American Ashkenazi Jews experienced upward mobility, witnessed the removal of discriminatory practices and greater integration, and are squarely middle-class. Thus, for them, the mannerisms of the poor yeshiva *bokher*, are weird, unattainable, and undesirable. The education they received, together with the mores and values of their social class, committed them to anti-racism and made them feel uncomfortable about over-eagerness to defend the ethnic tribe, yet they still have a strong feeling of bond and “ties of kinship” that produced “the imagined community of the diasporic nation” (p. 56). Boyarin declares that he loathes the term identity politics (pp. 14-67) and indeed, he offers no politics, just a form of identity. And this identity, he admits, should be *performed*. How? Through “modes of walking, body language, telling stories, singing songs, as well as the study of Talmud, practicing the rituals of the holidays, eating this food and not that” (p. 58). In short, “real Jews” are the people Boyarin sees in the mirror. Those Jews who do not walk the walk and talk the talk are, apparently, not part of the group.

At the end of the day, this is a failed manifesto because it fails itself. The late Israeli essayist Dan Tsalka joked once that philosophers are those who spread smoke in the room and then complain that they cannot see anything. Boyarin is not a philosopher, but there is something about his book that brings to mind Tsalka’s witticism. Choosing to call his work a manifesto—a text setting guiding principles and calling for action—Boyarin permits himself to revisit and simplify his earlier densely theoretical works and speak the language of the “common man,” but it is evident that he is having difficulty doing so. The role of a manifesto is to be a tool for political mobilization, not narcissistic meditations or nostalgia for a bygone world. But Boyarin offers no plan for action and does not tell us where we should go from here and how. That is because Boyarin runs away from the political. He declares that he wants “[n]o more Federations; Councils; Leadership Committees”—i.e. no more institutions representing the Jews collectively, operating in the political sphere—“Just Jews, singing, dancing, speaking, and writing in Hebrew, Yiddish, Judezmo, learning the Talmud in all sorts of ways, fighting together for justice for Palestinians and Black Lives” (p. 127). This is a childish retreat into an inner citadel. The *Jewissance* he offers us is a boutique café. Into this imagined and nostalgic

space of *Yiddishkeit*, too many *actual* Jews – the Jewish nationalist who is also a conservative statist, the yeshiva scholar who, unlike the so-called “woke generation” is not so progressive when it comes to LBGBTQ+ rights, the Jewish supremacist inspired by Meir Kahane and drawn to authoritarian, anti-democratic and racist ideas—are not allowed to enter. A product of the age and the society in which it was produced, Boyarin’s slogan book reflects the deeply polarized American culture of our times without much scrutiny and challenge. He flushed the ugly politics down the toilet in the name of a colorful and joyous “Jewish identity” he constructed in his imagination. Yet paradoxically, the more we disregard politics, the more it insists on bursting out of the gutter and filling the room.

Arie M. Dubnov, *George Washington University*

How to quote this article:

Arie M. Dubnov, discussion of *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*, by Daniel Boyarin, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15889

Mara Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2023), pp. 179.

by *Michele Sarfatti*

Mara Josi's book examines how the Nazi round-up of Jews in Rome on 16 October 1943, from the arrests to the deportation on 18 October, has been represented in literature. The Author analyzes what she calls "the four most influential texts" in literature (p. 2) that are either entirely devoted to that episode, or that devote a considerable space to it: Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943*,¹ Elsa Morante's *La Storia. Romanzo*,² Rosetta Loy's *La parola ebreo*,³ Anna Foa's *Portico d'Ottavia 13. Una casa del ghetto nel lungo inverno del '43*.⁴ The Author does not, therefore, explore historiographic texts, diaries, autobiographies, or biographies. The texts chosen by the Author are in fact the most important ones dedicated to that event, both for their narrative and for their structure. These are the books whose influence on the public memory of the "16 October" has been strongest; literature is "both a channel for perpetuating traditions and a source of new perceptions of the past" (p. 13).

Josi summarizes what historians have written about that event without questioning their narrative, informs us that historical documents about it are meagre, and reminds us that no photographs of it exist.

Because of this scarcity of documentary sources, both Debenedetti's text and the three later ones have come to be seen as "bearers of historical knowledge and channels of memory; not only outcomes of remembrance but also active ingredients in the process of forging cultural memory" (p. 3).

The Author describes each work, pointing out the links to other texts by the same author, highlighting their individual style, and outlining their important role in

¹ Giacomo Debenedetti, "16 ottobre 1943," in *Mercurio. Mensile di politica, arte, scienze* 1, no. 4 (1944), 75-97. English edition: Giacomo Debenedetti, *October 16, 1943; Eight Jews* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

² Elsa Morante, *La Storia. Romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974). English edition: Elsa Morante, *History: A novel* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

³ Rosetta Loy, *La parola ebreo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). English edition: Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2000).

⁴ Anna Foa, *Portico d'Ottavia 13. Una casa del ghetto nel lungo inverno del '43* (Rome: Laterza, 2013).

forging Italian cultural memory of the Roman round-up and of the Holocaust in general.

For each of the four authors she also details if they had a direct connection to Judaism, if they were born before or after the round-up, and where they were on 16 October.

All the quotations from the four books are published in the original Italian, followed by an English translation.

As already said, the book's aim is not to examine and to discuss the events of 16 October as reconstructed by historians or told by literary authors. It does not, for instance, investigate Debenedetti's statement "chi scrive questo racconto passò la mattinata del 16 ottobre in casa di una sua vicina" (The writer of this account spent the morning of October 16 in the house of a neighbor) (p. 43). Josi highlights instead and documents Debenedetti's ability in transforming memories (even personal ones) and witnesses' narratives into a "powerful and incisive means of recalling the round-up" (p. 44).

In comparing the four texts, the focus is on their defining aspects. Debenedetti, for instance, is the one who devotes greater attention to Jewish tradition and religious life. Morante, who could draw on a greater number of historical documents, inserts into her narrative passages in which "her writing is systematic, precise, and objective" (p. 79). Loy, who writes as a "non-Jew," obviously has a "tangential perspective" (p. 108) and the Author remarks that her book came out at the same time as other books and films (such as Francesco Rosi's *La tregua*, and Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*). As for Foa's text, Josi takes into consideration both the original work and the children's book derived from it (*Portico d'Ottavia*, with illustrations by Matteo Berton),⁵ and highlights how structure and narrative are centered on the visual perception of historical events, thus inviting readers "to see the persecution and the deportation in the place where they occurred" (p. 148). Altogether, Josi's treatment of the question "of the triangular relationship between history, memory, and literature" (p. 151) is interesting. The book makes for smooth reading, and the Author clearly has carried out an extensive bibliographical research.

⁵ Anna Foa, *Portico d'Ottavia*. Illustrazioni di Matteo Berton (Rome: Laterza, 2015).

In my view, it would have been useful to elaborate further on the comparison between some crucial points in the historic events and in the four narratives. One of these points concerns the area in Rome called “Ghetto” even today, that is the area where for three centuries, until the mid-19th century, all Jews had been forced to live. In the summer of 1943, Debenedetti, Morante and Loy, who was a child at the time, did not live in the former Roman ghetto (irrespective of their religious affiliation), whereas Foa was born in Turin in 1944. Later, Foa lived in a flat in that part of town, and this drove her to write a book on the persecution that had taken place in that *casa nel ghetto* (house in the ghetto). The other three writers, on the other hand, on 16 October were living (or had sought refuge) in other parts of town or other localities. Moreover, the arrests on that day were carried out all over Rome. Nevertheless, in his book Debenedetti focuses specifically on what happened in the ghetto, and the same is true for Morante and at least partially for Loy. The quality of their books has strongly contributed to fix in the cultural memory the idea of “the ghetto” as “the place” of the round-up, thus almost establishing a connection between the Nazi round-up and the policy of the old Papal States.

The Author has shown excellent capabilities in this book, and I hope she will expand her work to also include this kind of subtopics.

Michele Sarfatti, CDEC

How to quote this article:

Michele Sarfatti, review of *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature*, by Mara Josi, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15756

Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds., *Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today* (London: Bloombury Visual Arts, 2022), pp. 320.

by *Francesco Cassata*

Edited by art historians and curators Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, *Curating Fascism* examines how exhibitions after the Second World War and until recent times, in Italy and abroad, have shaped collective memory, political discourses and historical narratives about the relationship between art and politics during the fascist *ventennio*.

The book is articulated in four thematic parts. Part I explores three representative case studies of survey exhibitions on art under fascism: Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti's 1967 *Arte moderna in Italia, 1915-1935* in Florence, Renato Barilli's 1982 *Annitrenta* in Milan, and Germano Celant's 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics, Italia 1918-1943*, also in Milan. Although each curator's political and cultural trajectory was distinct, these three exhibitions—as art historians Luca Quattrocchi and Denis Viva, along with the editors, convincingly argue—shared a common approach of uncritical depoliticization of fascist-era art, combined with the spectacularization of the historical narrative.

This section of the book includes also an interview with Barilli and two additional essays. Robert Gordon analyzes two sites that epitomize the role of public display and exhibition in the cultural memorialization of Italy's Holocaust, from the 1950s to the present: first, the museum-monument at Carpi, near Fossoli, the principal transit camp for Italian Jews and others destined to Auschwitz; and second, the Italian national memorial and exhibit at Auschwitz-I camp. Art historian Romy Golan focuses on Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, exploring how this architectural container, used during fascism, has negotiated its past functions with postwar exhibitions.

The second part of the volume broadens the scope to explore exhibitions about Italian fascism in other countries, including the UK, Brazil, Germany, and the USA.

Rosalind McKever illustrates how the postwar reception of fascist-era art in Britain was closely tied with the collecting practices of art dealer Eric Estorick, who

avoided addressing the political issues surrounding Italian modern art. Art historian and museum director Ana Magalhães discusses a group of Italian paintings acquired by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francesco Matarazzo Sobrinho, on the advice of the powerful Italian fascist art critic Margherita Sarfatti, for South America's first museum of modern art, in São Paulo. The connection between this private collection and the cultural policies of Italian fascism in the 1930s, along with the visual aesthetics of the Novecento Italiano, resulted in its being forgotten and silenced until the 2010s. Miriam Paeslack presents the curatorial strategies she employed in the organization of the 2019 exhibition of photographs and videos *Photographic Recall: Italian Rationalist Architecture in Contemporary German Art* at the UN Anderson Gallery at the University at Buffalo. She emphasizes how the decision to assemble a variety of artistic voices in dialogue with one another, and with didactic supplemental materials, contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the different impact of the architectural traces of fascism in Italy and in Germany. Design historians Elena Dellapiana and Jonathan Mekinda address the role of design through exhibitions of the fascist-era art in Italy and beyond. By tracing the path of Gio Ponti's ceramics back to their fascist roots, the chapter advocates for the need to extract design objects from the realm of mere "decoration" and to challenge the general sense of "feeling at home" often associated with the display of furniture, textiles, and intimate objects. A critical curatorial approach is necessary to unpack the political and cultural mechanisms of power, exclusion, and control, that are embedded in the alleged neutrality of design works. The second part of the book concludes with an interview with art historian and curator Emily Braun on her 1990 exhibition, *Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy*, shown in New York and Ferrara, the first to include a section on the neglected topic of Jewish artists under fascism.

Part III of the book is devoted to "Absences", focusing on areas of curatorial practices characterized by omissions, exclusions, and silences. The first chapter, by literary historian John Champagne, examines two postwar exhibitions dedicated to Corrado Cagli and Filippo De Pisis. In both cases, a threefold silence shaped the curatorial approach, with no mention of the artists' queer sexuality, the homoeroticism of some of their fascist-era works, and their relationship with the regime. Champagne addresses the tensions and complexities involved in

recognizing Cagli's and Pisis' contributions to the history of the erotic representations of the male body, without ignoring their connection to the regime.

Raffaele Bedarida's chapter analyzes the narratives through which exhibitions have presented antifascist artists, from *Arte contro la barbarie* organized in 1944 after the liberation of Rome, to the 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*. By focusing on *The Chinese Hero* and *Concentration Camp*, two paintings by Giustizia and Libertà activist Carlo Levi, who was persecuted but also exhibited by the regime, Bedarida argues that post-fascist shows in Italy have consistently included but failed to fully address pre-Civil War antifascism, ultimately replicating the dynamics of fascist censorship or mirroring the redemptive and conciliatory agenda centered exclusively on the Resistance. Historian Nicola Labanca explores another silenced voice, that of Italy's colonial past. Discussing the 1993 exhibition *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, Labanca recognizes the groundbreaking role of this show, while criticizing its numerous pitfalls, such as the depiction of Africa as an architectural void as well as the celebration of fascist architecture as an expression of modern and universal rationality. The other two chapters in this section focus on innovative curatorial approaches in the critical analysis of fascist difficult heritage. Literary historian Lucia Re shows how the exhibition *I fiori del male. Donne in manicomio nel regime fascista* (2016-2019), drawing from the photographic archive of the psychiatric hospital in Teramo, significantly reverses the visual panopticon of the asylum. Through a contextualized narrative montage of images and texts, and by adopting a feminist ethics of care, the curators of *I fiori del male* invite the spectators to recognize the inmates' suffering and humanity, while deconstructing the process of women's confinement and punishment implemented by the Fascist regime. Shelleen Greene examines *Roma Negata: Postcolonial Routes of the City*, a 2014 exhibition organized by photojournalist Rino Bianchi and writer and activist Igiaba Scego, and *Postcolonial Italy: Mapping Colonial Heritage*, a 2018 digital project that reframes Italian colonial histories through the creation of digital public archives. Both *Roma Negata* and *Postcolonial Italy* are viewed here as decolonial interventions, based on participatory reengagements with urban geographies and archival materials. The final part of the volume addresses innovative strategies for curating fascism today. Vanessa Rocco examines how certain curatorial practices,

such as re-enactments, rehangs, and in general reconstructions of the past, can be challenging and sometimes misleading. Focusing again on the 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*, Rocco demonstrates how difficult it is to rehang the installation shots of the 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* without either fetishizing and monumentalizing them or erasing their broader political and ideological context. This does not imply that all reenactments, rehangs, or restagings are unproductive at the scholarly level. As convincing, positive examples, Rocco quotes the 2008 reconstruction of El Lissitzky's 1929 Soviet Pavilion at MACBA Barcellona, as well as the AI simulation of the 1931 Exhibition of the Building Workers' Unions, created by the media professor Patrick Roessler. Vivien Greene and Susan Thompson, the curators of the exhibition *Italian Futurism (1909-1944): Reconstructing the Universe* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2014, discuss their own curatorial choices. In this retrospective reflection, they not only recall the pressures they faced to downplay references to fascism but also reevaluate their choices with the benefit of hindsight. For example, the apex of *Italian Futurism*, showcased in the museum's top gallery, was Benedetta Cappa Marinetti's murals *Sintesi delle comunicazioni*, a loan from Palermo's Post office: Was this final aesthetic climax of the exhibition too spectacular? Where should the line be drawn—Greene and Thompson self-critically ponder—to avoid any risk of glorification?

Looking ahead to future curatorial strategies, Sharon Hecker suggests presenting fascist-era art alongside photographic and painted representations by artists of their studios. This approach would allow viewers to peer behind the visual power of art and grasp the contradictions, dissonances, and tragedies in which these artists operated.

Additionally, this section is enriched by interviews to Gabriella Belli, the founding director of the *Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento* (MART)—home of one of Italy's most important collections of fascist-era Italian modernism—and the writer Maaza Mengiste, author of the online exhibition *Project 3541*, which reflects her intimate perspective on the global and personal consequences of the 1935-41 Italo-Ethiopian War.

Methodologically rich and innovative, Bedarida and Hecker's book provides a much-needed intellectual history of postwar exhibitions on fascism. It addressed the multidimensional specificity of the art show by integrating architecture and

exhibition design, curatorial practices and institutional history, cultural diplomacy and political history, as well as theories of viewership and the construction of collective memory. This groundbreaking approach opens new avenues for research in areas that are only briefly explored in the book. For instance, the role of science and technology exhibits, as well as the public display of fascist “anthropological revolution” (eugenics, demography, environmentalism, etc.) offer fertile ground for future investigations.

Francesco Cassata, University of Genoa

How to quote this article:

Francesco Cassata, review of *Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today*, by Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds., *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15773

Magda Teter, *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 390.

by Matteo Caponi

In her latest, thought-provoking book Magda Teter revisits antisemitism and anti-Black racism by looking at them as two interconnected phenomena which have shaped Western cultures, societies and politics across the Atlantic. This choice implies a clear historiographical positioning. Quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, the author claims the need of “reconnecting the study of racism and antisemitism” and “overcoming methodological separatism”—we must consider that in US public discourse racism is mostly conceived in connection with the color line. Reversing a common trope, Teter argues that both antisemitism and anti-Black racism have old Christian, not novel secular, roots. The goal is not to point out, as Robert P. Jones recently did,¹ “the legacy of white supremacy in American Christianity,” but on the contrary to investigate, “by a deeper chronological look,” “the Christian legacy in white supremacy”: that is, how Christianity “left its mark” on Jewish/Black exclusion or annihilation (p. 14). Christendom was built on the “enduring marks of inferiority” attributed to certain “contrasting figures” (p. 15): Jews (chapter 2), in particular, and enslaved Africans, when a white European Christian identity emerged under the doctrine of colonial discovery (chapter 3). Missing, admittedly, is the figure of the Arab/Turkish/Moor/Muslim, also central to Christian imagination.

A Polish-born historian, professor of Judaic studies at Fordham University and a New Yorker living in Harlem, Teter has to her credit important works such as *Blood Libel*.² Her interests have expanded to analyze how Christian teaching had assembled, since the first centuries CE, “a mental habit” that provided for a socio-religious hierarchy. *Christian Supremacy* moves from the tragic events of Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, when a crowd of Christian white nationalists

¹ Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

² Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

protested against the removal of a monument of general Robert E. Lee to the cry “Jews will not replace us.” Teter rewinds the tape of this narrative and takes the reader through an itinerary that avoids trivializations. From the earliest Christian era onward, the theology of Jewish servitude established a paradigm that was later transferred to dark-skinned humankind in need of conversion. Indeed, the religious discourse about ‘heathens’ has been a powerful vector of racialization before and beyond the scientific-biological language of race, as also shown by Kathryn Gin Lum.³ Drawing from the *longue durée* debated interpretations by M. Lindsay Kaplan and Willie Jennings,⁴ Teter contends that Christian supersessionism, which was applied to Judaism, and implemented in legal instruments of oppression since the late ancient and medieval ages, acted as a genealogical paradigm for white domination over people of color since the early modern age. “The European Christian sense of superiority over non-Christians, which had emerged at first in regard to Jews,” represented a “fertile ground for the development of racialized Christianity” associating Blackness with non-Christian inferiority and “hereditary heathenism” (p. 57). The enslavement of black Africans reframed Christian supremacy, consolidating a religio-racial normativity well expressed by Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, which as of the Seventeenth century editions transposed whiteness as part of “European Christian identity” (p. 69). The imagery of Christian supremacy “developed, gradually, first in the Mediterranean and Europe in respect to Jews and then in respect to people of color in the European colonies and the US, before returning transformed back in Europe” (pp. 1-3). The thesis that supersessionism was the urtext of racism has been strongly contested. However, such a perspective allows us to decenter our gaze from an all-European history built on a Weber-style idea of modernity that coincides with secularization and the enfranchisement of the political bodies from Christian reference values. Significantly, intertwined representations of Christianity and whiteness were reaffirmed at the time of the emergence of post-1776 and post-1789 modern citizenship. The emancipation of Jews, accompanied

³ Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2022).

⁴ M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

by a debate on their “regeneration”, did not brand them as totally incompatible with the new model of national community, but still fashioned them as basically non-Europeans, “Semites”, and “Orientals”, as non-Christian. The legal parity awarded to Jews seemed, even to its advocates, a necessity to remedy their being strangers to the modern state. Despite secularization, the belief that “allowing Jews to be citizens would ‘endanger’ Christians,” (p. 92) and that the new post-revolutionary Europe and the United States of America had a Christian-based culture, was at work in a variety of geographic and chronological contexts.

While rejecting false equivalences between Jewish and Black condition (“Jews may have been despised, but they were not slaves,” p. 94), Teter focuses on the American case, adhering to a revisionist approach toward the “redemptive” narrative centered on the American dream, the Emancipation Declaration and so on.⁵ From the earliest laws of the now-independent former colonies (e.g., the Naturalization Act of 1790), and even in the minds of the abolitionists themselves, there was a shared view that the United States should be a Christian (Protestant) country and that the political freedom cherished by Christians (*We, the People*) was not a business for Jews, Native Americans, or Afro-descendants. The fact that for many this did not mean that Jews, infidels or ‘pagan’ savages should be oppressed and persecuted, did not prevent the view that the bearers of the torch of freedom were Christians, thought of as white, and that non-Christians were the outsiders to be marginalized. Bellah’s American civil religion was able to incorporate and remodulate the leading motifs of Christian supremacy, including antisemitism and Blackophobia. It would have to wait until the 1940s for the theme of the Judeo-Christian tradition to be disseminated, and then cultivated in the anticommunist climate of the Cold War. On the other hand, not even the Civil Rights Movement would erase the reality of systemic racism: as stated by James Baldwin in 1963, “the Christian world has revealed itself as morally bankrupt and politically unstable” (p. 268).

The contestation of Black citizenship by anti-Reconstruction jurisprudence after the Civil War was animated by the “reconciliationist” vision that it was a Christian duty, proper to a Christian nation, to oppose “Negrophile” tendencies that risked

⁵ Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

“Africanizing” the United States, and threatened civilization, progress and national harmony. Again: the myth of the Christian nation and of a “white Protestant republic,” openly thematized by Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court David H. Brewer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was also widely operative in unspoken anti-Jewishness. In the United States, Jewish citizens could certainly exercise the right to vote and were never in danger of being denaturalized. Yet, the 20th century saw a growing aversion to Jews as “unassimilable aliens” (pp. 196-197). Anti-Jewish discrimination was “often veiled in euphemisms [...], such as ‘restricted clientele’ in hotel advertising” (p. 216): nothing comparable to Jim Crowism at home or antisemitic persecution in Europe, but nonetheless something emblematic of a simultaneous backlash against Jewish and Black equality (chapters 7-8). The cliché of Jews as “tricksters and Blacks as dupes” planted seeds of what would become “an antisemitic and anti-Black trope of Jewish support of Black civil rights in order to disrupt white Christian American society” (p. 226).

The book closes by challenging the idea of a post-1945 retreat of racism and antisemitism, with the statement that “a true reckoning was not possible, neither in Europe nor in the United States” (p. 239). Really insightful pages are spent on anticommunist antisemitism in Eastern Europe, in particular in Poland, promoted by a part of Catholic bishops. Not even the evolution of Jewish-Christian relations since the 1980s, several years after *Nostra aetate*, has erased the “Christian sense of superiority” (p. 284) that has empowered cultural racisms in their various ramifications. If I may suggest a critique of this brilliant and wide-ranging monograph, sometimes the exposition seems to gloss over the alternatives, more or less traveled, with respect to “Christian supremacy” understood in a religio-racial sense, or at least its internal articulations. Teter convincingly emphasizes the original contribution of Christian cultures to antisemitic and anti-Black racism. However, not all anti-Black racisms and antisemitisms (plural) have been Christian-derived. Christian interaction with secular (or non-Christian) racisms/antisemitisms has been made up of encounters but also clashes and otherness. On this issue, several lines of research are still open. No doubt, Teter’s work represents an essential scholarly contribution.

Matteo Caponi, University of Genoa

How to quote this article:

Matteo Caponi, review of *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism*, by Magda Teter, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15783

Tamás Turán, *Ignaz Goldziher as a Jewish Orientalist: Traditional Learning, Critical Scholarship, and Personal Piety* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), pp. 298.

by *George Y. Kohler*

The author of this book likes to refer to Goldziher—scholarship as *Goldziherology*, his own work would then be the ultimate coursebook of this science: It is a truly comprehensive intellectual biography of Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), the Hungarian-Jewish scholar who almost single handedly initiated the modern academic treatment of Islam. Reading through the 300 pages, it seems the book takes into account almost every single line Goldziher has ever written: from his so far almost ignored youthful Hungarian writings to his famous and extensive diary, and of course his vast oeuvre of scholarship on religion. In addition, Turán presents Goldziher the man from every possible angle: the jealous private person and the grumpy public intellectual, the first rate scholar of Islam and Judaism, the Hungarian patriot as well as an almost clichéd member of the German born movement of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Turán has found a wonderful motive describing Goldziher's life: He was “fleeing from God to God,” from the God of Jewish tradition in his youth to the new, not less spiritual God of the academic pursuit of religion, in parallel: from the God of Judaism to the God of Islam—apparently as a kind of replacement after his disappointment about the contemporary developments in the religion of his fathers, especially in Hungary. And this is probably also the most interesting discovery of the book: Goldziher as a theologian, as a religious devotee himself, is portrayed here as the classic exemplar of the liberal Jew of nineteenth century—featuring all the elements of the first decades of Jewish reform theology: admiration for the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible (Moses, he wrote, was “the grandson of the prophets” p. 103); in this connection: the rediscovery of prophetic Messianism as a this-worldly universal ideal, in which Goldziher intended to raise his children (p. 226); the insisting on the purity of monotheism as a means of de-mythologizing religion (p. 144); a deep appreciation for Biblical criticism, not only as critical philology but as “honest theology” (p. 106); and finally: Judaism as possessing an ethical mission to the civilized world (p. 114). But most importantly, for Goldziher, as it was for his

German role models (first and foremost Abraham Geiger, as Turán shows), as well as for his West European followers and students, *Wissenschaft* was not a *Beruf* (Weber) but a religion, the new academic approach to written sources and lived history was the final stage in the *religious* development of Judaism. This position, today either completely forgotten or aggressively rejected, was the most common feature among liberal Jews around the turn of the 20th century.¹ It seems that Goldziher became the famous scholar of Islam “only” as a result of his departure from traditional Judaism, a telling case for the influence of science on life, and vice versa.

Especially in his welcoming attitude to Biblical criticism Goldziher seems to have been even a true pioneer of the *Wissenschaft* movement, according to Turán’s research presented in the book. Again following Geiger’s first careful steps on this field (and in a way also the more radical approach of Leopold Zunz), Goldziher supported a critical academic approach to the Bible from as early as the 1870s, claiming that ignoring source criticism was in fact the very cause of all the many flaws in modern Jewish education. Religious philosophy, that is, Jewish theology, was for Goldziher not only a central intellectual enterprise of the Middle Ages—it was of at least the same importance during his own time, the modern age. His personal view of religious reforms of Judaism, also elaborated on extensively in the book, is complex and fluctuated between the bottom-up approach of the younger Zacharias Frankel (“only what the community is willing to tolerate”) and the more radical position of Geiger who made academic research the exclusive criterium for the validity of a custom or a ritual, and thus suggested to abandon every law that would not pass this test. Turán discusses this within the framework of Pauline distinction between *dead and living* traditions, albeit ignoring that for both Geiger and Goldziher also the “living” laws of Judaism were laws, whereas Paul seems to have had rather antinomian intentions in the first place (p. 201). While Geiger had declared it the primary function of the oral law of Judaism to revive and regenerate

¹ Max Wiener called *Wissenschaft* “a matter of life and death” for Judaism. Historical research, and in particular, research into the history of its ideas, is not only a means for clarifying the essential content of Judaism, wrote Wiener; it actually plays a substantial role in the development of Judaism, its very subject. Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Philo Verlag: Berlin 1933), 176.

the Bible, Goldziher surprisingly assigned this very function to modern Jewish theology.

While the above mentioned are the main new and original contributions of the book to the research of the thought of Jewish scholars at the turn of the 20th century, Turán does much more, especially in regard to Goldziher's enormous achievement in the study of Islam, the relation of this study to his scholarship of Judaism (are there theological or legalistic parallels?), the views that Goldziher held on education, and finally Goldziher's personal relationship with other Hungarian scholars, less known to the English or German reading public. All this is of course embedded in a detailed account of Goldziher's private life and professional career, both of which were shaped by a great number of difficult experiences and setbacks. One of Goldziher's two sons committed suicide, his own way to a paid professorship was thorny and long, often also because of his own jealousy and stubbornness, as Turán shows convincingly.

This said, it must be admitted that the book is difficult to read. The English is often awkward and hardly comprehensible, obviously as a consequence of the translation from the original Hungarian. The use of (non-citation) quotation marks is so extensive that the reader often gets lost: Is that ironic? Or does it indicate a semantic shift from the use of the phrase in the Goldziher's time? In summary, the abundance of factual material presented in this work is its great strength, it gives the reader the opportunity to construct her own picture of Goldziher's life, work, personality and theology—without necessarily having to agree with the author's often lengthy comments and analyses. This picture of Goldziher, for the present writer, is that of an extraordinarily talented, pathbreaking scholar who was at the same time a difficult person, heavily torn between vanity and a deeply felt moral commitment. A typical liberal Jewish theologian of his era who at the same time took the highly atypical step of trying to overcome his own religious doubts through the study of Islam, which brought him eternal fame.

George Y. Kohler, Bar Ilan University

George Y. Kohler

How to quote this article:

George Y. Kohler, review of *Ignaz Goldziher as a Jewish Orientalist: Traditional Learning, Critical Scholarship, and Personal Piety*, by Tamás Turán, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15804

Liat Steir-Livny, *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 264.

by Guido Vitiello

Studies of Holocaust representations have long been marked by two general inclinations, or rather by two implicit premises. The first is a prescriptive rather than descriptive conception of literary, film or figurative genres. According to this conception—which recalls ancient and medieval theories of genres—there are appropriate genres and inappropriate genres for dealing with such an extreme subject. Elie Wiesel’s harsh attacks on the Nbc miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) and on William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice* (from which Alan J. Pakula’s film of the same name was made in 1982), as well as Primo Levi’s polite perplexities with respect to the erotic film *Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974) descend at least in part from this rule: beyond the merits and demerits of the works in question, the error lies in their genre. From the survivors, this propensity to give genres a prescriptive value would later extend to scholars. It has been a little over thirty years since Terrence Des Pres, in a highly influential essay, discussed the ethical and historical permissibility of dedicating a comic book—in this case Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*—to the Holocaust.¹ Still in 1997, the debate over Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is beautiful* was conducted largely along these lines: is it legitimate to set a comedy in a concentration camp?

In this respect, much has changed with the latest generation of scholars. Liat Steir-Livny’s book *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration* is an excellent demonstration of this shift in perspective. Presenting itself as “the first comprehensive analysis of animated Holocaust documentaries,” (p. x) the book analyzes films produced in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe and Israel. Rather than focusing on the supposed inherent morality of expressive genres, the author privileges the positive possibilities that a new genre offers. In this respect, animated documentaries “can visualize subject matter that previously eluded live action documentaries, such as

¹ Terrence Des Pres, “Holocaust *Laughter?*,” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (London-New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 216-233.

the unfilmed past and people's inner worlds of fantasies, dreams, and emotions" (p. x). In other words, this would grant documentary some of the privileges traditionally restricted to works of fiction. The book is structured in three parts. The first, " 'Unimating' the Holocaust," analyzes films about the Nazi period (1933-1945). In most cases these are films devoted to episodes isolated from context and focused on positive aspects such as resistance to Nazism, resilience, humanity and the possibility of redemption. With few exceptions—addressed by the author in part four—these films marginalize atrocities and choose not to represent them, thus risking giving an incomplete picture of the past. The second part, "The Life After," is devoted to the way animated documentary can translate into images the post-traumatic experience of survivors as well as their coping strategies. Finally, the third part, "Secondary Trauma, Postmemory, and Wishful Postmemory," moves away from the direct experience of survivors to focus on their second- and third-generation descendants. Animated documentary, due to its ability to recreate undocumented aspects of both the descendants' outer world (such as their childhood) and their inner world (feelings, imaginations, experiences, fantasies) is particularly well suited to illuminate the transgenerational impact of trauma.

However, as anticipated earlier, there is a second implicit premise in the studies of Holocaust representations, that we might call "Borges' cartographer's trap." In one of his short stories, the Argentine writer tells of an empire in which "the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point."² Often, in evaluating novels or films about the Holocaust, a claim of the same kind is implicitly made: even if one does not demand of a single work of art that it represent everything—which is obviously impossible—one nonetheless asks it to have an exemplary depiction of this totality, and reproaches it when leaving out something essential: e.g. the industrial and anonymous aspect of the massacres, the responsibilities of one or another historical agent, the vicissitudes of people who cannot be assimilated to the protagonist. This is one of the main criticisms levelled at Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993): why choose, out of all the Germans, the uncommon case of an industrialist rescuing Jews? One might answer: because it is

² Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas de Giovanni (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 131.

one single film, not a 1:1 map of the Holocaust. From the second of these *idola*, Liat Steir-Livny is less immune. The author argues that “Holocaust animated documentaries also have specific shortcomings and have generated a new set of problems relating to Holocaust memory and representation, since the vast majority marginalize the horrors and instead focus on small incidents that reflect bravery, resilience, solidarity, and hope” (p. x). Her analyses demonstrate this brilliantly. However, one might argue, this limitation would only be problematic in a context in which all information about the Holocaust passed through this medium. In a context that already includes a very rich documentary canon, perhaps we could focus on what the animated documentary *adds*, the new possibilities it offers, rather than pointing out its shortcomings with respect to the map of empire. These new possibilities are brought out particularly clearly in the third part of the book, “Secondary Trauma, Postmemory, and Wishful Postmemory.” This is not the place to discuss the heuristic value of such notions as postmemory and secondary trauma, which have come under scrutiny in recent years. But there is no doubt that for the second and especially the third generation—who for obvious reasons are forced to imagine a past they cannot remember—animated documentary offers a broad and nuanced expressive palette. Analyses of the films *2nd World War 3rd Generation* (Elad Eisen, Gil Laron, and Shahar Madmon, 2013), *Noch Am Leben (Still Alive)* (Anita Lester, 2017), *Sketches from München* (Shahaf Ram, 2013), and *Compartments* (Daniella Koffler and Uli Seis, 2017) show how animated documentary allows third-generation creators to explore their inner worlds, and to discover that the stratifications of eighty years of Holocaust visual culture have settled there as well.

Guido Vitiello, Sapienza University of Rome

How to quote this article:

Guido Vitiello, review of *Holocaust Representations in Animated Documentaries: The Contours of Commemoration*, by Liat Steir-Livny, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15793

Omer Bartov, *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 376.

by Hana Kubátová

Omer Bartov's *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past* (2022) is an intricately woven narrative about the past and present of Galicia, a region that played a crucial role in the formation of multiple national identities. It is not a story you might traditionally tell at a family gathering, but in some ways, it feels like one. Intimate in tone, as if recounted by the author to his own children—who, in fact, are introduced later in the book—Bartov crafts a deeply personal account of history. Returning to Buczac, the town that lies at the heart of both his family history and previous scholarly works, Bartov embarks on a journey through the complex ethnic, cultural, and political life that shaped the borderland.¹ His storytelling blurs the lines between the academic and the personal, inviting readers into a conversation rather than a lecture.

Galicia, once the poorest and most populous province of the Austrian Empire, served as both a frontier and buffer zone, seemingly positioned to protect the empire from the “uncivilized” Cossacks and Tatars in the east and the Ottoman Empire to the south. This region was marked by cultural and political complexity, simultaneously the birthplace of modern Ukrainian nationalism, a stronghold of Polish nationalism, and home to the empire's largest Jewish community. In *Tales from the Borderlands*, Bartov examines the aspirations, dreams, and disillusionments of the people who inhabited this contested region. He structures the history of the area around three pivotal questions: Where did we come from? What did we become? Where did we go?

By posing these questions, Bartov wants readers to reflect not only on grand historical transformations but also on the intimate, family experiences of those

¹ Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczac* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Omer Bartov, ed., *Voices on War and Genocide: Three Accounts of the World Wars in a Galician Town* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020).

who lived through them. He explores how identities were shaped and reshaped by the turbulent forces of nationalism, imperialism, and destruction. The “we” in Bartov’s questions is both national and universal, encompassing Jews, their Christian neighbors, men and women, individuals, and groups.

Bartov’s writing is characterized by “thick description,” akin to an ethnographic study, where historical facts are entangled with stories, rumors, and personal anecdotes.² Author’s own description is often paired with the words of Nobel Prize-winning author Shmuel Yosef (Shai) Agnon, a native of Buczacz, reviving a multi-layered past that existed here. The narrative also constantly shifts back and forth in time. As the reader is drawn into the intimate details of life in Galicia particularly between the revolutions of 1848 and the outbreak of World War I, they are also consistently reminded of the bloodshed and destruction of the Holocaust. This cyclical movement between past and present makes the story feel alive yet tinged with an inescapable sense of loss.

Bartov begins his historical account in 1672, with the Peace Treaty of Buczacz between the Polish king and the Ottoman sultan. He charts how this borderland became central to Polish and Roman Catholic imaginations, while Jewish presence in the region can be traced back as early as 1500. Bartov shows how Buczacz evolved into a commercial and cultural hub, with Jews living alongside, but not necessarily integrated with, their Christian neighbors. Spiritual movements like Hasidism, as well as the messianic movements of Sabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank, clashed with the region’s Christian authorities, particularly under Austrian rule. Bartov also highlights the latter reforms introduced by Maria Theresa and Joseph II, which ushered in an “age of improvement” with opportunities for the Jewish population. However, these opportunities were increasingly articulated within new national and ideological frameworks.

The case of David (Zvi) Heinrich Müller, a Jewish intellectual who succeeded in academia without converting to Christianity, is a telling example. Despite his success, Müller was viewed as an interloper by Christian scholars, a traitor by Zionists, and a sellout by nationalists—exemplifying the challenges Jews faced in balancing modernity and ethnic pride. What is more, as Bartov also demonstrates, the radical politics that facilitated Jewish self-transformation were later recast by

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

nationalists as part of a Jewish conspiracy. The notion of Judeo-Bolshevism, or *żydokomuna*, became a persistent trope, fueling antisemitic sentiments that persist to this day.

In the context of professional revolutionaries born out of the borderlands, Bartov introduces figures like Ostap Dłuski, originally Adolf Langer, a loyal communist from Buczacz who became entangled in the complex ethnonational crises within the Communist Party of eastern Galicia. Dłuski tried to mediate these crises, which were exacerbated by the annexation of the region by the newly independent Poland, with the majority Ukrainian population here being fiercely anti-Polish. Arrested by Polish authorities and forced to leave for the Soviet Union in 1929, Dłuski spent much of World War II in France. Surprisingly numb to the fate of the Jews, but certainly driven by ideological dogma, Dłuski justified Stalin's takeover of Eastern Europe. He was buried in 1964 as a model communist, yet Bartov notes with sharp irony that "he had impeccable timing; four years later he would have likely been 'unmasked' as the crypto-Jew Adolf Langer and expelled from Poland as a 'fifth column' Zionist" (p. 228).

Particularly moving is Bartov's shift later in the book to the story of his own family's migration from Galicia to Palestine, recounted through the voice of his mother. You can almost hear the rhythmic chopping of carrots by his mother as she recounts her growing up in Europe, the soft click of the tape recorder capturing every word, and the distant sounds of the author's children playing in the background. This moment adds a rich, sensory layer to the historical account.

In *Tales from the Borderlands*, Bartov strikes a masterful balance between the scholarly and the personal, delivering a multifaceted exploration of a region marked by both hope and violence. It is a tale of how the past is remembered and imagined, offering "a fragment of memory, transmitted from one generation to the next, of those long centuries lived, for better or for worse, in that *ek velt*, that corner of the world, like the fading echoes of a lost yet never entirely forgotten childhood" (p. 328).

Hana Kubátová, Charles University, Prague

How to quote this article:

Hana Kubátová, review of *Tales from the Borderlands: Making and Unmaking the Galician Past*, by Omer Bartov, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15744