

Jewish Political Life in Poland on the Eve of the Second World War

Abstract

The increasingly critical situation of the Jewish minority and the bankruptcy of the previously dominant political orientations within the Jewish community created a new set of opportunities for a group, the General Jewish Workers' Alliance, or Bund which had played only a marginal role in both Polish and Jewish politics between 1920 and 1935. The growing strength of the Bund was clearly evident in the municipal elections of late 1938 and early 1939 which saw it emerge as the largest Jewish party in towns such as Warsaw, Łódź, Vilna and Białystok. This article seeks to evaluate the Bund's reaction to its heightened importance in Jewish politics in Poland.

Keywords

Bund, Socialism, Poland, Jews, Interwar period



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The death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski in May 1935 brought to an end an era in Polish politics. Piłsudski had played little part in the running of the state in the last years of his rule. Worn out by the stresses of his life, and increasingly racked by the pain of liver and stomach cancer with which he was affected, he became a remote figure who only rarely attended cabinet meetings and who gave only the vaguest directives as to government policy. But his mere presence as the "Grandfather" (*Dziadek*) to whom his inner circle of acquaintances, linked with him in conspiratorial work from before and during the First World War, owed unquestioning allegiance, furnished a degree of stability. His charismatic presence provided a unifying force around which the disparate and often mutually incompatible elements which had made up his administration in his last years could coalesce. With his death the unresolved questions of Polish political life – how to revitalize the Polish economy devastated by the slump, what foreign policy should be pursued in an increasingly threatening environment, and how should the government, gravely weakened by the Marshal's death, acquire a measure of political support – all came to the surface. The government was riven with divisions over whether to continue the detente in Polish-German relations which had been initiated with the Polish-German Non-aggression Agreement signed in January 1934. Similarly it was split between those who believed that the government's unpopularity and isolation should be overcome by a return to liberal democratic norms, severely undermined by Piłsudski's clash with Parliament, and those who believed that some specifically Polish variant of the right-radical nostrums increasingly in vogue in Europe should be adopted (see Jędruszczak 1963; Jędruszczak 1970; Wynot 1974).

These developments had very significant consequences for the position of Poland's nearly three and a half million Jews. Even before Piłsudski's death, the relative security the Jews had enjoyed in the early years of his rule had begun to erode. The economic crisis had been particularly acute in Poland, already a poor country, and had led to a decline between 1929 and 1933 of nearly 25 percent in the country's national income; the slump radicalized political life and led to an increase in antisemitism. The fall in the price of agricultural products had been particularly sharp and had also undermined the position of Jewish traders, particularly when the government failed to extend a moratorium on farmers' debts to those of merchants. At the same time, the success and speed with which the German National Socialists had politically disenfranchised and dispossessed one of the wealthiest and most assimilated Jewish communities in Europe acted as a great stimulus to antisemites elsewhere, not least in Poland. The many violent anti-Jewish incidents which followed the Nazi takeover in Germany were widely reported in the Polish press, and even led to some efforts at emulation. Piłsudski himself had always regarded antisemitism as a crude political tool of his most irreconcilable opponents, the National Democrats led by Roman Dmowski. Thus, when in August 1929 the National Democrats had attempted to make use of an alleged Jewish profanation of a *Corpus Christi* procession in Lwów to initiate a campaign of anti-Jewish disturbances, his government had acted firmly and swiftly to restore order and stop attacks on the Jews (see Polonsky 1990). Similarly, the Ministry of Higher Education had set itself firmly against any attempt by nationalist students

and academic staff to introduce segregated seating for Jewish students and to restrict the number of Jews admitted to university (although in-practice a *numerus clausus* operated widely, though unofficially; see Rudnicki 1987). The government had also acted quickly in the early 1930s to ban the fascist offshoots of the National Democrats, the Camp for a Greater Poland and the National Radical Camp. There was thus a widespread perception in Jewish circles that the Piłsudski government constituted an important barrier to the advance of antisemitic views in Poland. This awareness coexisted with mounting resentment at the failure of the authorities to take sufficiently seriously the disastrous impact of the great depression on large sections of the Jewish community, as well as unease at the implications of the government's flirtation with Nazi Germany after the Non-aggression Agreement of January 1934.

The situation changed drastically after the death of Piłsudski. The relatively liberal government of Marian Żyndram-Kościatkowski collapsed in less than a year in the face of serious labour unrest and the largely non-ideological "Non-Party Bloc for Co-operation with the Government" (*Bezpartyjny Blok dla współpracy z Rządem-BBWR*) set up by the Marshal was also soon dissolved, a victim of the increasingly bitter power struggle among his heirs. The dominant figure in the new government of General Felicjan Sławoj-Składkowski, set up in May 1936, was Piłsudski's successor as Commander of the Armed Forces, General Edward Rydz-Śmigły. Rydz-Śmigły had few clearly defined views, but inclined towards a traditional right-wing attitude to Polish politics. He and his closest advisers, notably Colonel Adam Koc, favoured co-operation with the National Democrats, hoping in this way to acquire greater support for the government and bridge the rift which they regarded as largely anachronistic between the followers of Dmowski and of Piłsudski. As a consequence, when a new pro-government political organization, the Camp of National Unity (*Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego-OZON*), was established in February 1937, the principles it espoused bore many resemblances to those traditionally upheld by the National Democrats. It stressed the importance of the Catholic Church, underlined the leading role of the army in the state, and attacked Communism as "alien to the Polish spirit". It was also prepared to make concessions to antisemitism. When asked whether Jews could be members of the Camp of National Unity, Koc's deputy, Colonel Jan Kowalewski, replied that he accepted that there were some Jews who had sincerely adopted Polish nationality. He continued:

Nevertheless, Christian principles, which are the basis of Colonel Koc's declaration, will be the decisive factor in the choice of members. In exceptional cases, Polishness must be established not only by the fact of accepting this nationality, but by the sacrifice of blood voluntarily spilt, or by other services rendered to the Fatherland in the course of a whole life which bear witness to the fact that a person truly belongs to the Polish nation. We have in Poland Jews who have fought for the independence of the country and who, by virtue of this, are organized in the Association of Jews who have fought for Polish Independence. We respect this page of their life, which proves that they are good citizens, just as we respect the attachment, which they

do not hide, to their Jewish nationality. It is obvious that they cannot belong to the Camp of National Unity. All the more so, Jews who do not have a past of this type cannot be given privileges by the mere action of professing Polish nationality (Kowalewski 1937)¹.

The government came increasingly to argue that only the emigration of a large proportion of the country's Jewish population could resolve the issue. Foreign Minister Józef Beck claimed repeatedly that three million of the country's three and a half million Jews should leave Poland. The government now permitted the establishment of special "ghetto benches" for Jewish students at universities and lent encouragement to the burgeoning movement to boycott Jewish shops and stalls. The OZON programme had indeed proclaimed that "it is understandable that the country should possess the instinct compelling it to defend its culture, and it is natural that Polish society should seek economic self-sufficiency" ("Gazeta Polska" 22.02.1937). As early as July 1936, faced with the increasing violence of the boycotters, Sławoj-Składkowski had told parliament: "My government considers that nobody in Poland should be injured. An honest host does not allow anybody to be harmed in his house. An economic struggle. That's different" (Sławoj-Składkowski 1936).

For many of the fascist and near-fascist right, even these actions were too moderate. The universities were scenes of frequent anti-Jewish violence; force was also frequently used to implement the boycott of Jewish trade, leading to brutal confrontations and deaths, as in Przytyk, Mińsk Mazowiecki and many other towns (see Rothenburg 1986). Commenting on the government's attempts to facilitate Jewish emigration, the main National Democratic newspaper "Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy" commented on 20 November 1938 that it was not enough to show the Jews the door; one should push them through by means of a "surgical operation (*sic*) which will deprive them legally of the means to live in Poland".

These developments had important implications for the strategies of the various Jewish political groups in Poland. Jewish politics in the Diaspora in the modern period have essentially taken the form of establishing and maintaining alliances with sympathetic groups in the larger society. The years after 1935 saw the bankruptcy of most existing Jewish alliances in Poland. Growing antisemitism further weakened the influence of the assimilationists, who had already been reduced to a fringe group in Jewish circles after the First World War. It became increasingly difficult to uphold the optimistic assimilationist view that education and the passage of time would make possible Polish-Jewish coexistence (Heller 1974, 1986).

It was despair at the unrealizable character of this idea that led the prominent Polish-Jewish writer Benedykt Hertz, previously sympathetic to the assimilationist position, to comment in 1937 in his *Żydowska krew* (Jewish Blood): "Assimilation. Today this movement is generally considered ineffectual, bankrupt and in some measure rightly so" (Hertz 1937: 6).

¹ If not stated differently, all the translations are mine, AP.

Zionist groupings also saw their position undermined. In the 1920s, Zionist politics in Poland had been racked by a bitter dispute between the Galician group, headed by Leon Reich, and that in the Congress Kingdom, led by Yitshak Grünbaum. The difference between them related not to questions connected with Palestine, but to the correct political strategy to be pursued in Poland (see Mendelsohn 1982; Grünbaum 1941; Korzec 1972: 331-366). Grünbaum, coming from an area where ethnic antagonisms had become quite pronounced, stressed the need for a vigorous and uncompromising defence of Jewish national rights, especially as they had been guaranteed by the constitution and the National Minorities Treaty. The Jews, in his view, would only find a reasonable place for themselves when Poland had been transformed from a national state into a state of national minorities, in which the various ethnic groups enjoyed a wide measure of autonomy. This view of the Polish situation lay behind Grünbaum's advocacy of a united front of the minorities, Jews, Germans, Ukrainians and Byelorussians, which led to the establishment of the National Minorities Bloc in the elections of November 1922. During the 1920s this strategy did not prove very effective: it was clear that it needlessly antagonized the Poles, and the Jews' objectives were quite different from those of the other minorities. The Jews wanted only the implementation of rights they were guaranteed, the German were openly revisionist, while the Slavic minorities wanted at least territorial autonomy and, at the most, secession. By the 1930s, the liberal illusions of the Versailles era were almost entirely dead. In 1934 the Poles repudiated the National Minorities Treaty, while from 1933 on the majority of the Germans showed themselves sympathetic to National Socialism. Neither the Byelorussians nor the Ukrainians showed any real desire to make common cause with the Jews.

Reich, coming from Galicia where ethnic tensions were much less acute, rejected Grünbaum's maximalism and favoured a direct approach to the Polish authorities. This resulted in the agreement of May 1925 with Premier Władysław Grabski, which soon collapsed amidst a welter of accusations and counter-accusations of bad faith by the parties involved. Yet, after the May coup, Reich (who died in 1929) and his associates, who dominated the Jewish Parliamentary Club, still hoped to establish lines of communication with the government. They were generally satisfied with government behaviour in the Twenties and, although uneasy about the impact of the depression, still regarded the government as far better than the alternatives, whether of the right or the left. After 1935, and in particular after the creation of OZON, these hopes were clearly without foundation. It is true that the government was able to find some common ground with Zionist groups, above all the Revisionists, because of their support for Jewish aspirations in Palestine. Yet the hope of large-scale emigration to the Middle East was effectively undermined by British policy; this made the Zionists appear not only ineffective, but naive and toadying in their attempts to win support for a government policy whose real aim was to end the Jewish presence in Poland.

The Orthodox were even more seriously affected by developments after 1935. The main Orthodox political organization, Agudas Yisrael, in accordance with its understanding of the talmudic principle "*Dina de malkhuta Dina*" (The

Law of the State is Law) had quickly established friendly relations with the Pilsudski regime after May 1926 (see Mendelsohn 1972: 47-60; Bacon 1996). It had been rewarded by a decree in 1927 extending and re-organizing the Jewish communal organizations (*Kehillot*) which were now granted wide powers in religious matters, including the maintenance of rabbis, synagogues, *mikvot*, religious education and Kosher slaughtering. Some welfare for poor members of the community was also to be provided. The Aguda, in return, supported the government in the elections of March 1928 and November 1930. In 1928 one of its leaders, Elias Kirszbraun, was even elected on the government (BBWR) list. The Aguda continued to regard the government as sympathetic in the early 1930s, and in these circumstances it came as a particularly cruel blow when in April 1936 the government introduced a law effectively banning ritual slaughter. This move was justified on hygienic and humanitarian grounds, but it was clear to all that its main objectives were to make life difficult for Jews and to damage the Jewish slaughterers who also sold meat to Christians. It was finally passed in 1939 and was to come into effect in 1940, but this was forestalled by the outbreak of the war (the issue of *Shekhita* has given rise to a vast literature which is well reviewed by Meltzer 1982: 97-110).

These developments – the increasingly critical situation of the Jewish minority and the bankruptcy of the previously dominant political orientations within the Jewish community – created a new set of opportunities for a group which between 1920 and 1935 had played only a marginal role in both Polish and Jewish politics, the General Jewish Workers' Alliance, or Bund (there is quite a large literature on the Bund, but it is mostly of an apologetic character. See Hertz 1956, 1960-72; 1958). The political isolation of the Bund in its first fifteen years was largely self-imposed. Throughout this period it had adopted a resolutely anti-religious and anti-Zionist attitude which had isolated it from most of Jewish opinion. Its actions on the "Jewish street" were often deliberately provocative and the party constantly played down its Jewish character, stressing instead its broader concerns. At its 1924 convention, for instance, one of its leaders had asserted: "We are above all a revolutionary socialist party and only secondarily Jewish socialists" (N.N. 1925).

The Bund's hostility to Zionism was certainly deep-rooted, and it was to be a consistent feature of the party's ideology throughout the inter-war period. It held firmly to the view that antisemitism was essentially a secondary phenomenon which would disappear with the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. Yet the left-wing character of the Bund militated against its close co-operation with the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna-PPS*), the main socialist grouping in Poland. The Bund, still obsessed with the political struggles of the Russian Empire, in which it had been close to the Mensheviks and had clashed bitterly with the PPS, continued to see that party as a grouping too strongly wedded to the goal of regaining Polish independence, and insufficiently revolutionary or socialist. The Bund firmly retained its belief in the Socialist revolution, although by the mid-1920s it had lost some of its illusions about communism. Its political stance was closest to that of the Austrian Social Democrats, and like that party it tried to establish a position for itself between the Second and Third Internationals.

In Poland, the Bund's intransigent leftism brought but a few political dividends. It impeded co-operation with other political groups and isolated the party. In the early 1930s, the Bund began gradually to modify its political stance. The first stage in this process was the decision to join the Second International, which fact was welcomed by the PPS as removing an important barrier to co-operation between the two parties. In 1933, for instance, the parties ran joint lists in local elections in both Tarnów and Kraków and did relatively well, a sign that the political tide was beginning to turn. Both parties were deeply shocked by Hitler's rise to power and his suppression of German working-class political organizations.

Another factor increasing the co-operation of the two parties was the fact that the illusions of the Bund about communism were now finally all but shattered. The adoption by the Comintern in 1928 of a radical leftist line, which saw the social democrats, stigmatized as "social fascists", as the main obstacle to a revolutionary polarization of society, had led to a series of bitter ideological attacks, above all on the more left-wing social democratic groups such as the Bund. The Bundist leaders were also gravely shocked by the wave of show trials and executions which began in the Soviet Union in 1934 and which affected many with whom they might have clashed in the past, but whom they knew well and respected. According to Viktor Adler: "We must revise the old theory that communism and socialism, growing from the same root – and even the same branch, are divided only on matters of tactics and the methods of struggle, (and that they) should unite in a joint stand in fighting for the society of tomorrow" (Adler 1938: 49-50).

This paved the way for much closer cooperation with the PPS and the two parties co-operated in organizing the fairly successful boycott of the national elections called by the government in September 1935. This alliance was of great value to the Bund. At a time when the other main Jewish groupings saw their political strategies collapsing, it could claim that it had allies in Polish society who had a real chance of achieving power. Bundist confidence grew, and the party became much more active and self-assured in its belief that it could "conquer the Jewish street".

One sign of the Bund's new activism was its response to the intensification of organized attempts to boycott Jewish shops and stalls which followed Pilsudski's death and which frequently led to violence. One of the most serious incidents occurred on 9 March 1936 in the small town of Przytyk, near Radom, when a clash between fascists intent on implementing the boycott and a Jewish self-defence group resulted in three deaths (two Jews and a Pole). The Bund responded by calling for a half-day protest strike. The strike was a great success, although there was some criticism of the Bund for not involving non-socialist Jewish organizations.

The Bund was also prepared to take up other Jewish issues. It protested strongly against the banning in April 1936 of Jewish ritual methods of slaughtering animals, and in 1936 reversed a decision it had made in 1930 not to participate in *Kehillot* elections. The Bund's decision to participate transformed these elections, which now became essentially a struggle over who controlled the "Jewish street", and the Bund now established itself as a significant presence on these bodies. The success of the Bund in establishing itself on the

Kehillot was a reflection of the incompetence and frequent corruption of their leadership. It also protested against the worsening situation of Jewish students at Polish universities.

The increasing strength of the Bund and its closer, though still uneasy, relations with the PPS were both clearly in evidence in the elections to the City Council of Łódź which took place on 27 September 1936 (see Żarnowski 1965: 147-154; Korzec 1962: 207-54; Meltzer 1982: 123-127) Łódź, a major textile centre with a population of over 600,000, had nearly 200,000 Jewish inhabitants and many Germans. It was a town with a strong working-class tradition, but also one with deep ethnic antagonisms. In 1934, after six years of socialist rule, the right-wing National Democrats had succeeded in taking control of the municipality. They had soon clashed with the government and the premature dissolution of the council was the reason for the elections. In these, the socialist parties won a resounding victory. The PPS received 34 seats (of 72), the Bund 6, the Nationalists 27, the Aguda 3 and the Zionists 2. One of the reasons for the PPS's success was that while many poorer Jews voted for the Bund, many middle-class Jews voted PPS in order to oust the Endecja.

The new city government proved even less durable than its Endek predecessor. The socialist majority put forward Norbert Barlicki as its candidate for mayor. He was unacceptable to the central government and his candidature was not approved by it, as was required by law. In response, the majority refused to vote in a budget. The government responded by dissolving the City Council and ruling the city directly.

There was one issue on which the Bund and the Aguda agreed. Large sections of Jewish opinion, in addition to the Zionists, were coming to see emigration, and not only to Palestine, as the only means of alleviating the worsening situation of Jews in Poland. On this question all the other Jewish parties were resolutely opposed by both the Bund and the Aguda. The two parties also agreed that Yiddish should be promoted as the national language of the Jews rather than Hebrew as was advocated by the Zionists.

On 2 August 1936, for instance, Yitzchak Grünbaum called a press conference at which he stated that Jewish organizations should co-operate with the Polish authorities in facilitating emigration. The development of a desire among Poles to establish independent businesses, and the support given to this by the government, would, he claimed, deprive many Jews of their livelihood and emigration was the only solution (see Meltzer 1982: 147). This statement was widely criticized in Jewish circles, by the Aguda, "Chwila" and "Nasz Przegląd", but most strongly by the Bund. "Naye Folkstsaytung" on 4 August reminded its readers that in 1927 Grünbaum had talked in the USA of "one million surplus Jews" in Poland. This was the type of argument, the paper continued, "which incites antisemitism", since it seems to imply "that the Jews are responsible for the social problems under which they suffer".

There was some justification for the Bundist position, but the total refusal to consider emigration as a possibility was somewhat short-sighted. The fact is that the exodus of Jews to Western Europe and America had not only provided many of them with opportunities for a better life, but had also brought many benefits to those who had remained in the *haym*, the old home. Paradoxically, the PPS was

much more sympathetic to emigration. In 1936 a member of the party, Jan Borski, published a pamphlet, *Sprawa Żydowska a Socjalizm* (The Jewish Question and Socialism), which was, in a sense, intended to challenge the Bund's rigid opposition to emigration (Borski 1936). Borski argued that Jewish emigration had long been a feature of East European life. It was a "natural phenomenon", given the poverty of the area, and should not be seen as a byproduct of antisemitism. Rather it was the result of the separate national existence of the Jewish group in the region.

Another, rather less attractive side of the Bund was reflected in its opposition to the attempts in 1937 and 1938, in the face of the worsening political climate, to establish a representative Congress of Polish Jews which would speak for the whole Jewish community (see Meltzer 1982: 260-273; Marcus 1983: 372-375; Szajkowski 1919-39: 201-210). It is true that the Aguda opposed the Congress and favoured an unelected body chosen by representatives of the different parties. Significant divisions also existed among the Zionist groups, and the project was further undermined by the belief, particularly in the influential American Jewish Committee, that it was the brainchild of Nahum Goldmann of the World Jewish Congress. In addition, the authorities were hostile to the idea. Yet these difficulties could probably all have been overcome had the Bund not been resolutely opposed to cooperation with Orthodox or Zionist groupings.

The Congress was first proposed in mid-1937 by Moshe Kleinbaum (formerly Yitzchak Grünbaum's political secretary), and in the second half of that year it was subjected to a stream of virulent attacks in "Naye Folkstsaytung". The Congress, claimed the Bundist paper on 30 October, would merely serve as a stage to publicize Zionism and divert the Jewish masses from their real problems. It held no interest for the Bund. Paradoxically, the stance of the Communist Party was less hostile. If the Congress was democratic and representative of the Jews in Poland, wrote "Czerwony Sztandar", it would be a useful way of strengthening the anti-fascist front. The main issue, the paper argued, was not who organized the conference but what it did. By the end of the year the communists had cooled somewhat to the idea, seeing it as effectively a Zionist front, but they blamed this development on the failure of the Bund to participate.

Bundist attacks continued in 1938. According to Viktor Adler in "Naye Folkstsaytung" on 7 January 1938, in an article characteristically entitled *The Zionist Jewish Congress*, the proposed meeting would be a conference of the Jewish "right" – nothing more than a demonstration in favour of Jewish emigration. A similar position was upheld by the Bundist-controlled unions, which argued that they could not participate since at their Sixth Congress they had resolved that "No one must co-operate with reactionary or clerical elements, even if the issue is antisemitism".

By the summer of 1938 it was clear that the whole idea of a unified representative body was dead. The Bund highlighted its satisfaction by calling a congress of Jewish workers to protest against antisemitism. Describing the aim of this meeting on 23 August 1938, "Naye Folkstsaytung" stated that the goal of the Bund was to protect Jews by struggling against reaction and antisemitism and for a democratic Poland, which so many Jews saw as their homeland. It opposed any plan for evacuation or emigration. These, proclaimed the paper proudly, "are the main principles of the common workers' fight in Poland".

A telling critique of the Bund's political inflexibility was formulated by the doyen of Jewish historians Shimon Dubnow, father-in-law of Henryk Ehrlich, one of the leaders of the party, in an open letter *To a Bundist Colleague. On the Isolationism of the Bund*, which "Naye Folkstsaying" printed on 29 July 1938. In this letter, Dubnow criticized Bundist policy, which he described as "withdrawing from *Klal Yisrael*" (the people of Israel). He was not a Zionist, he stated, and had often criticized the mistakes of the Zionists. Yet he felt obliged to express astonishment at the hostility of the Bund to Zionism at a time of such critical danger for the Jewish people. The Zionists had achieved great things in Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel.

'The majority of the Jewish people is impressed by these achievements and is Zionist. The error of the Bund is that it does not see itself as part of the Jewish people, but of the Jewish proletariat. The Bund will only ensure its future if it abandons its separation and works together with all democratic and progressive forces within the Jewish people'.

This reproach certainly stung and provoked a reply from Ehrlich on 31 July under the heading *Is Zionism a democratic and progressive force?*. The Bund, he asserted, was the largest political force in Jewish Poland and not merely a temporary phenomenon. 'The Bund is an organic part of the Jewish people and represents its true interests. It is concerned for all Jews in Poland and not only for the workers. Yet the concept of *Klal Yisrael* cannot involve co-operation with reactionaries, with the Aguda or with the Revisionists. Zionism has become an ally of anti-Semitism. The worsening situation of the Jews throughout the world is exploited by the Zionists. The Zionists regard themselves as second-class citizens in Poland. Their aim is to be first-class citizens in Palestine and make the Arabs second-class citizens. The Bund, therefore, cannot see the Zionists as partners in the struggle against the reactionary forces in Poland'.

In spite of tensions, the Bund did succeed in tightening its alliance with the PPS. The two parties also co-operated closely in the local government elections of late 1938 and early 1939, called by the government in an attempt to improve the political climate by allowing a freer expression of opinion. In the event, the election proved somewhat inconclusive and failed to provide clear victors, at least in the context of Polish politics, with each of the main Polish groupings taking a minority share of the vote.

The results were certainly a triumph for the Bund. In towns with more than 25,000 inhabitants it won 9.5 percent of the total vote as against about 13 percent for all other Jewish parties. It did particularly well in the largest towns. In Warsaw the party received nearly 62 percent of votes cast for Jewish parties, as against 19 percent for the Zionists, 16.7 percent for the Aguda and 2.6 percent for the Poalei Zion Left. In Łódź, it won 57.4 percent of the votes cast for Jewish parties as against 20.4 percent for the Aguda and 22.2 percent for the Democratic Zionist bloc. The results were similar in Vilna, Grodno, Białystok, Radom and Lublin. Only in Galicia, where the Bund had never been strong, did traditional political loyalties hold fast.

In recent years, large claims have been made for the Bund in the period 1935-9. According to Bernard Johnpoll, author of a monograph on the party, political developments in the 1930s "handed the Bund the leadership of Polish

Jewry. Because the Bund was an *ecclesia militanta (sic)*, it was able to defy the threats from within and without and to lead the Jewish people during a period of despair" (Johnpoll 1967: 195). These views have been widely echoed. Majer Bogdański, a former Bundist activist in Łódź, wrote in the "Jewish Chronicle" on 31 October 1986: "Because the Bund led – yes, led – the struggle of life and death for the whole Jewish population in Poland, the population put its complete trust in it".

In this presentation, I have tried to determine how accurately these views represent the true situation. It is certainly the case that, in the local government elections of 1938 and 1939, a very significant proportion of the Jewish population of Poland cast its vote for the Bund. The nature of these elections makes it difficult to assess just how large Bundist support was. In towns with a Jewish population of 10-40,000 (18 percent of all urban Jews), the Bund received about 40 percent of Jewish votes, while in those 26 towns with less than 10,000 Jews in which elections were held (6.5 percent of the Jewish urban population), the Zionists won 45 percent of the vote, the Bund 20 percent and other parties (mainly the Aguda) 35 percent. According to one estimate of the Jewish votes cast in these elections, 38 percent went to the Bund, 36 percent to the Zionists, 23 percent to middle-class groups (in many cases the Aguda) and others (mainly Poalei Zion) 3 percent (Marcus 1983: 468). What does emerge is the increase in Bundist support, the decline of the Aguda vote and the persistence of a different voting pattern in Galicia. One can also assume that the remaining small-town and rural Jews would have voted for the Zionists and Aguda rather than the Bund. What is also clear is that the three-fold division of Jewish political life retained its hold, and that Bundist claims to a political monopoly, or even a majority of Jewish support, are greatly overplayed. It should also be pointed out that Jewish political life in Poland, partly as a consequence of the perilous situation of the Jews, was subject to violent swings of mood. The Bundist upswing was partly the result of Jewish hopes that the Bund could intercede on their behalf with a victorious Polish Socialist Party. Had the socialists not been able to take power (perhaps in co-operation with the Peasant Party), or had they failed to fulfil the hopes the Jews placed in them, these attitudes could very quickly have changed.

The statement that the Bund had been entrusted with "the leadership of Polish Jewry" thus seems an exaggeration. As a result, while accepting the important role the Bund, like all socialist parties, played in providing cultural and educational facilities for its members, and recognizing its growing political maturity, an assessment of the party's political stance in the last years before the war must be mixed. Johnpoll's account of the Bund's history is justly entitled *The Politics of Futility*. Certainly its intransigent opposition to any common action with other Jewish groups, whether to provide an executive for the Warsaw *Kehilla* or to create an umbrella organization to defend the interests of Polish Jewry, was shortsighted. At the same time, the Bund had improved its relations with the PPS, and had the political evolution of Poland not been interrupted by the war might have played an important part in the democratisation of Polish politics. This was all cut short by the war and the Holocaust. In this context, the suicide of Szmul Zygielbojm, the Bundist representative on the Polish Council in London, marked the effective end of the Bund as a major factor in Polish political life.

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