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The Anti-Semitic Riots on the Territories of the Kingdom of Poland at the Beginning of Independence¹

The last year of the Great War brought deterioration of Polish-Jewish relations. There were three main accusations addressed at Jews: cooperation with the Germans and Austrians, sympathising with the Bolsheviks, and speculation. Another reason for the mutual grievances became forcing the national and cultural autonomy by some of the Jewish parties and the attempts to search for the adherents of such demands in the West. The events in Lvov and the growing Polish-Ukrainian conflict in the Eastern Galicia, including rumours saying that the Jews sympathised with the Ukrainians, became yet another inflammatory point in the Polish-Jewish relations. At the same time, the anti-Semitic propaganda has collected all critical remarks of the Jews about the Polish rules and then, distorting them consciously, presented the Jewish population as an element hostile to the Polish state, which in general was not true.

In the Kingdom of Poland, as early as in spring 1918, the rumours of the pogroms became to circulate, usually repeated unverified and engrossed by the Jewish press. The phenomenon intensified in autumn, although there were more premises that the pogroms might occur then. In fact, the second part of this year brought a new wave of anti-Jewish pogroms and violence. In such circumstances, the Jewish population greeted the liberation of the Polish lands in autumn 1918 with fear.

For the Polish Jews, the end of the military operations did not mean any turning point in their everyday lives. The joy from the end of the war was mixed with fears: the anti-Semitic feelings were getting stronger in the Polish society, and the events directly preceding the end of the War were not optimistic.

At the turn of October and November, the disarming – mostly bloodless – of the soldiers of the occupational armies was carried out. Although in some places the Jews participated in that operation, the hostile attitudes towards them grew. Additionally, the disarming of

¹ The article is based on communicate delivering during the 16th World Congress of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (28 July – 1 August 2013). Title of the paper: "The Anti-Semitic Riots in the Kingdom of Poland at the Beginning of Independence, 1918-1919"; section: Pogroms in Central/Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century.

the occupant was preceded by establishment of the national councils (*rady*) by the soldiers of various nationalities from German and Austrian armies².

The Jewish soldiers joined the general councils of the soldiers' delegates or established their own assemblies and councils. Their participation in the councils, as well as their cooperation with the Zionist organisations were negatively perceived by the Polish political parties and by the Polish society. "It is absolutely characteristic – we can read in the reports of local Polish authorities – that the Jews simultaneously made their political aims more nationalistic and developed the international and revolutionary propaganda among other societies"³.

The newly established Committee for the Safety of the Jewish Population criticised that part of the Polish press, which "spreads the biased and deceitful information", protested against the acts of violence committed on the Jews, appealed to the Polish society to end the injustice done to the Jewish citizens of the country and to provide safety to them. In the proclamation issued on 11 November, we can read that "the streets of Warsaw became a stage of the bloody assaults upon the helpless and innocent people; in different districts of the city, the formal chase after the Jews was organised; the accidental passers-by were beaten and even killed" (however, this is unproven information)⁴. The Committee was composed of the representatives of the both – Jewish and Polish – cultural and political organisations in Warsaw. In general, from the Polish side the only some left and socialist organizations protested against the anti-Jewish agitation⁵.

In the meantime the Jews started to organise the formations of self-defence, however, in majority of towns it failed, mainly due to lack of weapons and the reluctance of local authorities. It turned out that the Jewish paramilitary formations are effective tool of defence. For example, pogrom almost occurred in Chełm after the Polish side took over power in the city. It was prevented by the rapidly formed self-defence carrying the rifles. Similar situation had taken place in Zamość, in the same *gubernya* (Russian administrative unit). Like in Chełm, self-defence was led by the members of the Bund⁶.

However, there were very few towns with Jewish self-defences, and the Jews felt in the streets of Polish towns more and more insecure. On 21 October, the Polish and Jewish traders got into fight in one of the Warsaw market places; on 6 November, there was a scuffle between the Polish and Jewish students of the Warsaw University. There were some incidents when the Polish soldiers and policemen attacked the Jewish passers-by, threatened

² See for example: J. Geresz, *Z dziejów rozbrojenia okupantów na południowym Podlasiu w listopadzie 1918 roku*, Międzyrzec Podlaski 1998, p. 37-38; J. Lewandowski, *Królestwo Polskie pod okupacją austriacką 1914-1918*, Warszawa 1980, p. 141-142; E. Kopówka, *Żydzi siedlecki*, Siedlce 2001, p. 88; W. T. Kowalski, *Rok 1918*, Warszawa 1989, p. 142-143; J. Szczepański J., *Spółeczność żydowska Pułtusk w okresie porozbiorowym (1795-1918)*, „Pułtusk. Studia i Materiały z dziejów miasta i regionu” 2000, t. IV, p. 73; K. Urbański, *Postawy ludności żydowskiej na Kielecczyźnie w okresie I wojny światowej i wojny polsko-bolszewickiej* in: *Spółeczństwo polskie w dobie I wojny światowej i wojny polsko-bolszewickiej*, red. R. Kołodziejczyk, Kielce 2001, p. 267.

³ Archiwum Akt Nowych (further: AAN), Komitet Narodowy Polski w Paryżu (further: KNP) 20884 p. 104.

⁴ YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, Herman Bernstein Papers 713 Box 32/766.

⁵ AAN, Ogóln żydowski Związek Robotniczy Bund w Polsce 30/1/5 p. 10.

⁶ K. Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach Królestwa Polskiego w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej*, Lublin 2005, p. 405.

them with weapons and beat them⁷. Usually, nobody defended them, particularly because the assaults were directed at the German or Bolshevik “traitors and collaborators”. As we can read in the memoirs of one of the inhabitants of Markuszow, a small town in the Lublin Region, just before the end of the war, “when the local peasants were heading for a mass, one could feel the atmosphere of a pogrom and everybody felt that the time had come”⁸. In many shtetles the petty stealing occurred, the Jewish stalls were robbed, and gratifications of the local Jewish communities for the local authorities police post prevented the more serious attacks.

The most serious events took place on 11 and 12 November in Kielce. When the rumour was spread that the Jews wounded a Legiony soldier, the Poles started to smash up the Jewish shops and to attack the Jews. From the Kielce *yizkor bukh* we can learn that also the Polish soldiers participated in the riots⁹. First, the representatives of the Jewish parties and groups were assaulted in the local theatre. They took part in the meeting which was, among others, to adopt the appropriate resolution on the regained independence by Poland. The Chairmen of the meeting were arrested by the police, probably in order to protect them, not informing them later what was happening in the city. Both local Jews and the Jews from other towns were assaulted (the aggressive groups headed, among others, to the railway station)¹⁰. Generally – it was underlined – the events were accompanied to a lesser extent “than usually” by plundering, so some eye-witnesses made a conclusion that the whole action aimed at showing the Jews “who rules here”. The situation had been ultimately dissolved by the army. On the order of General Waław Iwaszkiewicz, the soldiers left the barracks and restored order. Four Jews were killed and circa 250 wounded (there were also a few Poles among them). It was also confirmed by the catholic priests, curate of the Kielce Diocese, Antoni Brożek, who in the note to the Vatican wrote: “On 11 and 12 November, there was a pogrom of Jews in Kielce, connected with murders and plundering of the shops and robbing the people”¹¹.

After the pogrom, during the discussion in the City Council, the Jews blamed the city authorities, local militia and the Commissioner of the Government who was then present in Kielce for passivity and “hostile and biased behaviour” during the events. The Polish side retorted that having at its disposal the limited resources, it was unable to prevent the riots, and accused the organisers of the meeting that they did not inform about it beforehand. There were also accusations of speculations and cooperation with the occupants. The Jews – not denying the facts of trade cooperation of some of them with the Germans and Austrians – claimed that fencing is absolutely reprehensible, but it cannot be a reason for killing.

⁷ P. Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, in: *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, red. J. Tomaszewski, Warszawa 1993, p. 139.

⁸ See in: K. Zieliński, p. 404-405.

⁹ W. Blatt (ed.), ‘Relations Between the Jews and the Poles’ (Translation of *Sefer Kielce. Toldot Hehilat Kielce. Mityom Hivsudah Vad Churbanah*, by J. Montel, ed. by P. Cytron), Tel Aviv 1957, p. 47-58 – URL <<http://www2.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/kielce/Kie047.html>>, [August 6th 2013].

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ K. Urbański, p. 268.

The pogrom had its epilogue in the court in 1922. The sentences were jokingly low – 4 persons were sentenced for 4 months in jail, and one for one month in jail. The Polish press tried later to trivialise the events in Kielce and presented them as incidents provoked by the local criminals. It is difficult – due to the lack of sources – to estimate the work of the judiciary: the sentences were really low but considering the fact that many people took part in the events, one has to admit that the judges might have had problems with proving the guilt. The doubts as to its impartiality, and first of all, the will to explain the events by the city authorities and the Commissioner of the Government arise, when one bears in mind that only a few people were detained after the pogrom; there are also no information about the commander of the militia being punished for the reluctance of his subordinates¹².

In the materials of the Joint concerning the registered cases of the pogroms and acts of violence against the Jews, which occurred in November, December and January 1918-1919, we find a few dozen places, mostly in Galicia and only a few, which can be identified for sure in the Kingdom of Poland (we can find a few places of the same name both in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland and in Galicia, but there are no detailed data; these are: Grodzisko, Janów, Kurów, Morawica, Niedźwiedź). Besides Kielce, on 12 and 18 November, there were some incidents in Działoszyce of the assaults and the plunder of the Jewish shops by the armed mob, which earlier had disarmed the units of the militia. It was reported that the militiamen were to join the assaulters later. According to that source, also the Jewish self-defence units were being disarmed and in general 24 houses had been totally plundered and one person was killed. It was reported that on 18-20 November, in Wodzisław nearby Działoszyce, there were some assaults upon the Jews and some plundering, during which also one person was killed. On 10 November in Siedlce, a 14-years-old boy, who distributed the proclamation of the Bund was killed (shot) by the Polish members of the Legions, who attacked the demonstrating Jewish workers. Ten of them were seriously wounded¹³.

It is difficult to verify these information and to identify their character. In case of Działoszyce and Wodzisław, we can only refer to the Jewish sources; the events in Siedlce are not mentioned at all, for instance by Apolinary Hartglas, who writes that on 16 November, an 18-years-old village boy came to his office and announced that – during a quarrel – he stabbed a Jew of a similar age with a bayonet. The boy was not sure whether he killed his opponent but he asked the lawyer for advice. Hartglas had noted the boy's response to the question why he did it: "Sir – he said – since Poland is now free, any Pole can kill any non-Pole"¹⁴. It is interesting that the young Pole who had hurt or killed his Jewish colleague, sought the help of a Jewish lawyer...

¹² A. Penkalla, *Opinie o antyżydowskich wystąpieniach w Kielcach w dniach 11 i 12 listopada 1918 r.*, „Biuletyn ŻIH” 1998, nr 3, p. 55-69.

¹³ YIVO, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Records RG 347.8; “The Bulletin of the Joint Distribution Committee of the American Funds for Jewish War Sufferers”, 1918, vol. 3, No. 3-4 (*passim*). See also: *Evidence of Pogroms in Poland and Ukraine (Documents, Accounts of Eye-witnesses, Proceedings in Polish Parliament, Local Press Reports etc.)*, New York 1919 (*passim*).

¹⁴ A. Hartglas, *Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, wstęp i oprac. J. Żyndul, Warszawa 1996, p. 180-181.

In the accounts of the events in the Polish lands in 1918 and in January 1919, collected by the Joint and the Jewish agencies in the West we can find, among others, the statement that the Jews were being assaulted in order “to commemorate the regaining of independence by Poland”¹⁵. It is difficult to share such opinions: the peasant, particularly in Galicia, seeing the fleeing Austrians felt immune, and the suppressed hatred found the outlet in a physical violence. Quite an important factor was also the desire to get richer. There were also some other factors of the time: the poor harvests in 1918, the epidemics of typhoid and the intensification of the radical attitudes, which are explained by some of the researchers by the hunger for lands and the demands of the agricultural reforms¹⁶. Similar situation had taken place in the Kingdom of Poland. All these factors paired with anti-Semitic agitation resulted in the hostile actions against the Jewish population “engaged in speculation” and, indeed, vulnerable.

Although we do not know the precise circumstances of the deaths of the persons, who were killed in Kielce, it seems that it is the only documented case of the riots of a character of a pogrom in the Kingdom of Poland in autumn 1918. It is more difficult to take a position concerning the events in Działoszyce and Wodzisław on the basis of only the Jewish sources. It seems that the assaults on the Jews might have happened there, since it is almost improbable that those places were cited with no apparent reason. The village population in the Kielce *gubernya* had long sympathised with the Russians and extremely reluctantly welcomed the invading troops of the Central Powers (the Austrians) and the Legions, Polish military troops leading by Piłsudski. We must remember that the Jewish population there was noticed as German’s and Austrian’s supporters and traitors. It was that area where, besides Warsaw, the anti-Jewish events took place most frequently in the first year of the war¹⁷. The assumption that in Działoszyce and Wodzisław, the assaults upon Jews may have taken place is supported also by the fact that they were situated in the counties located close to the Austrian border, and Galicia was truly the stage of many actions against the Jewish population.

Also many towns of the Congress Poland were the venues of the various kinds of chicaneries. On the night from 14 to 15 of November in Łódź, around 20 armed men with the arm-bands on their sleeves appeared in the synagogue at Wolborska Street, seeking for weapons. They searched the *aron ha-kodesz*, destroyed equipment. The weapons were found neither in the synagogue nor in the adjoining house of prayer. Also on 14 November at night the armed men searched the hearse carrying the corps to the Jewish cemetery. The men also looked for guns. The matter was raised during the session of the City Council of 19 November. The investigation began but the guilty were not found. Both the army and the city militia claimed to have nothing in common with the incidents and suggested that the

¹⁵ K. Zieliński, p. 430.

¹⁶ E. Lis, *Dzieje Żydów w Kolbuszowej do 1939 roku*, „Prace Historyczno-Archiwalne” 2002, t. XI, p. 189-190.

¹⁷ J. Rokosznny, *Diariusz Wielkiej Wojny 1914-1915*, oprac. W. Caban, M. Przeniosło, p.114, 116-117, 121-122, 142, 171, 177, 181, 202, 209, 232, 237; K. Urbański, p. 262; K. Zieliński, p. 133, 152-153.

searching was committed by criminals¹⁸. Considering the fact, however, that the synagogue in general was not plundered and the people participating in the funeral were not robbed, the men were really searching for weapons, so, they could be connected with army or militia.

We have also to note that accounts and reports of the Jewish agencies – often the only source of information about the anti-Semitic events in the Polish lands in autumn 1918 – were evidently overestimated or based on the very fragile premises. Yet, it was their version that was cited by the press in the West. The Polish press and the government agendas protested – with various effects – against “the propaganda witch-hunt”; also the Jewish press noted that such information “badly served” the Jews in Poland¹⁹.

Although the events in Kielce could be induced by rumours about allegedly reluctant attitude of the Jews towards independence and “anti-Polish” activity of Jewish “lobby” in Paris, but it is difficult to make such a statement in the case of riots or pogroms in Działoszyce or Wodzisław. I do not think that such rumours and information from Paris had a decisive influence on the conduct of Poles in the early weeks of independence. It seems that, especially in the smaller towns and Galicia this factor was not so important. The conference in Versailles has just began, and it’s course did not have to be closely monitored by the peasant masses and residents of small towns.

The situation of the Jews was – to a great extent – determined by the role of an intermediary in the exploitation of the country by the Central States, as well as the opinions about their “permanent cooperation with the Germans”. However, such accusations, formulated against the Jews in the last year of the war and in the first months of the independent Poland, were increasingly replaced by the accusations of sympathising with the Ukrainians and communists. In the reports of the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs we can read that the Jews “provide the invaluable services to the communists; they organise the intelligence and the agitation services, and massively avoid the recruitment”²⁰. In Polish press we can find the opinion that the leftist Jewish organisations, like Bund, Poalei Zion, Farainigte, as well as various fractions of the Zionists were – in spite of the slogans preached outside – “the nests of Bolshevism in Poland”. They have their networks in Germany and they are in close contacts with the communists – we can read further on²¹.

The vast majority of the Jewish inhabitants of the Polish territories was religiously Orthodox and the ideas preached by the socialists and communists, with their prominent atheism, were absolutely unacceptable for them. Nonetheless, the pro-Bolshevik sympa-

¹⁸ Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi, Akta miasta Łódź 13157 p. 1, 3, 7-8.

¹⁹ AAN, KNP 20883 p. 1-84.

²⁰ K. Zieliński, p. 411-412.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

thies, even although they were cherished by a relatively small group of the Jewish youth, as well as participation of people of Jewish origin in the highest apparatus of the Russian Communist Party [Bolsheviks], had a significant impact on the Polish-Jewish relations. Indeed, in the near future stereotype Jews-communists became more and more popular in the Polish society. Accusing Jews of sympathy for the Bolsheviks, were the most common reasons or pretexts anti-Semitic attacks in the next months.

Exemplification could be situation from Zamość. In materials of Jewish writer and journalist Israel Cohen's we found a report on situation in that town²². Anonymous author of the report, based on his own observation and testimonies of other eye-witnesses, described the anti-Semitic riots, which took place in Zamość during the last days of December 1918 and the first days of January of 1919. They were the result of an attempt of taking over the power by the group of revolutionized soldiers of the Zamość garrison. His report is one of a very few documents on these events. This so called "revolution in Zamość" was quickly relieved and the order was restored, but according to the report more than 100 Jews were arrested under the pretext that they helped and sympathized with the "red soldiers". In fact, there was no proof of such cooperation. In the meantime plundering of the Jewish property had taken place. According to the report, two people was killed. Even local newspaper, "Kurjer Zamojski" of January 2nd 1919 admits that those morally guilty of this pogrom are not to be found among those under arrest²³.

The final note of the worsening of the Polish-Jewish relations in Galicia were the pogroms. Assuming, however, that the events in Kielce (probably in Działoszyce and Wodzisław) were incidental, the attitude of the Polish society towards the Jews in the years of World War I in the Kingdom of Poland may be described rather as "from the boycott to the violence" than to the pogrom. As in all the Polish lands, that process reached the culminating point in November and December of 1918. However, accusations of the Jews of sympathy for the communists found their tragic end in the pogroms of the times of the Polish-Bolshevik War.

²² Israel Cohen, active in the Zionist movement, was a Secretary of the Zionist Organization in London. After World War I he toured Europe and reported on the pogroms of 1918-1919 in the Ukraine and described the situation of the Jewish situation throughout Europe. His books relate to Zionism and topics in Jewish history.

²³ M. Cześniak-Zielińska, *Raport na temat zająć antysemitycznych w Zamościu 28-30 grudnia 1918 roku (ze spuścizny Izraela Cohena w YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)*, „Studia Żydowskie. Almanach” 2011, nr 1, p. 191-196.

The Anti-Semitic Riots on the Territories of the Kingdom of Poland at the Beginning of Independence

The last year of the Great War brought the enhancement of the activities of the political parties, both the Polish and the Jewish ones, as well as deterioration of Polish-Jewish relations. The attitudes reluctant to cooperate with the Poles took hold among the Jews or rather a belief that there were no actual chances for the agreeable fixing of its principles. Another reason for the mutual grievances became forcing the national and cultural autonomy by some of the Jewish parties and the attempts to search for the adherents of such demands in the West. The events in Lvov (Lviv, Lemberg) and the growing Polish-Ukrainian conflict in the Eastern Galicia became yet another inflammatory point in the Polish-Jewish relations. The rumours, which reached the Kingdom of Poland saying that the Jews sympathised with the Ukrainians in Galicia and 'shoot the Polish soldiers at the back' added to the traditional accusations addressed at Jews (cooperation with the Germans and Austrians, sympathising with the communists), one more element, the consequences of which are hard to ignore. At the same time, the anti-Semitic propaganda has collected all the oppositional declarations of the Jews and their critical remarks about the Polish rules and then, distorting them consciously, presented the Jewish population as an element hostile to the Polish state, which in general was not true.

In autumn 1918, the Jewish population greeted the liberation of the Polish lands with fear. Those were not groundless fears: one could notice, as early as in spring that year that the hostility towards the Jews undertook the increasingly severe forms. The serious anti-Semitic riots took place in the Kingdom of Poland in November 1918, and some of them, like the one in Kielce and probably in a few other towns of the Kielce Province, were in fact pogroms. The next year brought a new wave of anti-Jewish pogroms and violence.