

The assimilation of Jews in interwar Poland

# Between Worlds

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**Interwar Poland was a multinational state inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, and Jews. But Poland was also inhabited by people not reflected in any statistics, about which little is in fact known: the assimilated Jews**

While the Jewish assimilation movement of the 19th century did not end in complete success – assimilated Jews did not in fact simply become Poles, and were not absorbed into Polish society – it did lead to a situation in which Jews who wanted to modernize and to assimilate formed their own community and could become Poles by interacting mainly with such circles of assimilated Jews.

During the time of Poland's partition, assimilation was both easier and more difficult. Although Jews were then a closed society, reluctant to open up to new trends or secular lifestyles, assimilation was on the other hand rendered easier by the fact that there was no Polish state. Both Poles and Jews were then national minorities and therefore "playing on the same side." Assimilation into the culture of the Polish nation, which was not then in power, could thus not be explained as opportunism. Poland's regaining of its independence, however, called into question the "disinterestedness" of assimilation, as it opened the doors to professional success in the reborn Polish state.

## Polish or Jewish?

The numbers of assimilated Jews in interwar Poland are impossible to ascertain, as a consequence of both the imprecise notion of "assimilation" and a lack of research on the topic. In the census of 1921, 25.5% of individuals professing the Jewish faith declared

themselves to be of Polish nationality. Such figures do not seem fully credible, however, as many individuals were not aware of the possibility of declaring Jewish nationality, while others declared Polish nationality in support of Poland's statehood. The census of 1931, in turn, did not ask about nationality, and data can only be derived from questions about religion and language.

Another problem is posed by individuals of Jewish descent who became baptized or who came from families that converted long ago – such individuals are not reflected by any statistics.

Moreover, it is not entirely clear what we mean when discussing assimilation: who meets the criteria for an "assimilating" or an "assimilated" Jew, and who should simply be considered already Polish? The question arises of whether we can really speak of "assimilated Jews" as a distinct group at all. After all, assimilated Czechs, Germans, or Ukrainians are simply considered Poles. Having ancestors of such nationality does not detract at all from an individual's "Polishness," and they are considered to be simply Polish, rather than "Czech-Polish," "German-Polish," or "Ukrainian-Polish."

And so, any discussion of the assimilated Jewish community in interwar Poland must necessarily be a simplification, glossing over the individual stories and specific situations of each assimilating family or individual.

## Assimilation and religion

There are, however, certain common factors characterizing many assimilated Jews. First of all – religion. While it was possible to be a Pole of the Jewish faith, one could not be an orthodox Jew and be considered Polish at the same time. Assimilation did not have to entail breaking with Judaism entirely or becoming baptized, yet for example one could not reconcile strict observance of the Sabbath with gaining an education (schools and universities held classes on Saturdays), or adherence to kosher cuisine with social interactions with



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Poles. Usually the more assimilated a family became, the less they observed religious practices. They limited themselves to practicing a few aspects, more social conventions than religious ones, sometimes only those necessary to meet formal requirements. For instance, Jewish communities would refuse to register uncircumcised boys. That posed a problem for assimilated, nonreligious families, who did not want the rite of circumcision because they did not want their sons to be distinct from Polish boys, among other reasons. But family pressure and administrative obstacles were difficult to overcome. That is why in time such families would eagerly greet the birth of a daughter, as they did not have to make an immediate decision as to whether she would be raised as a Polish or Jewish girl. These families sometimes celebrated the bar mitzvah rite, yet more rarely attended the synagogue (only on the major holidays) or held burials, since Jews could only be buried at a Jewish cemetery.

What truly distinguished the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia from Poles was their attitude towards religion. While the Polish intelligentsia could be simultaneously educated and religious, the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia could not. The latter situation occurred only rarely, sparking controversy and a certain dislike among other assimilating intellectual families.

Religiousness waned from one generation of assimilators to the next. Usually the grand-

parents were believers, the parents observed certain rules of the faith (often only to satisfy the grandparents), while the children already had only negligible awareness of the religion. Often they were just familiar with certain customs and holiday traditions, without attaching much significance to them. Sometimes, an assimilated unreligious family would have certain fervently faithful individuals among their closest relatives, most often the grandparents. At times, this even led to the two sides severing all contacts whatsoever. An assimilated family would not wish to advertise that there were traditionally-clad, religious Jews among their numbers, while orthodox Jews sometimes disowned their own "godless" children. If such a break did not occur and parents remained on good terms with grandparents, the former would sometimes yield on certain issues - i.e. celebrating holidays, teaching their children basic Hebrew, and holding bar mitzvahs for their sons - yet would abandon religious practices after the grandparents' deaths.

Families of assimilated Jews, especially intellectual ones, did not differ much from Polish families, at least in their day-to-day lives. These were generally small families with few children - unlike the traditional large Jewish family.

### Social contacts

Judging by their surviving memoirs, assimilated Jews - especially the intelligentsia

**Even assimilated Jews in Poland would take their marriage vows under the chuppah - a canopy extended over the bride and groom**

## The assimilation of Jews in interwar Poland

Picture of the second-grade class at the General School in Warsaw, at Hoża 13, attended by the children of assimilated Jews, in 1938



Jewish Historical Institute

- maintained weaker contacts with their more distant relatives than the Polish intelligentsia did. There were three reasons for this: religion, language, and an aversion to traditional Jewish society, seen as backward. The greatest obstacle arose when a household did not observe kosher rules: orthodox Jews would refuse to enter into a "tref" household that would put pork on the table and a Christmas tree up at Christmas. On the other hand, assimilated housewives had no intention of adhering to all the complex rituals of orthodox cuisine only just so that grandparents, uncles, or aunts could pay visits.

As a consequence, visits by such extended family members became rare or nonexistent - which of course led to looser family ties. Grandparents did not always want to keep in contact with grandchildren given non-religious upbringing. Another barrier here, sometimes insurmountable, was language. Assimilated households spoke Polish, and children usually did not even understand Yiddish. Their grandparents, in turn, did not speak Polish, further complicating contacts even given the best of intentions.

Obviously, one of the main prerequisites for assimilation was excellent knowledge of the Polish language. It would be an excessive simplification, however, to just equate assimilation with knowledge of or even the sole use of Polish. Although all assimilated Jews spoke Polish, not all of those who spoke only Polish can be seen as assimilated. Many Polish speakers remained religious individu-

als, rooted in the Jewish tradition and Jewish national consciousness.

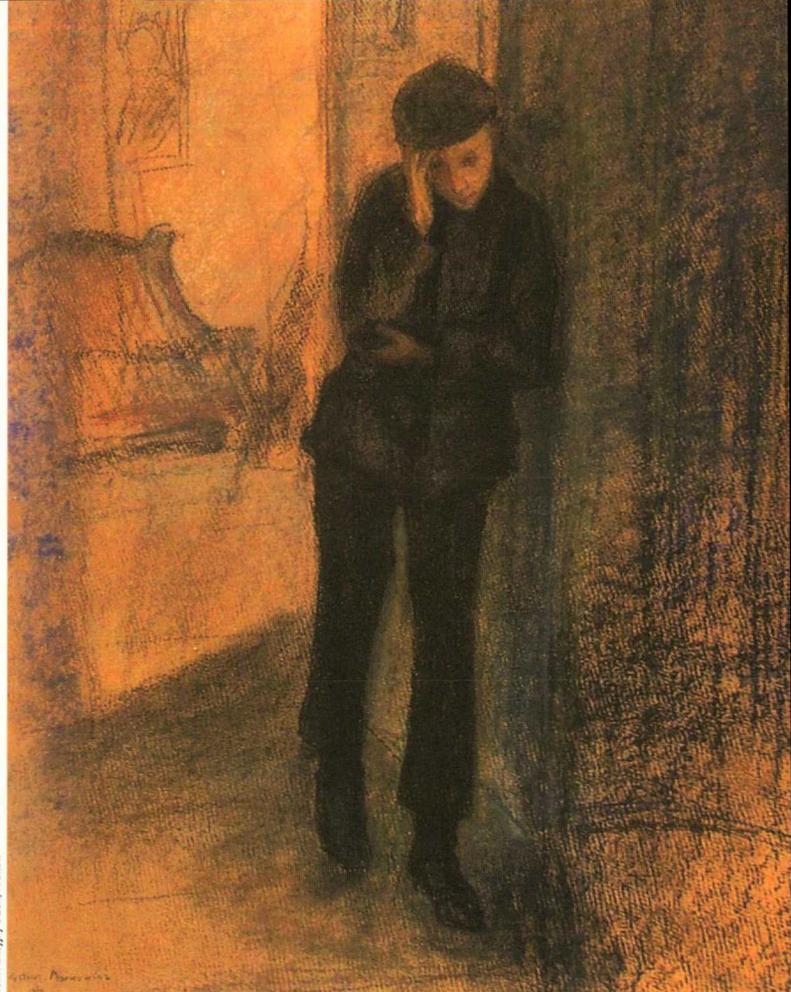
Even many assimilated Jews used more than one language - making use of two, or sometimes even three or more. The use of both Polish and Yiddish was characteristic of non-intelligentsia families on the path towards assimilation, but generally did not occur in completely assimilated homes. For many individuals, it was the exclusive use of Polish by an entire family, including the eldest generation, that offered the best criterion of assimilation. In intellectual circles, on the other hand, Yiddish was not used at all and was described scornfully as a "jargon." Pure, unaccented Polish, free of typical Yiddish influence, was highly prized. Great efforts were taken to eliminate any Yiddish accent from Polish speech, punishing children harshly for any linguistic errors.

One of the most interesting issues of assimilation is what kind of social relations were maintained with individuals from the Polish or Jewish communities. The choices made here by assimilated individuals, or individuals in the process of assimilating, can attest to which community they felt most comfortable or "at home" in. That offers an indication of which society they aspired to be part of, of who they were or who they wanted to become. Of course, one has to recall that this choice was not entirely free. Assimilated Jews could only mingle in circles, both Polish and Jewish, which were ready to accept people of blurred national identity.

### “Not one of us” – the 1930s

Yet even almost complete assimilation did not have to automatically entail forging links to Polish society at large. It may seem surprising to note that many children, even from the homes of assimilated families where only Polish was spoken, did not have any opportunities to meet with Poles at all. Young people and adults encountered Poles at work, in school, in shops – but children raised at home frequently did not have any interaction with the Polish society in whose midst they lived. In the interwar period, the older the assimilated individual, the greater the likelihood of their having forged closer contacts and friendships with Poles. Such contacts were the worst among individuals who reached adulthood in the 1930s – a decade which marked a turning point. Less and less intermingling of communities occurred and old friendships were often broken off. Sometimes this was a consequence of an unfriendly attitude on the part of Poles, yet it sometimes resulted from the Jews’ own desire, conscious or unconscious, to abandon social circles where they were “unwelcome” or perceived themselves to be. Differences in nationality became increasingly observed and could not longer be waved aside. This period also saw the emergence of a growing phenomenon whereby contacts were restricted by anti-Jewish edicts, imposed from above.

Although Polish society did not fully become home for all assimilated Jews, for most of them Jewish society had already ceased to be “their own.” Assimilation entailed a decision not only to grow closer to Polish society, but also to break with Jewish society. In many assimilated families no one cultivated religious traditions or wore traditional clothing. For many children, meeting a traditional Jew came as a shock. For Polish children it was clear that *Hassidim* were foreign to them, so the degree to which they differed from their own family and experience was no surprise. Children from assimilated families, on the other hand, reacted with a harsh glance when told that these strangely-dressed people, speaking an incomprehensible language, were of the same nationality and religion as their own. Some families consciously isolated their children from their Jewish peers. There could be vari-



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ous causes for this – from a desire to stress their own Polishness to a fear that Jews posed a danger to their children’s education and pure language. In certain cases, dislike for traditional Jews turned imperceptibly into a certain form of anti-Semitism.

Who did assimilated Jews feel themselves to be? Not many individuals, among either Poles or Jews, accepted the notion of dual nationality – especially in the 1930s, a period of mounting nationalisms. The sense that one could simply be Polish despite having a different religion was rare and only appeared when anti-Semitism was not manifest within a certain social circle. On the other hand, assimilated Jews’ sense of connection to the Polish nation was significantly stronger than to the Jewish nation. This situation was aptly summed up by Richard Pipes: assimilated Jews, “such as we were,” lived outside of traditional communities, “in an in-between world, but I must say that I felt more in common with educated Poles than with Orthodox Jews.” ■

**Most assimilated Jews ceased to see Jewish society with its traditional religion and customs as “their own.”**

**Here: pastel by Artur Markowicz (1872–1934), entitled “Wrapped in Thought”**

#### Further reading:

- Landau-Czajka A. (2006). *My Son Will Be ‘Lech’... Assimilation of Jews in the Interwar Period* [in Polish]. Warsaw: Neriton.
- Pipes R. (2003). *Vixi – Memoirs of a Non-Belonger*. Yale University Press.