

Setting the Polish Jewish Framework

Presenter: Samuel D. Kassow

My task in this synthetic history of the Holocaust in Poland is threefold: to discuss Polish Jewry before the war; to describe what happened during the Polish-German war of September 1939; and finally to describe and analyze cultural life in the ghettos. In order to understand how Polish Jews reacted to the war and to the ensuing German occupation, one has to explore the regional, economic and cultural profile of Polish Jewry on the eve of the war. Despite deep regional differences, political infighting and striking cultural transformations, during the interwar years the diverse Jewish communities of central Poland, Galicia and Jewish Lithuania forged a new identity as Polish Jews. Forced to defend their rights, and to fight back against growing Polish pressure to eliminate their livelihoods and to force them to emigrate, Jews in Poland fought back on a number of levels: in the parliament, in local governments, in a wide array of self-help organizations, and through economic retraining and proletarianization. These in turn helped forge personal networks and economic options that, coupled with far flung self-help, helped many Jews survive in the early years of the war.

This emergence of an assertive Polish Jewish identity went hand in hand with what might seem, a first glance to be a paradox: the growing “acculturation” of Polish Jews, especially young people, even as hopes totally collapsed that Jews might assimilate and gain acceptance as “Poles of the Mosaic Persuasion.” On the one hand, for the first time ever, an entire generation of Jewish youth went to Polish schools, learned Polish, and came to admire Polish culture. On the other hand this same generation suffered constant reminders of their second class status in Polish society. This discordance again sparked responses: political radicalization, youth movements for instance-that again would have an important impact on Jewish life during the occupation, and especially on the growth of spiritual and armed resistance.

Finally, this first chapter will analyze why, in the months just before the war, and continuing into the September campaign and the early period of the German occupation, many Polish Jews found reason to hope that Polish Jewish relations had turned a corner and that Polish antisemitism, in the face of the common enemy, was abating. This made, as Havi Dreyfuss has shown in her own research, the subsequent disillusionment and bitterness at Polish behavior all the more hurtful.