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Jews in Post-War Wrocław and L'viv

Official Policies and Local Responses in Comparative Perspective, 1945-1970s

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Izabela Kazejak

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Introduction

This study examines the attempt to re-establish Jewish communities in two cities that once boasted a substantial Jewish presence, a presence that was utterly destroyed by the Holocaust. The postwar reestablishment of the communities took place in Wrocław, a city that passed after 1945 from Germany to Poland, and in L'viv, a city that passed from Poland to Soviet Ukraine. The process of reestablishment of Jewish life in these two cities was thus overseen by two different communist regimes, and a large part of this investigation is concerned to compare the similarities and differences in the policies of the two regimes. In the end, the attempt to reestablish Jewish life in the two cities largely failed and my study seeks to explain why the effort to create communities that were self-identified as Jewish yet loyal to the communist state did not succeed.

The first chapter looks at the prewar history and wartime destruction of the Jewish communities in Breslau in Germany (or Wrocław, as it became after 1945) and in Lwów in Poland (which was incorporated as L'vov/L'viv into Soviet Ukraine after 1945). The study then goes on to trace the efforts of the postwar regimes, supported by those Jews who had survived the Holocaust and who chose not to leave Eastern Europe, to reconstitute Jewish life. It examines the history of these communities up to 1968 in the case of Wrocław and up to the 1970s in the case of L'viv. Chapter 2 compares how after 1945 Jewish communities were reestablished in two cities that had as a result of the war been moved into new polities, both of which were or soon became in the hands of Communists. There were similar processes of emigration, resettlement and an increase in Zionism in both cities. Chapters 3 and 4 go on to compare the policies of the two regimes that notionally repudiated antisemitism at the municipal level. Analysis of the impact of policy in two cities allows us better to understand how policies on such matters as work, housing, education influenced the attempt to restore Jewish life. The work compares how Jews sought to rebuild their communities but also why they were unable to develop vibrant Jewish communities in both cities, the causes of which lay not only in the

policy of the state, but also in the memory and experience of the Holocaust, which manifested itself in political Zionism and emigration, as well as in popular antisemitism. The study concludes by attempting to assess the relative importance of factors such as the small size of the Jewish population, of official policies that were never supportive of Jews and sometimes outright discriminatory, of popular antisemitism, and of the processes of assimilation in determining the relative success of the communities in the two cities. The main research questions thus relate to how similar or different the policy was towards Jews in the Soviet Union and in Poland after 1944 and how it was articulated in the respective cases of the Jewish communities in Wrocław and in L'viv. Secondly, the study asks, how did policy change over time (if at all)? What were the factors that led to the failure to re-establish a vibrant Jewish community in the two cities? What were the factors that led to Jews, by and large, conforming to the values, norms and languages of the surrounding majority. Thirdly, it examines the stereotype of Poles and Ukrainians as antisemites.

In this investigation the micro- and macro-level approaches has very important. This is because I concentrated on state policies and did not confine myself to the policies of the cities. It was important to explain the overall policies of the state and how these policies were implemented in the small scale of two cities. Additionally, because Ukraine was a Soviet republic, the context of the Soviet Union was highly significant in the Ukrainian case. This is due to the fact that the Ukrainian state was not able to introduce its own independent policies towards Jews. The contexts were thus different in the two cases. In the Polish case the context is that of Polish socialism, while in the L'viv context what matters is the Soviet policies towards Jews and their local implementation in Ukrainian cities.

The comparison of the two Jewish communities is explored in relation to five inter- related contexts. The primary context is that of the official policies towards Jews of the government of the Polish People's Republic (this was its official name only from 1952) and of the government of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 examine the aims and effects of these official policies

in some detail, highlighting the many similarities in the policies between the two regimes—similarities that arose not least because Poland, especially in the late-Stalinist era, was required to submit to economic, political and social policies handed down from Moscow. At the most general level the analysis of official policy is concerned to understand the tensions between the desire of the two regimes to integrate Jews as equal members of socialist society and their recognition of some elements of Jewish difference, whether that difference was understood in terms of religion or ethnicity. Soviet Jews, while never having the extensive territorial autonomy awarded to some other national groups, were, for better or worse, recognized as an official nationality. One's Jewishness was a dimension of one's Soviet citizenship in a way that was never true in Poland, where Jews were simply citizens of Poland. Nationality was a key element in individual status in the Soviet Union, recorded in one's internal passport (which was introduced in 1932) and recorded in all official transactions. One's nationality derived from one's parents' nationality, not from one's place of residence, language or subjective identification. There was no possibility of changing one's nationality, except for children of mixed-nationality marriages, who at the age of 16 had to choose one of their parents' nationalities. In some contexts, notably admission to higher education and application for certain types of employment, legal nationality significantly shaped one's life chances, both negatively (especially for Jews) and positively for titular nationalities in non-Russian republics who benefitted from tacit affirmative action. Incidentally, since mixed marriages were common among Jews, this reclassification strategy contributed substantially to the apparently dramatic shrinkage of the Jewish population of the USSR from 2,2m in 1959 to 1,4m in 1989. In Ukraine, according to the 1979 census, only 10.3 percent of children born to a Jewish father and a Russian mother and 9.1 percent of children born to a Jewish father and a Ukrainian mother opted to become Jewish (although even this was higher than in the Russian Federation).[1] As we shall see, then, there

1 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), http://jwa.org/en

were important differences as well as many similarities in the official policies towards Jews of the two regimes. The focus on official policy requires that we explore how the two regimes viewed the decimated Jewish populations in the two cities after 1945, and how these perceptions shaped policy on the vital matter of emigration, since following the destruction of the war hundreds of thousands of Jews desired only to leave the territory on which the Holocaust had been taken place. The majority of the 270,000 Holocaust survivors registered in Poland, for example, decided to emigrate, so that by 1955 only 75,000 to 80,000 Jews remained in the country. The second context of our enquiry is directly related to the first and concerns how central policies were implemented at the local level of the two cities. Chapter 2 examines official efforts at repatriation and resettlement of Jews in Wrocław and L'viv, while chapters 3 and 4 compare how the local administrations responded to Jewish claims for recognition of cultural and religious rights in areas such as education, language use and the practice of religion. I try throughout to highlight the fact that the Jewish community was not homogeneous, and that there were important divisions between religious and non-religious Jews, between communist, socialist and Zionist Jews, between Jews who were Polonized or Ukrainized and those who were formed in the shtetl.

It is at this point that the contexts relating to official policy and its local implementation intersect with a third context, specifically one that which relates less to communist ideology and policy and more to the particular national contexts of Poland and Soviet Ukraine. As a result of the war, Poland became essentially a mono-ethnic and mono-religious state, whereas the Soviet Union (of which Soviet Ukraine formed a part) remained a multi-ethic and multi-religious state. In Poland, the communist regime was forced to come to terms with a strong Polish nationalism and with a hegemonic Catholic Church, and this had indirect effects on the Jewish population that were not a direct consequence of official policy. Meanwhile in Ukraine, the incorporation of Galicia, which had historically been a bastion of Ukrainian nationalism since the last years

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cyclopedia/article/demography-soviet-union-russian-federation-and-other-successor-states (accessed 5 February 2012).

of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, strengthened the Ukrainian nationalism that had been gathering pace in Soviet Ukraine since the 1920s. Ukrainian nationalism, combined with the vigorous efforts of the Orthodox Church to assert its dominance in the newly incorporated territories, were factors that had an indirect effect on the policies of the Soviet Ukrainian government towards Jews. As this suggests, despite the massive rupture of the Holocaust and the political revolution that transpired in Poland, both regimes had to contend with the legacies of history (thus the importance of chapter 1). This was nowhere more evident than in respect of the traditions of antisemitism that intersected more or less powerfully with Polish and Ukrainian nationalism.

The fourth context of our enquiry, therefore, explores both popular and official antisemitism and how this shaped the fate of the postwar Jewish communities in Wrocław and L′viv. Both Poland and Ukraine had grim histories of ingrained discrimination and periodic violence against Jews, although the extent and nature of antisemitism is a question that needs to be investigated rather than simply assumed. There is much in this traditional antisemitism that may be characterized as 'anti-modern', with Jews being seen as the cause of the social, political, religious and cultural problems caused by modernity. [2] At the same time, as the Nazis showed only too clearly, antisemitism could be articulated in highly modern terms, and in the case of the two communist regimes it was at various times coupled with 'anti-cosmopolitism', hostility to 'bourgeois' intellectuals, 'anti-speculation' campaigns, anti-religious campaigns and, above all, following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, anti-Zionism. Particularly shocking, in view of their purported rejection of any form of racial and ethnic discrimination, was the way in which the two communist regimes in the postwar era succumbed to antisemitism—often under the banner of anti-Zionism. Presiding over Slav populations that had suffered massively during the Second World War, neither the Soviet Ukrainian nor the Polish communist regimes was willing to recognise the specific suffering of their Jewish citizens in the Holocaust. But much worse was the way in which in the late 1940s the Soviet government

2 Werner Bergman, *Geschichte des Antisemitismus* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2004), 6.

for the first time engaged in anti-Jewish repression and rhetoric, since in the years prior to the Stalinist terror the Soviet Union had stood out among the interwar regimes of Eastern Europe for its progressive policy towards Jewish self-expression. Ironically, this was an important reason why Jews in Poland joined the Communist Party in significant numbers both before and after the war. Jews who were active Communists were always a small minority among Jews in both Poland and Soviet Ukraine, yet in both countries Jews in general—i.e. that small handful that had miraculously survived the Holocaust—tended to attribute their survival, at least in part, to the Soviet Red Army. We do not have precise figures on the number of Jews in the United Polish Workers' Party, but relative to their number in the population as a whole they were numerous. Jews in the Polish Workers' Party were especially prominent in the Ministry of Foreign Trade, in the Ministry of Public Security and in Military Counterintelligence. These Jews were largely spared the antisemitism unleashed in the Soviet Union (and in Czechoslovakia) in Stalin's final years (although Jewish officers in the Polish army, purged by Soviet officers in 1950 to 1953, were not so lucky). Moreover, in contrast to the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the Soviet Union, antisemitism in the Polish Workers' Party remained covert until 1956, when the general crisis of the communist regime led to a new wave of Jewish emigration; even then, however, antisemitism did not come to dominate official policy towards Jews until 1968.

The fifth and final context in which we place our comparison of the development of the Jewish communities in Wrocław and L'viv is that of the economic and social modernization that the communist regimes carried out. One of the questions posed is how far the failure of Jewish communities to reestablish themselves as strong vibrant communities in the postwar era had less to do with official policies or with official and popular antisemitism, and more to do with the indirect effects of economic and social processes that led to the assimilation of Jews into the wider society, whether these were Jews 'of the street', i.e. who hailed from traditional, religious, Yiddish-speaking areas, or those who were already more urbanized and Polonized or Russified on the eve of the Second World War.

What is clear is that the majority of Jews in the postwar era lost contact with the religious, cultural and linguistic traditions that were the taproot of Jewish identity, as urbanization, industrialization, education and intermarriage with the dominant populations got underway. In Poland, for instance, from the late 1940s, many Jews took on Christian names and surnames that sounded more Polish.[3]

The aim, so far as sources allow (and they are inevitably uneven for the two cities) is to explore the experience of Jews in Wrocław and L'viv in relation to these five different contexts shaped. By choosing to compare two cities, I hoped to go beyond macro-level generalizations and to explore how Jewish communities re-established themselves at local level after 1945—from scratch in the case of Wrocław—and also why these communities failed to grow. The two cities had substantial and vibrant Jewish communities prior to 1945, but these were completely decimated in the course of the Nazi occupation. Both briefly experienced an influx of Jews as a result of the forced migrations that took place following the end of the war. From the mid-1950s the Jewish community in Wrocław became the largest of any in Poland—it overtook Łódź at this time—yet it was a community in steady decline, its size falling from 17,747 in 1946 to 3,800 in 1960 (these figures are on the conservative side) or from 9.8 percent of the population to 0.9 percent of the city's population.[4] The Jewish community in L'viv was altogether larger, numbering 25,800 in 1959 and falling slightly to 24,362 in 1970, or from 6.3 percent of the city population (which stood at 410,678 in 1959) to 4.4 percent of the population (which stood at 553,452 in 1979). In 1931 Jews had comprised 24.1 percent of the population of Lwów; in 1989 they comprised just 1.6 percent.[5]

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3 Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, "Polen als Heimat von Juden: Strategien des Heimischwerdens von Juden im Nachkriegspolen 1944-1949," *Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust* 2 (1997): 92.

4 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/WrocpercentC5percent82aw (last accessed 4 February 2012)

5 http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/percentD0percent9BpercentD1percent8Cpercent D0percentB2percentD0percentBEpercentD0percentB2 (last accessed 4 February 2012).

1. The historical background

The chapter offers an overview of the history of Jews in Poland and Ukraine in the interwar years, with particular reference to Breslau and Lwów (L'viv), with a view to providing a benchmark against which the experience of Jews in communist Wrocław and L'viv can be judged. It examines the demography, social profile and political status of these Jews and seeks to trace their changing fortunes over time, particularly by focusing on the extent and nature of antisemitism in the two regions. The first part of the chapter traces the history of Jews in the German territories through to the 1930s, concentrating on Breslau. The second part looks at the life of Jews under the Second Polish Republic, again with a view to providing a point of contrast for the discussion of Jewish life in Lwów after it was incorporated into socialist Ukraine.

1. Jews in Breslau

Between 1800 and 1933, the Jews in Breslau constituted the third largest Jewish community in Germany, after Berlin and Hamburg, at a time when the city was the seventh largest in the Reich.[6] Jews overall made up only 0.95 percent of the Reich population and were concentrated mainly in large cities, although there were those who lived in rural areas and small towns.[7] In 1910 Breslau had a population of 512,000 and a Jewish population of 20,200[8]; Protestants made up 60 percent of the citizens of the city, a further 35 percent were Roman Catholics, and 5 percent were Jewish.[9] Up to 1914 Jews and non-Jews had close contact and interaction in Breslau and it

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6 Till van Rahden, *Juden und andere Breslauer: die Beziehungen zwischen Juden, Protestanten und Katholiken in einer deutschen Großstadt von 1860 bis 1925* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 32.

7 Peter Pulzer, *Jews and the German State: The Political History of a Minority 1848-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 138

8 Martina Steer, *Bertha Badt-Strauss: eine jüdische Publizistin* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005), 17.

9 Abraham Ascher, *A Community under Siege: The Jews of Breslau under Nazism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 31.

could be said that the Jews were closely integrated into the life of the city. In general Jews in Breslau belonged to the middle-class. A large number were lawyers, businessmen, and teachers. They also held positions in academia, making a major contribution to building the excellent reputation of the universities in Breslau, and were active in the cultural life of the city, for example in the opera and theater. They owned department stores and were active in commerce. Their children mostly attended the best schools in the city.[10] German Jews were thus better integrated into German society than Jews in any other country, some even being German nationalists.[11] German Jews in Breslau were indistinguishable from the rest of the German inhabitants of the city. They spoke German, dressed like the Germans and identified themselves fully with the Germans. They also showed patriotism during the First World War. Nevertheless there was still a kind of barrier between Jews and non-Jews. Jews faced obstacles in achieving positions in the civil service, the army or higher education, and their social relations with Gentiles might be called close but not intimate. The Jews of Breslau were not full 'insiders', but nor were they 'outsiders'.[12]

Defeat in the First World War and the political crisis that ensued caused a deterioration in relations between Jews and non-Jews. Between 1916 and 1923 there were antisemitic campaigns in the city that saw Jews excluded from teaching positions, medical associations, and the boy scouts. By 1919 antisemitic agitation on posters started to appear. In 1920, at the time of the Kapp Putsch, when right-wingers tried to seize power, some Jewish students who removed antisemitic texts from walls were locked in a cellar and roughed up. Half a year later antisemites staged a pogrom: they demolished a Jewish department store and stormed a hotel in which Jews from East Central Europe were accommodated. Although the police arrived in time and an outbreak of violence was prevented, one Jewish student was murdered by a group of Nazis. Another

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10 Gregor Thum, *Die fremde Stadt: Breslau 1945* (Berlin: Siedler, 2003), 17.

11 Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24.

12 Ascher, *A Community under Siege,* 20-21.