Introduction

Culture and Psychology of the Polish-Jewish Relationship

The Theoretical Footnote that follows this Introduction engages the historical and social science literature that underpins – or challenges – this book's arguments. But such matters do not rivet all readers' attention. Many will be drawn to these pages by personal ties of ancestry, religion, or nationality. Others will seek in them illumination of the conflict-beset, often-tragic history of twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe or of the present-day world's passionate, often cruel and bloody clashes of ethnicity and culture. Crucial are the perspectives in which the Polish-Jewish relationship appeared to those enmeshed in it, whether in the early twentieth century or thereafter. This Introduction conveys dissonant voices, some scholarly, some popular, in the conviction that readers hearing them will begin to understand the human dynamics of this book's dramas and grasp the interpretational problems they pose. Notable are recent works, informed by cultural anthropology, that insightfully reframe the problem of antisemitism in historically Polish lands.

The Jewish Plight in Anna Kahan's Eyes

Anna Kahan was a girl of fourteen when World War I erupted. She lived with her family – her father a lower-middle-class, partner-swindled retail butcher – in Siedlce (Shedlets in Yiddish), in Russian Poland's east. In 1911 it was a town of some 31,000 civilians, 54 percent Jewish, the rest mainly Catholic Poles alongside some Christian Orthodox east Slavs (Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians). In 1906, as the revolution of 1905 faded, Russian soldiers unleashed by tsarist authorities staged a military pogrom that may have claimed as many as fifty Jewish lives, with another one-hundred wounded. Anna possessed admirable maturity and intelligence, reflected in the Yiddish-language diary she kept in 1915–16. To assist her parents, she curtailed her studies to work as milliner, earning in April 1915 eight rubles monthly, woefully little but not insignificant. The war-gripped tsardom ruthlessly uprooted Jewish communities living

near its western front opposite the German and Austrian armies, though Siedlce initially evaded this fate. But the Russian Empire's discriminatory western Pale of (Jewish) Settlement was awash in refugees, while wartime shortages undermined Jews' precarious existence. They were filled with *tsores* (worries) about *parnose* (their livelihoods) and life itself. Anna (Figure i.1) wrote on April 15, 1915:

> I walk on the street and see a suffering face. I'd like so much to read this face. So many faces are now filled with sorrow. Fear overwhelms me. What if I am one of the weak ones that cannot help anyone, not even themselves? All these people had been young once, full of ambitions and strivings, yet life had broken them, given them nothing.
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> I cannot understand how one can be an optimist after seeing so much poverty and injustice. Yet many of these people have preserved hope. They keep deceiving themselves: tomorrow, tomorrow things will be better.

Figure i.1 Anna Kahan (second from upper right) with her family on the eve of her 1916 departure for New York with sister Bracha (on Anna's right). This picture was taken in Siedlce's park, where Anna pondered Jewish fate with her friends. Though economically insecure, the Kahan family appears robust, self-assured, and dignified. In this and other extant pictures, Anna and her friends – some drawn to emigration to America, others through Zionism to settlement in Palestine – project a maturity, seriousness, and longing for better life characteristic of such education-keen and hopeful young people.
Source: Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince.

My father is a religious man. He is sure that God will help. I am not so sure now.

. . . My heart is breaking in me today – there is just too much suffering around me. When will mankind be redeemed?[1]

She pondered Jewish fate in ardent discussions with friends. Of Greenbaum she wrote:

Not so long ago he had tried to convince me that the Jewish people would either assimilate or perish. He saw no inner or outer forces that would rise to their defense. There is no sense in suffering meaninglessly, he said. The Jewish people ought to stop reproducing themselves. Of course, I had protested against this pessimism. I told him our nation is alive and doesn't want to die.

Later Greenbaum became a confident and optimistic Zionist.[2]

Multilingual Anna was proudly Jewish but open to its different political expressions. Though she studied Hebrew, Zionists' preferred language, she defended Yiddish, rapidly developing as modern literary language. "Yiddish has deep roots in the Jewish people, it has become sacred, for it is *Mame-loshn*, mother-tongue. But he [a friend] insists that Yiddish must perish. Whenever it encounters another language, it is vanquished, assimilated."[3]

[1] "The Diary of Anna Kahan. Siedlce, Poland, 1914–1916," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vol. XVIII (1983), 141–371, here 175*ff*. Anna Kahan was mother of Arkadius Kahan, one of the author's graduate program professors. On Siedlce, see Edward Kopówka, *The Jews in Siedlce, 1850–1945* (New York, NY: JewishGen, 2014). There is an important Jewish memoir literature encompassing the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On Russian Poland, see, for example, I. J. Singer, *Of a world that is no more* (New York, NY: Vanguard, 1971 [Yiddish original: 1946]); Isaac B. Singer, *In My Father's Court* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966 [Yiddish original: 1963]); David Assaf, ed., *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhetzkel Kotik* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002 [Yiddish original: 1913]). On Austrian Poland, see Joachim Schoenfeld, *Shtetl Memoirs: Jewish Life in Galicia under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the Reborn Poland 1898–1939* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1985).

Critical to understanding the wartime Polish–Jewish relationship: Konrad Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach Królestwa Polskiego w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005). An authoritative and judicious synthesis of the vast polyglot literature is Anthony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 3 vols. (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010–12), here vols. II–III (1881–1914, 1914–2008).Cf. Heiko Haumann, *Geschichte der Ostjuden* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990); Jerzy Tomaszewski et al., *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 1950 roku)* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993); Andrzej Żbikowski, *Żydzi* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1997); Andrzej Paluch, ed., *The Jews in Poland*, 2 vols. (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 1992, 1999); Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772–1881* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[2] Kahan, 212 (July 15, 1915). [3] Ibid., 310 (October 3, 1915).

She viewed Jewish life's imperfections sternly: "The Jewish communal leaders who ruled and taxed without pity; the sharp distinction between rich and poor; the contempt of the learned for the ignorant; above all, the poverty of the masses." The *maskilim* – assimilation-oriented (or "integrationist") Jews, "modernized" by nineteenth-century German-born Jewish Enlightenment *(haskalah)* – deluded themselves into thinking the antisemitic tsarist government was only waiting for Jews "to acquire education and European manners" to grant them equal rights.[4]

Despite her ambivalent feelings toward Poles, she avidly read Polish literature, including the idealistically nationalist Nobelist Henryk Sienkiewicz (who fired no anti-Jewish cannons). Zionist friend Ackerman "criticizes me for reading Polish books. 'If you read Polish for six months,' he says, 'you develop assimilationist tendencies.'" She archly replied that "even specifically patriotic works in Polish would not have an adverse effect on a person who is conscious of his own nationality."[5]

In the park she discussed with friends Polish-Jewish relations, "which are not good." Yet the venerable Polish Commonwealth, before its partition among Russia, Austria, and Prussia (1772–95),

> had given refuge to Jews when [in the late Middle Ages] they were expelled from other countries and Jews had been mighty patriots of Poland, defending her with their blood and possessions. Now things have changed. I don't know who started this bigotry and hatred among peoples, but the Poles certainly swallowed a big dose of it.

Of this she had personal experience. A friend told her of his hospital stay, where many wounded soldiers lay abed. They liked him, making no invidious religious distinctions. "But one single Pole in that ward kept yelling: 'Jew! Jew!' He was just sick with hatred."[6]

When in August 1915 Siedlce Jews were evacuated eastward, she sat with her family in the crowded train. A "handsome Polish lady, wearing a Red Cross armband" arrived with husband and child. A Jewish man tried to walk past her. She refused to let him through.

> I never saw such a transformation in a person. She turned green, her eyes flashed, her lips grimaced, her hands shook. She spewed out invective like vomit. "The swine! The Jews! They're everywhere! They grab everything! Even the train! You can't get away from them! They dirty up everything! That dirty Jew!"
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> She kept on in this vein for a long time. "The Jews are usurers, the Jews are swindlers, the Jews are spies . . . *Żydzi, Żydzi* [Jews, Jews]."

[4] Ibid., 333 (January 8, 1916). [5] Ibid., 349 (March 29, 1916).
[6] Ibid., 205, 211 (June 25 and July 10, 1915).

> Oh, God! The Poles themselves don't have it good, yet they're forever accusing the Jews, as if the Jews were the cause of all evil, of all trouble. Where does all this hatred come from? How can a human being absorb so much poison and go on living?[7]

Victorious advance of the Central Powers' armies brought Russian Poland's heartland (the 1815-defined, Warsaw-centered "Congress Kingdom") under German occupation, allowing the Kahans to return home. During the fighting, they heard that "Cossacks are coming!" She reflected, "What terror in the one word 'Cossacks.'" Though a small girl at the time, she remembered Siedlce's pogrom during the 1905–6 revolution:

> The shooting, the fear, the soldiers knocking on the door, their hoarse cries and my father's soothing, cheerful voice. (He bought them off with money and a drink.) I remember vividly one night, all of us lying on the floor, bullets whistling through the windows across, and my mother crouching, examining my feet in fear that a bullet hit me.[8]

During 1915 fighting, a drunken Cossack was "out on the street, brandishing his sabre, shouting 'I'll kill all the Jews!' The German fired twice and finished him off with his sword. Cossacks they don't take as prisoners, but kill them off on the spot. 'I think that's barbarous,' I say."[9]

The German occupiers permitted Siedlce's Poles to celebrate their holiday – forbidden under tsarist rule – of May 3, commemorating the liberal constitution promulgated in 1791. Blue and white Zionist flags decorated houses alongside Poles' red and white. "No wonder the joy of the Polish people is great – they have waited 125 years for this holiday. I wonder whether the Jewish people will ever celebrate their own national holiday." Jews, wearing Zionist armbands and badges, marched alongside Poles. Anna found Polish girls in Cracovian costume good-looking. Warsaw-based Zionist luminary Antoni Hartglas spoke. "At the end he expresses the hope and wish for a free and friendly life for both nations, living in harmony and peace."[10]

Germans' pitiless requisitioning of war supplies embittered the Jews. Anna heard that "They'll come and take whatever they please, and you have to smile while they're robbing you." But in Siedlce, locally quartered Germans were friendly and decent (Figure i.2). "They are extremely patriotic and awfully proud. They have no regard for

[7] Ibid., 236 (August 8, 1915). Another train-riding obsessive antisemite among educated Poles appears in Alfred Dőblin's impressive *Journey to Poland* (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1991 [German original: 1924]), 257–58.
[8] "The Diary of Anna Kahan," 370 (September 18, 1916); on the pogrom, see Kopówka, *The Jews in Siedlce, 1850–1945*, chap. 3.
[9] Kahan, 275 (September 17, 1915). [10] Ibid., 356–57 (May 3, 1916).

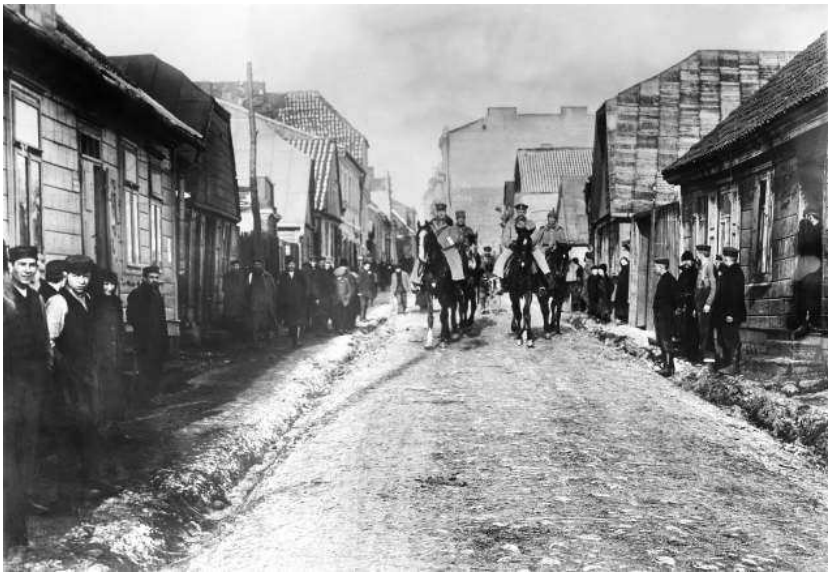

Figure i.2 German soldiers, 1915, entering Mława, formerly a Russian Polish town north of Warsaw. Jewish residents – mostly men – observe them. This is a not untypical Jewish street in a *shtetl* or small town with a large Jewish population (here, in 1910, lived some 15,000 souls, 45 percent Jewish, but many *shtetls* were smaller). Onlookers wear customary everyday dress. Mutual understanding of Yiddish and German was possible, given a will to achieve it. For German Jewish soldiers, contact with Polish Jews was often bewildering. They tended to sentimentalize and exoticize their eastern coreligionists, pitfalls that still yawn today in Western countries. Polish Jews inclined toward caution in associating themselves with Germans, despite often strong incentives to do so. Wartime requisitions by rival armies and governmental controls on food supplies severely injured Jewish merchant interests while infuriating townspeople and, ruinously, stoking antisemitism.
Source: Ullstein Bild. Getty Images, 501372297.

anyone but Germany and the German people. 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles!' If you're not a German, you're an inferior creature. (They hate the Cossacks most of all, and all want to kill several.)" Yet German policy reversed tsarist prohibition of public schooling in Polish and Jewish languages. "So the Germans do bring culture wherever they come!"[11]

[11] Ibid., 294, 298, 312 (September 28 and 30 and October 3, 1915).

Figure i.3 A Warsaw street scene from 1906, centered on Jewish workers amid others in bourgeois dress. Jewish artisans and other laborers, including dairymen and butchers, were a massive presence in Poland. Many were poor, but others supported stable households, and some rose to prosperity. The more secular-minded among them were often rough and tough, strongly inclined to cooperative organizations and labor unions and drawn to leftist politics. Alongside such scenes stood the vast, ramshackle structure housing Jewish textile workers throughout the Polish lands. Technological change imposed adaptability and, often, self-exploitation. The Russian Empire's greatest industrial textile center was Łódź/Lodzh, west of Warsaw. Factory jobs were frequently barred to Jews, even when employers were Jewish, because Christian workers aimed to monopolize them and would work on Saturdays. Jews found employment as handloom weavers and tailors and in finishing or labor-intensive home labor.
Source: Ullstein Bild. Getty Images, 542350157.

Penury, even starvation, stalked Anna's gloomier thoughts. During the German advance, she wrote that "the rich have plenty of money and most of them have already sent their families deeper into Russia. But for people like us who have a few hundred rubles, the question arises: How long can a sum like this last? What then?" In winter 1915 she wrote:

Figure i.4 A Galician Jewish Passover celebration, 1915. Two Austrian soldiers are present, together with students and, seemingly, a rabbinical guest. Here depicted is the complex cultural hybrid of religiously stamped identity, including bearded patriarch; Austro-Hungarian education and citizenship; and contemporary middle-class life, including a young woman presenting herself in modern light. Nor should the photographer – a profession to which many Jews were drawn – be overlooked.
Source: Imagno. Getty Images, 53313274.

Destitution is increasing, whoever has bread today will not have it tomorrow. Riots will surely break out. Hunger compels the most law-abiding man to use force. When he'll see a bread, he'll take it, money or no money. The starving will grow wild, break into stores and warehouses. And the end will be that sooner or later we'll all die the horrible death of hunger.

In March 1916, she wrote: "Oh, these hunger riots! The roar: 'Bread!' keeps ringing in my ear."[12]

Anna Kahan sharply perceived the dilemmas and dangers facing Russian Poland's Jews. Among these, Polish anti-Jewish violence did not figure, even if Judeophobia among Poles shocked and baffled her.

[12] Ibid., 215, 326, 350 (July 22 and November 12, 1915, March 31, 1916).

Figure i.5 Unidentified Jewish family portrait, Warsaw, ca. 1910. This photograph, free of religious imagery, captures the marriage of contemporary Jewish and Christian European domesticity. Many such pictures, including prominently those of notables from the world of business, literature, and politics, testify to Jewish acculturation to the social and cultural patterns of the Polish (and Russian) intelligentsia and urban propertied classes. Embrace of a Polish cultural and political mentality sometimes accompanied the process, bringing about what

Figure i.6 Eight of the thirteen Jewish deputies elected in 1919 to the first (Constituent) Polish parliament (further discussed below). Front and center (3) is Abraham Perlmutter, Warsaw's principal rabbi and widely respected advocate of Polish-Jewish cooperation on a basis of religious and cultural equality. In their self-presentation, the deputies display varying modes of integration in secular Polish public life. Others depicted: (1) Rabbi Moshe Halpern (Agudas Israel), (2) journalist-politician Noach Prylucki (Folkist), (4) Solomon Weinzieher, (5) Itzhak Grűnbaum (Zionist leader), (6) Dr. and Rabbi Osias Thon (Zionist leader), (7) Dr. Jerzy Rosenblatt (Zionist), and (8) Dr. Ignacy Schiper (historian and leader of worker-oriented Poale Zion).
Source: YIVO Institute of Jewish Research.

Caption for Figure i.5 (cont.)

was commonly understood to be "assimilation." But from the interactive process of Jewish acculturation within contemporary Polish and Russian secular civilization there also emerged Hebrew-oriented modern-minded Jewish nationalism. Family portraits of such Zionist giants as Nahum Sokolow and David Grűn (David Ben-Gurion), both born near Warsaw, display similar or still more modern self-presentations as that depicted here.
Source: Imagno. Getty Images, 551786891.