

Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People. Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland*, Cambridge, Mass.-London: Harvard University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0-674-24510-5

Traditionally, the interwar period is referred to as the golden age of East European Jewish culture. During these two decades, Jews in certain states were granted cultural autonomy, Jewish parties could participate in state parliamentary elections and they became actively involved in politics at the municipal and government levels. Children had the opportunity to attend schools where the languages of instruction were Hebrew and/or Yiddish, and secular Jewish culture and academic pursuits in the Yiddish language flourished. Nonetheless, in recent decades there are ever more attempts to look at the history of interwar Polish Jews not just in terms of evaluating these positive changes, but by distancing ourselves from the post-Holocaust tradition of seeing the interwar period in an optimistic light and writing what could be called an unidealised history of this period. New studies try to take into account voices ‘from below’, that is, to analyse the moods of separate individuals or social groups regarding the future of Jews in the Diaspora and to reconsider attitudes to Jewish political movements and parties not based on texts of their ideologues or official party literature, but from broader perspectives present in Jewish society.

One such example is the monograph by Joshua Karlip where the author analysed the rise of the ideology of the Diaspora nationalism and its eventual fall through the biographies and works of three intellectuals who supported it. Karlip’s research revealed that this ideology ran out of steam before it could attract sufficient attention on the country-wide scale well before the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Another example could be the study by Kamil Kijek, which analyses the moods and world-views of the first generation of Jews to have grown up in independent Poland. In this research, the author relied on texts written in the interwar period submitted for the YIVO Institute’s autobiography

<sup>1</sup>J.M. Karlip, *The Tragedy of the Generation. The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

contests<sup>2</sup> and stated that the dominant world view among young people could be described as 'radical modernism', that is, the conviction that the world needed to be radically transformed.<sup>3</sup>

This collection of 'unidealised history' studies is supplemented by Kenneth B. Moss' book *An Unchosen People. Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland*. According to the author, the changes of the 1920s did bring greater stability to Poland and accelerated the assimilation of Jews in the country, yet at the same time many came to the conclusion that they could not expect a bright future in either Poland or Europe in general (p. 6). The author raises the hypothesis that this sense of hopelessness and the sense of being in danger that developed in the 1920s and 1930s transformed Poland's Jewish political culture to its core and in this book he presents what led to these changes, how they unfolded and how this transformed Jewish political thought.

Unlike earlier studies, Moss does not limit himself to either one political ideology or one age group and analyses how this 'golden age' was perceived by Jews of various political factions, different ages and social groups. This variety of different approaches is one of the book's strongest points, allowing the author to construct his research convincingly.

The book's chronology spans the years 1926 to 1935, a period deemed relatively more favourable to Jews under Józef Piłsudski's governance, often presented in historiography as a time when Jews' opportunities to become integrated into Polish society increased. In the geographic sense, Moss was right to choose his protagonists from various regions across the country. The discussion of regional differences reveals even more convincingly to the reader that the described sense of hopelessness was not an exception but rather the rule across the whole country. Quite a bit of attention here is given to Jews in Vilnius as well, making it a potentially valuable resource for Lithuanian scholars. One of the main intellectuals presented in the book is Max Weinreich, a linguist who wholeheartedly supported the Diasporist ideas and one of the leaders of the YIVO Institute. It also presents the ideas of another Vilnius Jew, Shmuel Lekerman, who supported the politically opposite Zionist camp. Moss analyses the observations made by Zionists from other regions and

<sup>2</sup> For more details about the YIVO autobiography contests, see: B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, M. Moseley, M. Stanislawski, 'Introduction', *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*, ed. J. Shandler (New Haven, CT, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> K. Kijek, *Dzieci Modernizmu: Świadomość kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Kraków-Budapeszt-Syrakuzy, 2020).

Zionists who travelled through these regions, such as the opinions of journalist Rachel (Rokhl) Faygenberg who lived in Palestine for several years, about the moods among young people that she noticed during her travels in Poland. There is also a review of the position of Yiddishists who worked with young people, plus their insights, for example, Gershn Urinsky's thoughts about how youths in Pruzhany were feeling.

The book is divided into chapters relating to certain themes. In the first chapter, the author seeks to demonstrate the extent to which doubts began to spread among Poland's Jews about ever becoming successfully established in this country and the all-pervasive sense of futurelessness. As Moss himself stresses, these doubts came about not just due to the Great Depression and the accompanying difficult economic conditions, but were also based on political fears and insights. Moss seeks to analyse the development of thought among Poland's Jews which was formed by their sociopolitical experiences – how did the image, formed by the surrounding national majority, that Jews were a problem that needed to be solved, and the sense of danger determined the formation of a certain kind of political reckoning among Jews (p. 46). The author presents the ever-worsening political climate for Jews in the country by using sources that illustrate the attitudes of Polish society towards Jews, that is, he reveals what the moods of that national majority were that ultimately forced Jews to rethink their situation and prospects for the future.

In the second chapter Moss analyses the changes in political thought among Poland's Jews and introduces a new phenomena in political thinking, which he calls 'politics of doubt'. During the period under analysis, boundaries between the previously functioning four main ideologies were erased: these were the traditionalists, the Yiddishists who largely supported Communist and Bundist political ideologies, the Zionists and those who supported assimilation. Moss states that Jews migrated between these movements, sometimes choosing completely opposing poles, or would participate in parallel in the activities of several political movements declaring opposing political ideologies (p. 100). The author presents how changes to Jewish political thought took place and describes the political reorientation that pervaded in various regions, social classes and ideologies in order to find an organisation that could suggest realistic solutions for securing a brighter future. This sense of hopelessness and search for a more hopeful future partly influenced a new wave in the popularisation of Zionism, which according to Moss, was influenced by the mood of exitism (p. 92). The author raises the

hypothesis that in the case of Zionism, push factors outweighed pull factors (p. 94), that is, the movement attracted more and more members who showed little interest in the ideology itself, had no desirable knowledge about the settlements being established in Palestine, did not know Hebrew and showed no intentions of learning this language. The main goal of these people was to receive the certificate that would allow them to emigrate. It should be noted that their main desire was not to reach Palestine, but rather, simply to leave Poland.

In the third chapter of the book, the author analyses the attitudes of the Diasporists (those who supported the idea that Jews could and should live in the countries of their birth) towards the ever-changing moods among Jews. Their new attitudes towards youth psychology are presented, their attempts to better understand the needs of the younger generation and to find ways how the Diaspora nationalists could inspire the youth to love the country where they lived and find support for this political ideology by using sociological and psychological youth research. In this chapter Moss also presents the considerations of the Diaspora nationalists about the Diaspora and life as a national minority, also about the strong and weak aspects of culture, which was one of the main cornerstones of the type of Jewishness backed by Diasporists.

Some of those who supported life in Diaspora idealistically did not want to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, yet even they saw that public moods were changing and searched for ways how to attract young people to join their ranks. They tried to create an equivalent of the Hehalutz Zionist youth organisation and use regional history societies to create the sensation that Poland was also home to the Jews that lived in this country. In this chapter, quite a bit of attention is given to Max Weinreich's youth research, which he conducted based on texts written for the YIVO youth autobiography contests.<sup>4</sup> Weinreich was forced to admit that young people's moods had changed and was worried that in their eyes Jewish self-awareness based on the richness of their culture had been replaced by the sense of helplessness (p. 137). In the opinion of Diaspora nationalists, one of the most important elements supporting Jewishness was to be culture and the Yiddish language, which is why in this chapter Moss embarks on an analysis of poetry, looking at how the changing moods were reflected in such texts. The interpretation of

<sup>4</sup>M. Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt. Yesoydes, metodn, problemem fun yidis-her yugn-forshung* (Vilne, 1935).

poetry is a rather complex genre, and may not have been necessary in this research.

Joshua Karlip, who analysed the rise and fall of Diaspora nationalism, drew attention to a few aspects that were not covered in Moss' book. Firstly, it should be mentioned that in presenting the thinking of Diaspora nationalists in the period under analysis, Moss paid a great deal of attention to changes in the world view of young people, whereas Karlip focused on the moods of intellectuals born in the late 19th century. Karlip noted that some Jewish intellectuals, having lost faith in this ideology, blamed emancipation and Haskalah for the weakening of collective bonds between Jews – phenomena that were considered as ended, yet in the view of some former Diaspora nationalists, still had an influence on the community's perceptions of the world. Karlip adds that some Diaspora nationalists, including Zelig Kalmanovich, who lived in Vilnius from 1928 to 1929 and thus was part of Moss' research field, offered the isolation of Jews or the idea of going 'back to the ghetto' as a solution to the worsening situation Jews were finding themselves in. That is, to concentrate in one territory where they could avoid assimilation and maintain their Jewish national identity.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth chapter of the book discusses the history of exceptions, or the ideas of several voices in the Jewish intelligentsia that proposed taking a different approach to the new reality surrounding Jews, to come to a better understanding of antisemitism and the nationalism of nation states. In this chapter, the author pays most attention to the years 1931 and 1932, that is, the period just before the Nazis came to power in Germany.

This chapter presents how the Jewish intelligentsia analysed the antisemitism of Poland's right-wing parties and how they raised the question of whether it was beginning to spread beyond the boundaries of the supporters of just one party or to the rest of society, and whether it was becoming a political standard. It was gradually noted that even though the Polish national democrats (Endecja) were not in power, their antisemitic views did have an influence on state policy. The Sanacja regime did not want to clearly express support for Jews or to reject laws unfavourable to Jews for fear of being considered a 'pro-Jewish' party (p. 160). The obviously growing anti-Jewish moods forced the Jewish intellectuals and thinkers discussed in this chapter to consider how nationalism and antisemitism were related and to raise

<sup>5</sup>J. M. Karlip, *The Tragedy of the Generation. The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 176–234.

the question of how much time Jews still had to take action so as to change the situation.

In the fifth chapter, Moss presents a phenomenon he calls the culture of 'skepticism, inquiry and judgement'. This was the formation of a postideological Jewish political culture, during which the tradition of unconditional loyalty to a single political ideology weakened and was gradually replaced by skepticism towards ideologies and inquiry into finding a political force that could solve Jews' problems in the quickest and most effective way, and offer the chance of creating a better future for themselves (p. 197).

This chapter focuses largely on the texts written by a young male, Binyomen R., from Bielsk. He was one of those who had sent their biographies to the YIVO youth autobiography contest. Besides analysing this autobiography, in the book the author also adds Binyomen R.'s critical response to Weinreich's book on youth research.<sup>6</sup> With this example, Moss illustratively reveals the differences between the views of Weinreich's and Binyomen R.'s generations regarding political ideologies and young people's relationship to them. In this and other examples, Moss demonstrates that the Jewish youth was no longer determined to blindly serve one ideology. In searching for avenues of recourse from a bad situation, they were determined to participate in the activities of organisations and parties representing various ideologies by raising questions and looking to see which organisation could offer them realistic solutions or ways out of such a seemingly hopeless situation. According to Moss, during the period under research, inquiry became a more important element for the Jewish youth than ideology (p. 208).

These conclusions drawn by Moss partly contradict the statement by Jack Jacobs that the Jewish youth was actively involved in the Bund party's *Tsukunft* (Yiddish for 'future') youth organisation, as it not only imparted a sense of power among poorer and uneducated Jewish youths and the feeling that they belonged to the global network of socialists, but also made them feel that their wishes and needs were natural and could be responded to momentarily by the Bund youth organisation and by socialism in the future.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the appeal of Bund or any other party's activities could have been temporary was noticed not only by Moss but by Kamil Kijek as well, who noted that differences between

<sup>6</sup> In his research, Moss uses the manuscripts of these texts; however, after the release of this book the documents were translated and published in a separate book: R. Beniamin, *Ploneŭi gniewem. Autobiografia młodego Żyda* (Warszawa, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> J. Jacobs, *Bundist Counterculture in Interwar Poland* (Syracuse, NY, 2009), p. 27.

party ideologies in the 1930s were less important than the development of a new youth political culture in which young people hoped to find the most suitable party or organisation that could propel what they deemed a necessary, radical transformation of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The sixth chapter analyses how Poland's Jews tried to rethink their relationship with Palestine no longer by taking Zionist or anti-Zionist approaches, but by evaluating the fact that the Yishuv, as a growing community partly open to Jewish immigration, could improve the lives of the tangible number of Poland's Jews. Information about life in Palestine circulated through the press, personal letters and travel guides. One of the important aspects Moss draws our attention to in this chapter is that during the period under analysis, Zionist ideologues could no longer control the information that was meant to reach Jews and keep the myths of Zionist ideology alive. Jews in the Diaspora were receiving ever more information from personal accounts from emigrant relatives or friends, moreover, it was now possible to travel to Palestine as a tourist. As the number of settlers in Palestine and opportunities to visit this country increased, it was not only those who wished to settle there or tourists seeking to assess their chances for emigration who visited but also harsh critics of Zionism, such as the passionate Diaspora nationalist and critic of Zionism, Tsemach Shabad of Vilnius. This chapter also includes material on the travel accounts to Palestine published by the long-lived Yiddishists Yoysef Tshernikhov and Max Weinreich, who analysed various aspects of life in the newly established Jewish settlements, for example, relations between Jews and Arabs, between the Yiddish and Hebrew languages, and so on.

In the seventh chapter Moss analyses discussions about community solidarity against individual evacuation: was departure in the name of individual salvation an option at a time when the community was facing difficulties and the help of every single individual was needed? For example, ever since the beginning of its activities, the Jewish Central Emigration Society (YEAS) organised agricultural training and supported individuals wishing to emigrate, but who had insufficient funds to do so, yet it did not develop any activities 'teaching' emigrants how they should uphold their national identity. Initially supporting colonisation, that is emigration in groups or the emigration of individuals to already formed Jewish communities, YEAS ultimately acknowledged the benefits of indi-

<sup>8</sup> K. Kijek, *Dzieci Modernizmu: Świadomość kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Kraków-Budapeszt-Syrakuzy, 2020), pp. 625–649.



vidual emigration even though this strategy would lead to the dispersal of the nation, making it more difficult to retain its nationhood (p. 267).

The increasing migration to Palestine raised the question among Zionists themselves as to how long should the expansion of settlements continue according to the previously dominant strict immigrant selection principle and whether this model needed to be reconsidered to accept as many as possible Jews facing difficulties living in the Diaspora. The Territorialist organisation *Frayland lige* suggested a different alternative – to allow as large a group of people as possible to depart, yet some of the ideologues of this organisation abandoned it in the end, and redirected their support to Zionism in the belief that there was no time to begin new experiments when Zionist activities had already shown tangible results. The search for realistic solutions for how to improve the community's situation became a priority, pushing aside ideological loyalty and often elevating the needs of the individual over and above those of the community.

As the author states, with this book he sought to find new ways of thinking about Jewish political thought and choices in a period noted for its unique simultaneous congruence of cultural complexity, economic tragedy, political danger and the growing possibility of Jews departing from Poland (p. 313).

In the broader sense, this is a book about questions and the search for answers. Not only those raised and answered by Moss himself, but mostly about those Poland's Jews raised themselves in the interwar years and searched for acceptable answers to. These questions were by no means straightforward: what future awaited Jews in Poland? How does our youth feel and what kind of future do they see for themselves? Should we stay here, or search for opportunities elsewhere? Should we operate in a community-focused way or spread out in search for individual alternatives for a brighter future? Such questions did not have simple answers, and not all the personalities discussed in this book were satisfied with the answers they found. However, even the most hopeful optimists could no longer deny the fact that Jewish political thinking and moods for a brighter future in Poland were beginning to change in a cardinal way. In turn, these conclusions force us to reflect on whether we truly have a proper understanding of what we would consider to be the relatively familiar Lithuanian Jewish history in the interwar period. It must be said that thus far, such deeply delving research into Jewish political thought or mentality is yet to be conducted, and the volumes of various Lithuanian *shtetl* memory books actively being translated into



Lithuanian and published will most likely only strengthen the idealistic approach to this period.

If the pessimistic moods for the future felt by groups of different world-views, social strata and ages among the Jewish Diaspora revealed in Kenneth Moss' book do not smash preconceived images of the inter-war years as the golden age of Poland's Jews, then they should at least stimulate readers to deeply rethink this established tradition.

*Saulė Valiūnaitė*

Vilnius University

ORCID: 0009-0005-6794-6903