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The presence of large and heterogeneous Jewish communities on Polish soil dates back to the 12th century. From the 16th to the 18th centuries they were regarded as the very soul of Ashkenazi Jewish culture and religion. At that time a number of important Jewish communities in western Europe, such as the ones in Amsterdam and Antwerp, recruited rabbis who had studied at the *yeshivas* of central Poland. All of this altered quite quickly during the 18th century as a result of the belated assertiveness of the *Haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment) movement as well as of the increasingly widespread backwardness of central and eastern Europe. In the first half of the 19th century on the soil of what was known as Congress Poland (established in 1815 and belonging to Russia) people following the religion of Moses accounted for nearly 10% of the population and were decidedly different from their own coreligionists from the less sizable German and French communities. From 1880 and in the wake of the first pogroms, a great wave of westward migration began; during this time the Jews of Russia and Austro-Hungarian Galicia, drawn from the territories of what had been ancient Poland, but which was now divided between

the two empires, still accounted for 80% of Europe's Jews, in strictly demographic terms.

As a body they had long and rightly been regarded as an extremely traditionalist, conservative and politically unreliable group, not only by their Polish and Russian neighbours but also by their brethren from western Europe. Here the growing Jewish presence in new ideological and social movements was starting to invite anti-semitic criticism from western conservatives who argued that the Jews were, by nature, dangerous radicals bent on organising a worldwide revolution. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, another leftwing stereotype prevailed, which regarded Jews as usurers and capitalists and diehard defenders of an iniquitous established social order.[1] It was only thanks to the upstart presence of Jews in political and social endeavours in the last two decades of the 19th century, alongside the reawakening of the aspirations of the Russian Empire's many peoples, that the old picture was altered and it changed to such an extent that by the early years of the new century, the Okhrana was successfully exploiting the myth of Jewish radicalism in the famous forgery at the heart of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.*[2]

This present essay will deal only with this latter period, from 1881 to 1917, that is, the first two generations of radicals of Jewish extraction with a presence on the soil of Poland, or rather, the few among them who had plumped for libertarian options. Besides, in order to examine this subject properly in its historical context, we must first look at a number of the methodological problems involved. Traditionally the issue of Jewish radicalism has been explained by recourse to two keynote ideas. The first which, as I see it, can be argued with some legitimacy, states that the problem is non-existent, given the ab-

[1] Apropos of these two stereotypes of Jews, see E; Silberner *Western European Socialism and the Jewish Problem 1800–1918* (Jerusalem 1955).

[2] [see Norman Cohn, *Warrant For Genocide* (London 1967)]

up the birth of the new society. Had they been living in one of the western democracies as the London-based *Arbeter Fraynt Club*[20] members were, they would probably have been peaceable supporters of prise au tas (take what you need), Kropotkin-style. But in the dark reality of tsarist Russia and in the seething atmosphere of Congress Poland they could scarcely be anything other than radical, belligerent militants, committed to an unequal struggle against overwhelming state forces by whom they were constantly being hunted down and ruthlessly killed. The Polish writer Stanislaw Brzozowski had paid them a splendid tribute in his 1907 novel *Plomienie* (Flames). But other writers such as Henryk Siekiewicz or Andrzej Strug (the famous, high-ranking socialist exponent of Polish freemasonry) have caricatured them as demonic types or nutcases always with bombs in hand. The views peddled about them in respectable Jewish circles were equally unfair and dictated by political conveniences.

Today, looking back over nearly a century, we can arrive at a more generous characterisation of their handiwork. Whilst not forgetting the exaggerated extremism of certain ideas and stances, such as the simplistic world view, we should reassess their idealism and the novelties that they introduced into Jewish life. But for that radical faction, albeit a relatively small faction, the cultural and political life of Jews on Polish soil would not have been as rich as it was.

[20] W D Fishman *East End Jewish Radicals 1875–1914* (Duckworth 1975).

families of Mieczyslaw Goldberg and Izrael Blumenfeld who both belonged to the *Internacjonal* anarcho-communist group in Bialystok and of the weaver brothers Dawid and Szlama Bekker, who were *Walka* activists.

As for the profession of the militants that we know about, the situation there is not greatly different from that which has emerged from the information supplied, in the case of France, by Jean Maitron and René Bianco.[19] We find numerous representatives of "sedentary artisan trades" — cobblers, tailors and hat-makers. But pride of place goes to the weavers (and especially in Bialystok, Lodz and Zgierz). In Warsaw, Krakow and Vilnius a telling role was played by members of the intelligenstia too — the teachers, journalists and printing workers — a sort of "aristocracy" of labour rubbing shoulders with the intelligentsia proper. Such social and professional distinctions had no real impact on stances vis a vis religion. In accordance with the intellectual; trends of the day, anarchists described themselves as "freethinkers" or "agnostics". The leaflets and pamphlets they distributed often poked fun at those Jews of their own generation who renounced their Judaism only to embrace Christianity in its Catholic form.

Their rebellion was always, inevitably, directed at Parents, Family and Religion. Jewish traditions and traditional models of social organisation were depicted in darkest tones and described as the greatest obstacles to a radical betterment of the lot of their compatriots. Being themselves a characteristic product of the breakdown of a society that was having to come to grips with the inevitable process of modernisation, the anarchist Jews deliberately decided to push that process as far as it might go. Outrages, expropriations and other armed actions, ratcheting up existing, real class conflicts, helped speed

[19] J. Maitron "Un Anar — qu'est-ce que c'est?" in *Le Mouvement social*, No 83, p. 27 and R. Bianco *Le mouvement anarchiste à Marseille et dans les Bouches-du-Rhône 1880–1914* (Marseilles 1997), p. 346

sence of any specific link between Jewishness and radicalism. Those who take this line stress the fact that, whilst there may have been many important radical Jews in religious, social and political movements of various kinds, the radicals as such were always a tiny minority set alongside the Jewish community as a whole. For instance, in the Polish Communist Party (KPP) which, before the war also included activists drawn from the western areas of what are Byelorussia and Ukraine today, the percentage of members of Jewish extraction amounted to 26% but the local election results, the only ones in which it saw fit to run (under a different name) show that even among the Jews themselves the KPP cold only command 1%-2% of the vote.[3] Supporters of this argument also point out that the higher the social standing or economic status of the Jews, the less they favoured radical political stances, as is striking if we compare the France or the United States of today with the period leading up to the Second World War. Taken on its own, looked at in this light, the Jewish radicals were no different from radicals of different extractions and their motives were dictated by circumstance and external factors.

The second interpretation searches out a number of specific connections between being Jewish in the highest sense and the tendency to look for radical solutions. Among the factors normally regarded as being at the root of this phenomenon, there are the supposedly revolutionary strands in Judaism (see M. Löwy), great sensitivity to matters relating to justice or affecting religion and a way of thinking that tends to call everything into question. Academics who incline towards psychological or sociological analyses highlight the marginalisation and particular "pariah" role in which Jews found themselves cast in a society undergoing the process of modernisation (see

[3] G. Simoncini *Ethnic and Social Diversity in the Membership of the Communist Party of Poland 1918–1938*, Special Issue of *Nationalities Papers*, Supplement 1/94, pp. 55–91

H. Arendt, M. Wistrich) and, more importantly, the relative durability of the attitudes generated by such circumstances (I. Berlin, P. Gay[4]). Such interpretations all have one thing in common: they are out to explain, not so much radicalism per se, as the propensity towards radicalism. Furthermore there is an over-concentration of the question: how was this possible? We on the other hand, if we are interested in the libertarian model of radical militance, should be asking ourselves the question (at least insofar as it relates to Polish Jews): how come this phenomenon was so weak compared to the other brands of political commitment?

The problem of such a disproportionately slim presence as compared not only with the presence of marxist Jews as well as of their more Russified compatriots from the lands of eastern Poland, has never been seriously posed, let alone explored. One possible explanation lies in the fact that the historiography on the subject was, as one might have expected, rooted in the exploration of Russian sources. From their point of view the lame, sporadic disposition to libertarian activism west of Vilnius was pretty much irrelevant insofar as it was happening in the region with the greatest Jewish influence. Indeed writers like Paul Avrich and Moshe Goncharok cite only activists and events directly related to the Russian Jews within the movement. Besides, they appear utterly ignorant of the ideological and indeed cultural differences to be found among the westernised radical Jews of the territories of "Congress" Poland.[5] The Polish Jews themselves felt compelled to defend their own good name against constant charges that they had revolutionary and illegalist tendencies, charges that were finally encapsulated by the formula *Zydokumuina* (Jewish communism). They strove to play the issue down or be dismissive of it. In the eyes

[4] I. Berlin *Jewish Slavery and Emancipation* (London 1952) and P. Gay *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* (Oxford 1985)

[5] See M. Goncharok *Vek voli* (Jerusalem 1996)

of Kropotkin.[18] Among the books seized during inquiries the writings of Kropotkin were very often discovered. By contrast, there were few supporters of tendencies such as what was known in Russia as the *bezmotyvniki* (motiveless) terror as well as pacifists of the Tolstoyan variety and the anarcho-syndicalists.

The first thing that emerges from researches is the youthfulness of the militants. Generally speaking they are young workers or artisans between the ages of 15 and 20. In age terms, these militants stood out from members of the Belle Époque political and social movements and bring to mind an analogy with the younger generation's modern protest movements.

From analysis of their social origins some interesting conclusions can be drawn. Notwithstanding the widely held view about their primarily proletarian origins, quite a few of these anarchists were drawn from other strata of society. There were rebels also to be found amongst the children of well to do businessmen and well-off artisans, albeit that the majority of them came, naturally, from the poorer orders. Which explains why most of the Polish anarchist Jews from this first generation had had no formal education, unless we count the elementary classes at the *cheder*. It was this unmet need to understand the world that drove them into reading unconventional literature and ultimately made them followers of Proudhon, an autodidact like themselves.

Another intriguing and consistent factor was the fact that most of the militants had brothers who were usually older brothers sympathetic to a variety of leftist factions and who had been the first in the family to set out down that road. Thanks to them, the younger siblings were in a position to plump for even more radical options. This was true, say, of the

[18] For an exploration of the ideology of Polish anarchist groups at the time see D. Grinberg "Zdziejow polskiego anarchizmu" in *Mowia wieki* No 11/1981, pp, 14–16

militants. We can, though, analyse them as a group, starting our bibliography with the details contained in the *Slownik biograficzny dzialaczy polskiego ruchu rewolucynjego* (Biographical Dictionary of the Polish Revolutionary Movement), a periodical publication carrying a wealth of details, albeit politically influenced, its publication unfortunately ceasing at the letter K. There we find that libertarian-minded militants accounted for less that 4% of the total number, but if we check the rather vague Russian figures for the years 1905–1907[15] we can conclude that this tiny band was strongly represented in terms of the victims and convicted (including those sentenced to death) who amount to 10% overall.[16] And it can also be shown that that upwards of 80% of the anarchists listed in the *Dictionary*[17] were of Jewish extraction and that no other faction of the Polish revolutionary movement can stand comparison with the libertarian faction in this regard. Another consistent fact was the almost complete absence of women. Among the upwards of 600 known members [in total] of the *Walka* (Struggle) group in Bialystok, scattered through the *Czarny Sztandar* (Black Flag) group in Bialystok and Vilnius, in short-lived organisations in Warsaw like *Internacjonal* and *Frajhajt* or like *Zmowa Robotnicza* (Workers' Conspiracy) and *Rewolucyjni Msciciele* (Revolutionary Avengers) that were around during the revolutionary period, we find a mere 10 women. In Russia this percentage was remarkably higher, albeit not as high as the figure for militants in the socialist movements.

A common denominator of the afore-mentioned groups was an interest in violence, a militant anti-capitalism and a credo deeply rooted in the anarcho-communist teachings

[15] See E. Kaczynska *Czlowiek przed sadem* (Warsaw 1986, pp. 238–250)

[16] H. Rapaport, op. cit.p. 4

[17] *Slownik biograficzny dzialaczy polskiego ruchu rewolucynjnego* Vols, 1–3 (Warsaw 1978–1992)

of the Jewish community, including the most forward-looking part thereof, anarchists of Jewish extraction were caught up in the most extreme and unacceptable form of desecration of their national traditions. Their choices looked like a full-on challenge to the retention of any distinctive character at the very point when Poland, and with it the Jews themselves as a definite confessional group, was beginning to become a modern nation; hence the widespread hatred and prejudice and often, silence, that were reserved for anarchists.

As far as Polish historiography goes, the situation there is even more complicated in that here we are dealing with the intersection between Jews and anarchists: two "highly delicate" phenomena, so to speak, for successive generations of the Polish intelligentsia. Because of historical circumstances, anarchism per se held no widespread appeal or interest in this area. Prior to 1918, when Poland as a state was non-existent, being anarchists simply meant treachery to the nation, but even later it stood for brazen defiance of the mighty Catholic church. Which explains why the number of Polish anarchists living on their native soil (as opposed to living abroad as emigrés) was always very small and why anarcho-syndicalism never took off there the way it did in the Czech lands. Even today the biographies of its best known sympathisers, such as Edward Abramowski for instance, try to ignore this aspect of their history. The business of the Jews was, in any case, a highly controversial one discussed with extreme prejudice and also, more often than not, shrouded in a great deal of ignorance. No tendency out of step with Polish national aspirations could boast an accurate grasp of the reality of them. Especially the ones that were against religion as a matter of principle. In post-*Shoah* Poland the only topics acceptable in debate were those chosen by the marxist movements. Then, following the anti-Semitic purges in 1968, even those avenues were cut off. For nearly 20 years the matter we are dealing with was virtually unutterable.

In contemporary Poland, whilst matters relating to Judaism are still "hot potatoes" and, up until recently, "all but forgotten territory", they are of great interest not just to researchers but also to the wider public, but little has appeared in writing thus far on the Jewish followers of Bakunin and Kropotkin. This cannot be entirely explained away in terms of the widespread unpopularity from which all such matters in any way linked to marxism have suffered in Poland. Other factors seem to have played greater parts.

Writers trying to keep alive the memory of the great traditions of Polish Jews have steered clear of this small area, not just on account of anarchism's unpopularity, but also on account of the utter absence of the requisite information, as well as out of the deeply rooted but mistaken belief that Jewish anarchists, by abjuring their religion and their traditions, had completely lost their "identity" and become typical representatives of what Isaac Deutscher termed the "non-Jewish Jews".[6] The inaccessibility of sources and of a dearth of literature (especially in Yiddish, a language little used these days) has undoubtedly been a significant factor. What sources survived the *Shoah* on Polish soil are very limited and one-sided. A typical anthology of documents drawn from the *Archiwum Glówne Akt Dawnych* (AGAD, the leading Polish archive of ancient documents) was compiled by Herman Rapaport.[7] That anthology contains Russian police documents dating back to the 1905 Revolution. There would no point in searching for documents there that deal with the militants or their views objectively. Important documents of this sort are to be found abroad, scattered throughout the countries to which sizable groups of militants migrated, in cities such as, say, Paris, London, Tel Aviv, Buenos Aires, Montevideo or, above all, New York where reviews and

[6] I. Deutscher *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (London 1981, pp. 25–59)

[7] H. Rapaport *Anarchizm i anarchisci na ziemiach polskich do 1914 roku* (Warsaw 1987)

of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), this was down to the fact that their ideology appeared to be jeopardising that party's long-term strategy. Besides, their choice was anything but ignored. And anarchism's low pulling-power for generations who had grown up at the turn of the century was a direct result of the fierce ideological competition between those who were trying to capture the imaginations of young people at a time of belated awakening to national consciousness. Young Jews (and 95% of militants were male) stepping outside of a world of *kehila* [the traditional Jewish community] and jettisoning Hasidism or religious orthodoxy, had no need to join the most radical movements in order to be treated like extremists by their most traditional compatriots.

The choice to support the Szymon Dubno-style '*folkists*' who gave pride of place to cultural autonomy and the use of Yiddish as a mother tongue, or the Zionists (in all their leftwing and rightwing varieties: and there were anarchist Zionists too, followers of the French Jew Bernard Lazare), or indeed liberal progressives was quite a radical act. True radical options led them towards the revolutionary syndicalists or to join one of the many out-and-out marxist leftist parties or parties that subscribed to a marxism blended with special Jewish ingredients, such as the *Bund* (1897) which was affiliated to the Russian social democrats whilst holding out for full cultural autonomy, *Poale Zion* (1906) or, later, the *Hashomer Hatzair.* The challenge of modernity and anti-Semitism doubtless worked in favour of such radical choices. It even appears that the choice of anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism loomed even more extreme. Disregarding Jewish specialness in the name of widespread revolution was a genuinely bold choice possible only for a limited group of individuals.

Serious deficiencies in the sources make any attempt to identify precisely who took part in this adventure very hard. Above all there is a dearth of first hand testimony. We do not even know the real names (but only the aliases) of a few

even more open than the socialist outlook, there were still clear differences between militants from individual countries belonging to a range of cultural minorities. Just as it is common practice to point up the differences between the Spanish anarchist movement and its Italian or French counterparts, the same goes for Jewish anarchism. It also had idiosyncratic features in its Polish, Russian or Ukrainian versions.

Some writers tend to think in terms of an identity impervious to alteration. According to them, a person can have only one identity. Moshe Goncharok, for instance, treats as Jews only such anarchists as mainly used Yiddish in their political activity.[13] This way of thinking leaves me bewildered and strikes me as far removed from reality. Lots of militants whom he would see only as Russians or Ukrainians of Jewish extraction corresponded with their brother and sister activists in Yiddish and, to cut a long story short, never severed their ties to the Jewish community. They had merely made a different choice: one of the few choices open to a Jew of radical opinions. What little information we have about the activities of anarchists operating in Warsaw, Lodz or Bialystok during the 1905–1907 revolution which is often rather over-inflatedly dubbed the Fourth Polish Uprising tell us that Jewish anarchists busied themselves in their own circles whilst at the same time working hand in glove with Polish and Russian revolutionaries. Although Jews in linguistic terms, culture and social background, they were simultaneously acknowledged members of the Russian and Polish revolutionary members. R. Nagórski in his short history of the Polish libertarian movements has no doubts about this.[14] And whilst they were repeatedly denounced to the police, and especially by members

[13] M. Goncharok *Oczerki po istorii jewriekskogo anarchistskogo dwizenija* [*Historical survey of the Yiddish anarchist movement* (in Russian)] (Jerusalem 1998)

[14] R. Nagorski "Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en Pologne" in *La Revue international anarchiste* (Paris) 15 November -15 December 1924.

publishing houses were founded. Thus an interesting collection has survived in the Labadie Collection of the Library of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There there are rare newspapers as well as some personal memoirs generally drafted with an eye to posterity. Such sources have been widely utilised and to good effect by Avrich in his researches into the later stages of the Russian anarchist movement.[8] To a lesser extent, some material on Poland can be found in the rich collections of the Amsterdam-based International Institute for Social History.

Now we can turn back to the circumstances surrounding the radicalisation of increasingly wider swathes of the younger generation of Jews, helping to mould them. The revolutionary potential of Polish Jews was first revealed in the 18th century when the new Hasidic movement drew the bulk of its most zealous following from there. Social radicalism, on the other hand, surfaced much later on and we actually know very few of the names of supporters of the French Revolution born on the soil of central Poland. The Jewish masses of eastern Europe were at that time completely in the dark as to what was going on in faraway, mythic Paris. Besides, fifty years later, during the "springtime" of the nations (1848) on the barricades of Lvov, Prague and Vienna there were lots of the sons of Jewish small craftsmen; and still more were among the supporters of the Polish national uprising of 1863. The processes of change under way inside the Jewish community of central Europe during the second half of the century have rightly been compared by Isaiah Berlin to the gradual thawing of some gigantic glacier or iceberg. The outermost strata of the emerging Jewish intelligentsia were of course those most inclined to embrace a culture of acculturation and assimilation.

The cultural and ethnic groups surrounding them and who first evolved a modern national consciousness (Germans, Poles, Russians and, a short time later, Ukrainians and Lithuanians)

[8] P. Avrich *Anarchist Voices* (Princeton 1995)

started seriously to compete in recruiting them to the cause. The belated national backlash followed the example set by neighbouring peoples and was designed to build a separate Jewish nation. On Russian soil, moreover, this happened slightly later. A sizable segment of the younger generation made a stand on the basis of an extreme internationalism, imitating the example of the glorious undertakings of the renowned *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will). Some of these wound up embracing marxism but others made up the first cohort of Russian anarchist Jews. On Polish soil, the Russian Jews (known as the *litvaks*) were looked at askance, as was anything Russian. Whereas in Russia the youth turning away from the *cheder* [religious school] were enthralled by the idea of "going to the people", their contemporaries in the lands of Congress Poland and in Galicia in the 1870s and 1880s hoped to be accepted by and admitted to the Polish intelligentsia. In the following decade, in a backlash against a burgeoning anti-Semitism, the bulk of them threw themselves into Jewish movements. Certainly there are lots of Jewish names to be found in the ranks of the Polish socialist parties, but as a percentage they accounted for a rather tiny figure when set alongside the numbers in the Russian movements.

The first out-and-out anarchists to be found among Polish Jews popped up in artisan circles in emigration in London and Paris from 1884 on. It was anarchist emigrés returning from Paris who in 1903 in Bialystok launched the first libertarian group made up entirely of Jews.[9] Before then, there was the odd individual Jew drawn above all from the intellectual and artistic circles that felt drawn to anarcho-communism. Jewish artists who had studied in Munich or in Paris were among those most disposed to embrace libertarian teachings. Mecislas

[9] R. Rocker *The London Years* (London 1956, p. 160). See also H. Rapaport, the unpublished introduction to his book, p. 30

Goldberg[10] (aka Mieczyslaw Goldberg), a publicist and drama critic in *fin de siècle* Paris, became an anarchist from head to toe, even though he had earlier been in touch with Polish nationalists.[11] The reasons underlying political and ideological choices are complicated and not always clear-cut, even to those who made those choices. The availability of a number of personal accounts in this instance provides us with a good opportunity for singling out the chief motives, though. The leading one appears to have been a craving for justice, a fervent desire to live in a better world free of injustice, borders, classes, ethnic or national divisions: a world in which the fate of the individual would be determined exclusively by his actions. Whilst marxists believed in historical determinism, those who plumped for anarchism tended instead to base their own aspirations on freedom and on themselves.[12] In the case of Jewish anarchists, there were no less important specific reasons such as the fact that this was an ideology seemed to offer the most radical therapy for moving beyond social insignificance and for combatting anti-Semitism. The universal outlook which not only resolved the Jewish question at a stroke but also settled the issue of all nations and religions through one great "brotherhood of human beings" had no doubt attracted many who were in their position. Does that mean that, on turning into followers of Proudhon, they had cast aside all national characteristics? Definitely not. Even if the "black flag" ideology was by nature universalist and

[10] See D J Siewierjukhin and O L Lijkind *Khudozniki russkojemigracii (1917–1941)* (St Ptersburg, 1994)

[11] Goldberg was a very prominent figure in Parisian Jewish circles. See P. Aubery *Anarchiste et decadent, Mécislas Goldberg 1869–1907* (Paris 1978) and C. Coquio (editor) *Mécislas Goldberg, passant de la pensée* (Paris 1994)

[12] For the general reasons leading on to the option for anarchism see A Hamon *Psychologie de l'anarchiste-socialiste* (Paris 1895) which is based on a questionnaire circulated by the author: see too a survey conducted by *Le Libertaire* (1902) and D. Grinberg *Ruch anarchistyczny w Europie Zachodniej 1870–1914* (Warsaw 1994)