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**Jewish Daily Life in Warsaw between the Two World Wars**

Abstract

In 1931, the Jews living in Warsaw numbered approximately 350,000, or about a third of the city's population. Warsaw had the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, and second largest worldwide, after New York.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet the importance of this Jewish center was not a matter of size alone: the interbellum Warsaw Jewry formed a thriving social, cultural and political center, characterized by its profound impact on world Jewry.

One of the aims of this book is clarification of issues concerning the Jews of Warsaw within the context of a comprehensive examination of the city and the daily life of all its inhabitants. This includes: cultural and economic activity, the nature of urban construction, and infrastructure, transportation and trade. In addition, this work illuminates an element that has received little attention in the historiography of the Jews of Warsaw – the daily life of the Jews of the city. At the same time, this work endeavors to restore the physical and human image of the Jewish neighborhood that was wiped off the face of the earth – its inhabitants, houses and streets.

It is particularly important to note the significance of the book in the context of the study of the life of Jews in Poland prior to the Holocaust, their complexity and cultural wealth. For the sake of historical memory, it is important to study and understand not only how the Jews of Europe were murdered but also how they actually lived their lives previous to that event.

Contrary to the commonly held stereotype of an eastern European Jewry that is mostly religious-Hassidic and resides in 'Shtetls' – the small provincial towns of eastern Europe - this book portrays the life of Jews in a large city – Poland’s capital. The book also highlights the richly varied nature of the secular Jewish public, which at the time formed a significant part of the Jewish public in Warsaw.

This book provides an overall, comprehensive depiction of daily life in the Warsaw Jewish street. What were the living conditions and how did they affect relations between the various neighborhoods and the sense of community? What role did the hundreds of trade, social, and religious organizations play in public life? What was the nature of relations between Jews and non-Jews? What did apartments, courtyards, workshops and stores looked like? What languages and music were heard throughout the Warsaw courtyards, streets and houses of prayer? What was family life like?

The book brings to light these and other aspects of the daily life of this prominent community, obliterated almost completely during the Holocaust. This book is based on detailed statistical data on the distribution and nature of the housing of the Jews in Warsaw in the context of the housing of all of Warsaw’s residents. The book also makes extensive use of qualitative sources: contemporary literature, fiction and non-fiction, diaries and memoires, as well academic literature from the period.

Using these sources, this book casts on a number of topicsrelating to this large and important pre-war center of Jewry that have received little attention to this date, notwithstanding the considerable research that has been done on this community. These issues involve:

- The social and societal implications of the geographic distribution of the Warsaw Jews' residential and business quarters.

- The impact of the city's urban structure, such as multi-storied apartment houses built around inner courtyards, on neighborly relations and community life.

- The impact of the extensive array of dozens of Jewish organizations, ranging from the professional, occupational and religious to the political and social, on the life of Warsaw's Jewish residents.

- The implications of the residential concentration of Warsaw's Jews next to the city's main commercial center on Polish-Jewish relations and on the daily life of the city's Jewish residents.

- The underworld, margins of society and criminality among Warsaw Jews.

**Target Audience**

Although the study on which the book is based is academic in nature the book is written so as to be accessible to the wider public, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in Israel and abroad. This book is intended for both historians and the general public. Therefore, it will probably be purchased by academic libraries around the world together with the scholarly community researching the subject. In addition, it should be of interest to descendants of people with Polish backgrounds and anyone interested in Holocaust studies and also the interested in the lives of national minorities within the majority population. It will also appeal to those interested not only in the history of inter-war Europe, particularly the lives of the Jewish community in Poland, but also those interested in urban development, demographics, and their interrelationships with social and communal organization.

**Other Work in the Field**

Despite the importance of the Jewish community in Warsaw in the inter-war period, little research has appeared in Hebrew on that center of Jewish life. Yitzhak Gruenbaum published a volume focusing on Warsaw Jewry in the context of “The Encyclopedia of the Diaspora” in 1953. In the 1990s, Alexander Guterman wrote a “A History of the Jews of Warsaw” and Alexander Guterman published his research on Warsaw’s Great Synagogue on the Jewish community in Warsaw in the inter-war period. Recently Benny Mer’s book, *Smocza: Biography of a Jewish Street in Warsaw* was published in Israel in 2018.

A larger number of comprehensive studies dedicated to the Jews of Warsaw have appeared in Polandk by J. Kasprzychi, *Zydzi Warszawy.* K. Morawski, and B. Singer-Regnis.A comprehensive study of Warsaw Jewry appeared in Poland in 1996, authored by G.Zalewska, with an in-depth analysis based on the population census that was carried out in Poland in 1921 and 1931. Other works in Polish have focused on the *numerus clausus* limitations imposed on Jewish students at the University of Warsaw, on the history of Nalewki Street and on Warsaw’s synagogues. Other works include J. Hen’s description of a Jewish neighborhood and J.Zielinski and J.Majewski 2014 a “Guide to Jewish Warsaw,” and J. Leociak’s 2017 “Biography of Jewish streets in Warsaw.”

In 2015, Gershon Bacon published an article in English whose focus was the Warsaw rabbinate in the inter-war period, which appeared in a *festschrift,* “Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis,” edited by Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet in honor of Antony Polonsky’s 75th birthday. This collection of essays also included an article by Kenneth B. Moss entitled “Negotiating Jewish Nationalism in Interwar Warsaw.”

We also find chapters devoted to the Jews of Warsaw and the Jewish neighborhoods in the city in many general publications, both those dealing with the whole of Polish Jewry and those dealing with the general population of Warsaw. For example, the geographical guide by Orlowicz (1922) that describes the city, includes a chapter on the Jewish neighborhoods. Other examples include: S.R.Dobrowolski-M.Berman’s *Bruki Warszawy* published in 1964, B.Poznanska’s 1993 book on the Warsaw bourgeoisie,M.Drozdowski’s books on inter-war Warsaw (1973, 1976, 1968, 1990), M. Barbasiewicz’s *Warszawa. Perła Północy* published in 2014, among others.

The scholarly literature written by Jewish academics has dealt with the internal politics of the Jewish street, the crystallization of Jewish nationalism, community institutions, the Jewish press and literature, the ultra-Orthodox currents operating in Warsaw, assimilation and acculturation, all of this concentrating almost exclusively on the Jewish aspect of these issues. Other works – almost all of them by Polish scholars – dealt with the Jews of Warsaw inter alia,while exploring the entire city. Ezra Mendelsohn and Antony Polonsky have noted that the historiography of Jewish Warsaw written by Jewish scholars was largely ethnocentric and ignored the Polish, non-Jewish context. However, none of these works has examined the details of the make-up and demographics of the city together with the daily life of the Jews.

**Materials**

Attached please find the book’s Table of Contents, excerpts from two of its chapters: one chapter based on demographic research, and the second chapter drawing the larger social and cultural conclusions based on this data.

1. At the time, nearly 2 million Jews resided in New York City, while the population of Palestine numbered only 175,000 Jews. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)