A PICTURE OF JEWISH LIFE IN EUROPE BEFORE WWII

ECHOES & REFLECTIONS
TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

Before World War II, about 9.5 million Jews lived across Europe, from Scandinavia to Greece, as well as in the Russian Empire, the Middle East, and North Africa. They had lived in certain lands for hundreds of years; in others, for nearly two thousand. The Jewish world was diverse, with different languages and cultures.

A TIME OF CHALLENGES

The turn of the 20th century was a dynamic period in the life of the Jewish people. For the first time in history, Jews had equal rights in every country in Europe and the opportunity to join the modern world. But this required them to make choices about their identities. Should they integrate into local society, sacrificing some or all of their culture and religious traditions? Should they give up on integration and immigrate to places full of economic promise, like the United States, or establish their own homeland in British Mandatory Palestine (the region that encompasses what is today Israel), reviving the ancient Hebrew language? Or should they remain in Europe but develop their own separate culture in languages like Yiddish or Ladino? The Jewish future was hotly debated in the Jewish press, in a rainbow of political parties and youth movements, and within families.

MODERNIZATION

Most Jews lived in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the century, with over 8.5 million living in the vast territory that includes areas we refer to today as Poland and Russia. A large percentage still lived in small market towns called *shtetls*, where modernization was often slow in coming and Jewish life often had not changed much for centuries. Life was ordered by Sabbaths and holidays, and by religious traditions and institutions. Yiddish was the most widely-spoken language of daily life, which created solidarity but also separated the Jews from their neighbors in many ways. *Shtetls* were vibrant centers of Jewish spirituality, despite often grinding poverty. Prohibited for centuries from farming, most Jews were tailors, shoemakers, watchmakers, and artisans, who worked in family businesses or in small workshops.

Others were merchants or peddlers carrying goods to sell from place to place in a pack on their backs. As new ideas penetrated the *shtetls*, Jews began to take advantage of educational opportunities, becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers and writers, as they were doing in the cities.

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, there was a mass exodus from the *shtetls* and a move to the big cities to take advantage of new opportunities. By the 20th century Jews were the most urbanized people in Europe. Many of the cities they moved to – Warsaw, Vilna, Paris, Vienna, Berlin – became cultural and intellectual centers.

In Western and Central Europe, where there were fewer Jews, there was more integration. Jews adopted the culture and language of the societies they lived in, many moving away from the Yiddish language and religious

Two unidentified boys working the wheel of the town pump, Otwock, Poland
SOURCE: 2014 YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

traditions; some completely assimilating into the local culture.

Throughout Europe during the early 1900s, from east to west, the contribution of Jews to culture reached new heights. In Paris, Amedeo Modigliani, Marc Chagall, and Marcel Proust created masterpieces of art and literature. In Vienna, Sigmund Freud changed the face of psychiatry. In Prague, Franz Kafka wrote classics.

Jews made inroads in positions that had previously been closed to them, such as public service and government. Italian, German, French, and Polish Jews became mayors and ministers. Italy and France even had Jewish Prime Ministers.

There was a flowering of the arts in cultural capitals like Warsaw, Poland, which had the largest Jewish community in Europe. Yiddish press, literature and theater flourished. For instance, more than half a million people visited the Jewish theater in Warsaw in 1935, where classical Yiddish plays were presented alongside works by William Shakespeare and Molière, all in Yiddish.

Siblings Welwel and Hershel Ilewicki riding a bicycle, Baranowice, Poland
SOURCE: Yad Vashem Archives 9169/13

Jewish youth movements thrived in these years. They were a mirror of the debate about the Jewish future and the competing ideas of tradition, integration, or Zionism, the movement for a Jewish independent state in what today is Israel. The one thing they agreed on was criticism of the older generation. They created a "youth culture" transmitted by peers, which often replaced their parents' values.

Education changed as well, also reflecting this debate. In many places, religious boys still began to study the Torah (first five books of the Bible) at the age of three as they had done for centuries. But now competing school systems developed. Some encouraged integration, teaching in French, Polish, German, or whatever the local language happened to be. Others promoted Zionism, teaching Hebrew. Girls began to be educated in movements like Beys Yaakov, an Orthodox Jewish educational movement for girls and young women. More and more Jews also attended public, non-Jewish schools, and their numbers grew among university students.

By the 1920s, more than ever before, Jews were part of the fabric of society. Jewish Nobel prize winners included Paul Ehrlich, inventor of chemotherapy, and Albert Einstein, author of the theory of relativity. Jews were more visible, going to coffeehouses and sporting events, wearing the latest styles, attending the opera and the cinema.

Perhaps this increased visibility led to resentment, for at the same time as this progress was being made, antisemitism was spreading and intensifying, with accusations that the Jews were trying to take over Europe.

RISING ANTISEMITISM AND NATIONALISM

As the new century dawned, pogroms (organized violent riots) swept through Russia, leaving thousands of Jews dead in hundreds of towns and villages. In an infamous antisemitic incident in France, a Jewish military officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was falsely accused and convicted of treason in 1894. Most of the evidence against him was forged, and as his trial progressed, it became obvious that he had been targeted because he was a Jew. It took 12 years until he was declared innocent. The "Dreyfus Affair" proved to many that no matter how integrated Jews became in society, they were still subject to intolerance and persecution.

The trauma of World War I increased anti-Jewish feeling. In the wake of Germany's unexpected and humiliating defeat in 1918, Jews became scapegoats and were unfairly blamed for society's problems. In pogroms and mass murders during wars and civil wars following WWI in Eastern Europe, some 100,000 Jews were killed or perished.

At the same time came rising nationalism, the idea that the majority population of a nation is united by a common language and shared culture, religion, and traditions. This belief promoted national unity. However, it also meant that minorities like the Jews, who did not share these defining elements, were excluded as outsiders.

In the interwar period in Poland, for example, inflamed nationalism led Jews to be called an "alien nation." Cries arose for their emigration. Violent anti-Jewish riots there increased steadily in number. The governments of Poland, Hungary, and Romania adopted policies to intentionally exclude Jews from their economies. These laws imposed new requirements for licensing of craftspeople and other workers, or required shops to close on Sundays, creating two days during which Jews were unable to work (since religious Jews could not work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath). Other laws limited higher education for Jews. As a result, many Jews fell into terrible poverty and could no longer support themselves.

JEWISH REACTIONS

Jews responded in different ways to the worsening conditions.

Many religious Jews continued to maintain their traditions and remain in their often insular communities, praying for better times and appealing to governmental authorities to protect them.

Other Jews gave up on Europe, seeing no hope and no future. In a massive wave of immigration, about 2.75 million Jews fled between the mid-1800s and 1914, most going to the United States. At the turn of the century, Warsaw was the world's largest Jewish community. By 1914 New York had surpassed Warsaw with one million Jews - over double the number in Warsaw. Among the immigrants to the U.S. were Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, film pioneers Louis B. Mayer and Samuel Goldwyn, and cosmetics giants Helena Rubinstein and Max Factor. Irving Berlin, originally from the Russian Empire, became a beloved American songwriter, who wrote "White Christmas." In the wake of World War I, however, America became isolationist, closing its doors to other countries and severely restricting immigration.

The poverty and distress of the working classes attracted many Jews to revolutionary ideas and groups that fought for the equal treatment of workers, such as socialism and Marxism.

Still others, disappointed that their integration led neither to the promised equality nor to acceptance, advanced the solution of a Jewish national homeland. This movement was known as "Zionism." As pogroms spread, Zionism became more popular. Youth movements fired up enthusiasm for this ideology among teenagers, as they trained their members for immigration to British Mandatory Palestine.

Members of the Socialist-Zionist youth group, Hashomer Hatzair, during the Jewish holiday, Lag ba'Omer, Wloclawek, Poland, 1937
SOURCE: Yad Vashem Archives 1592/1