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My Home, My City, My Small Town.

A Picture of Jewish Life Before the Holocaust

After World War II, the pulsating life of the Polish-Jewish small town (*shtetl*) ceased to exist. Its specific socio-cultural climate remained only in reminiscences, in literature and in old photographs. Small towns with beautiful synagogue singing, with the traditional candles on Friday night, with Jews in black, gaberdine coats and skullcaps, as farewelled by Antoni Słonimski:

”They are no more, there are no more small Jewish towns in Poland
In Hrubieszów, Karczew, Brody, Falenica,
In vain would you seek lit candlesticks in windows
Or hear singing coming from the timber prayerhouse”.

Today, when cities and towns with Jews are no more and that landscape has undergone an irrevocable change, it is worth remembering what the everyday life of the Jewish community looked like. Many Jews in the Diaspora still remember the country of their childhood. Spread around the world, *landsmannschaften* publish richly illustrated books (*sefer zikaron*) which describe specific places, events and customs. They reveal the mentality and lifestyle of Jewish people in a particular place. Pre-War Jews appear, more and more often, in the reminiscences of Poles and on the pages of numerous monographs of individual communities.

Memoirs and, less frequently, archive material and the press, will constitute the basis for this paper. The subject of my deliberations will include such issues as the view of the *shtetl* and the family home in the light of memory; the Jewish family (the size, standard of living and changes in the manner of its functioning) as well as the role of religious councils in the everyday life of the Jewish community. These issues will be discussed using specific examples from the inter-War Kielce Province, where the Polish-Jewish small town dominated with its specific socio-cultural environment.

In the average small town, the names of which never made it onto history's pages, the majority of buildings were single or double-storey, having no architectural value, concentrated on small, narrow streets, on plots with, as a rule, sheds and coalstores. Many of the buildings were single-storeyed homes, often in a country-style layout, with the entrance hall in the centre, with two rooms on each side. Such homes comprised the dense

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and semi-dense building development directly on the footpaths of the streets². Over many decades, within their walls, they developed their own, separate, internal communal, family and social life, as well as their specific culture. The inhabitants of these small towns cultivated their own system of values, cultivated traditions which were intended to maintain their separateness and old, social prestige. Their everyday life was carried on with a provincialism characteristic of a small town environment which is, in a traditional way of thinking, dressing and spending free time in a manner reluctant to the acceptance of novelty or progress. The provincialism of small inter-War towns resulted from a small migration of small-town people to bigger cities, from a lower level of communications development and influence such as the press or radio. Kazimierz Wejchert, characterising the small-town environment, writes, "In some small towns, during the inter-War period, nothing changed or almost nothing except the names of the streets. Changes in the psyche of the small town person happened, but very slowly"³.

Inhabitants of Jewish settlements gave the small town a specific appearance.

Numerous elements of Jewish architecture, sacred and secular, entered the small town landscape. Of most significance were the synagogues (the centre of religious life for the Jewish community), the *bet hamidrash* (prayerhouse), the *mikveh*, (bathhouse), the Jewish cemetery. If the size and significance of the community grew, then a hospital, a home for the elderly or an orphanage would be established in separate community buildings. Thus a central synagogue would be established chaotically, as a rule⁴.

In memoirs, the world of the small town appears as a specific mosaic of aspects of everyday Jewish life. Józef Rozenberg, in the Opatów Memorial Book (Yizkor Book) recalls that, "We didn't need to be embarrassed of our small town. Our small town was well-known, it had everything that a Jewish community should have. In Opatów, there was a beautiful, old synagogue, three prayerhouses and several Chassidic *shtiebels*. The thick synagogue walls, with their engraved pictures, the *bima* supported by four columns and the massive, hanging candelabra, created a holy, solemn mood"⁵.

Today, many of these houses of prayer are gone and the last time prayers were heard in those that still remain was during the time of the occupation. To summon their prevailing mood and the memory of the people who met each other there, I will utilise the reminiscences of Dr. Szalom Honig. In the Prztyk Memorial Book, he writes, "Despite the fact that the little town was small, several Chassidic *shtiebels* could be found there, in

² T. Chrzanowski, Miasteczko drewniane jako dzieło zbiorowe architektury i urbanistyki, w: Wieś i miasteczko u progu zagłady, pod red. T. Rudkowskiego, Warszawa 1991, s. 77-79; K. Dumala, Studia z dziejów Szydłowca, „Rocznik Muzeum Świętokrzyskiego” 1967, s. 210.

³ K. Wejchert, Bezimienne miasto, w: Małe miasta. Problemy urbanistyczne stale aktualne, pod red. H. Adamczewskiej-Wejchert i K. Wejchert, Warszawa 1986, s. 286-287; Zob. szerzej, R. Renz, Życie codzienne w miasteczkach województwa kieleckiego 1918-1939, Kielce 1994, s. 13-26.

⁴ A. Sabor, Sztetl. Śladami żydowskich miasteczek: Działoszyce – Pińczów – Chmielnik – Szydłów – Chęciny. Przewodnik, Kraków 2005, s. 144-145.

⁵ J. Rozenberg, Opt – di sztot be un ire Idn, In: Apt. Sefer Zikkaron le'ir va'Em be Jisroel, Tel Aviv 1966, s. 111.

which would gather followers of the *tzaddiks* from Góra Kalwaria, Warki, Opoczno and Koźienice (...) The prayers of the Góra Kalwaria *tzaddik* chassids were stormy and loud, while those of the Warki *tzaddik* chassids were mild and delicate. Followers of the Góra Kalwaria *tzaddik* were conceited and self-confident, and considered that their *tzaddik* was the greatest⁶.”

Regarding Jewish religious schools (*cheder*'s and *talmud torah*'s), one can, more or less, find writings such as this in archival sources - "Education takes place in small, dark, dirty rooms, full of mud and unbearable stuffiness. The family of the teacher, the so-called *melamed*, is also crammed into the same room in which the classes are conducted. Usually, the family was quite numerous"⁷.

However, in memoir, a more sentimental image is presented. The wearisome conditions are omitted. However, childhood years are recalled with tenderness. Chańcia Frydman-Honig, in the already-quoted Przytyk Memorial Book, writes, " We had a school, Beit Yakov (for girls), where we felt free and at ease. In the morning, we went to the Polish school (elementary school) and in the afternoon, we went to Beit Yakov. Many girls studied there. The basis of the lessons were the Five Books of Moses, the history of the Jews, the religious laws. I studied there for several years. There, I learned many good things from the Torah. Our time spent there was good. Excursions were organised. We had a drama group and and we commemorated various historical dates and anniversaries"⁸.

In every small town and in every religious community, an inseparable inordinately important institution was the *mikveh* – the ritual bathhouse – in which were usually organised a gully for the men and a bathtub for the women. From reports of inspections of the religious communities, it was stressed that, in many cases, the Jewish bathhouses, "instead of being temples of cleanliness, were hotbeds of dirt". For hygiene purposes, spray baths were called for⁹. But the *Mikveh* had a specific significance for the Jewish people living in their cramped dwellings without bathrooms. It gave them the opportunity of having a bath, even if only one a week. Szalom Honig writes, "The atmosphere of the *mikveh* had something specific about it. The wooden buckets with hot, boiling water, the beating of oneself with pine brushes, all provided a mood of cleanliness and holidays. The *mikveh*, despite its faults, was not only a place to wash, it also created a specific atmosphere which helped to distinguish weekdays from the sabbath"¹⁰.

In the panorama of every small town, the cemetery held a specific place. It served as an archive of sorts, especially as how gravestones and epitaphs were preserved there.

⁶ Sz. Hong, Partajen un jidiszer sztajger in Przytyk, in: Sefer Przytyk. Macewa Zikaron lekehila jehudit, Ed.D.Sztofisz, Tel Aviv 1973, s. 128-129.

⁷ Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach (APK), Urząd Wojewódzki Kielecki 1918-1939 (UWK I), sygn. 1690. Protokół z lustracji Gminy Wyznaniowej Żydowskiej w Kunowie z 18 sierpnia 1932 r.

⁸ Ch. Frydman-Honig, A filerbik jidysz lebn, In: Sefer Przytyk, s. 114.

⁹ APK, UWK I, sygn. 1960. Protokół z lustracji Gminy Wyznaniowej Żydowskiej w Kunowie z 18 sierpnia 1932 r.

¹⁰ Sz. Honig, Partajen un jidiszer sztajger in Przytyk, s. 126-128.

Jewish cemeteries were unusually rich with gravestones with various types of inscriptions due to the fact that, for centuries, they remained untouched. Renaissance, baroque and classical styles of gravestones have been preserved. Plant and animal motifs constituted the decorative art, objects associated with worship or with the profession practised by the deceased. For women, candlesticks were carved on the gravestones, since it was they who lit the Friday evening Sabbath candles. It is hard to state as to whether the ban on showing the human form enhanced or diminished this rich gravestone art. It was certainly a stimulus to use interesting solutions based on allusion and metaphor.¹¹

Gravestone symbols, similar to epitaphs, usually commemorate that aspect of the deceased's life which related to his occupation, religion, piety and zeal in performing good deeds. With the help of the gravestone text, a memory of aspects of the life of the deceased, both the commendable and the ordinary, was being transmitted. It was believed that emphasising the virtues of the deceased would contribute to reducing their posthumous suffering. On the gravestone of Majer Lewit Liberbejm, who died in 1926 and who was buried in the Szydłowiec cemetery, is written, that " ... he was a man who walked an honest path. He engaged in trade honestly. Every day, morning and evening, he prayed in the synagogue".¹² On the gravestone of Sara Mindel, daughter of Reb Chaim Jehuda, who died in 1926 and who was buried in the Szydłowiec cemetery, it was noted that "... she was good and virtuous, a modest woman held in high regard, training her sons in the Torah"¹³. Inscribed texts, through their biographical-eulogistic character, were an interpretation of the ethical principles of the everyday life of the Jewish people.

The everyday small town life of the Jewish people was arduous and monotonous. Craftsmen and merchants spend most of their time in their stores, small shop and workshops which were, more often than not, located amongst the residences. From research conducted on the small towns of the Kielce Province, it turns out that, during the inter-War period, nearly 80% of small town people lived in one or two-roomed homes where, on average, there were 3-4 people per room¹⁴.

In the monograph *Sztetl Łopuszno*, we read, "Let us look into a Jewish home in Łopuszno. In one of the rooms, as a rule, was a small shop with smallgoods and, where there was no shop, was a simple trademan's workshop or a *cheder* room where children would study with the *melamed*. Sometimes, the home consisted of a few rooms. In that case, they would rent them out to other families"¹⁵.

¹¹ M. Krajewska, *Czas kamieni*, Warszawa 1982, s. 3,5; D. L. Muszyński, *Cmentarze żydowskie*, „Kalendarz Żydowski” 1991/1992, s. 169-170.

¹² A. Penkalla, *Cmentarze żydowskie w kieleckim i radomskim*, w: *Kultura Żydów polskich XIX i XX wieku*, pod red. M. Meduckiej i R. Renz, Kielce 1992, s. 66-67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, s. 68.

¹⁴ R. Renz, *Spółeczności małomiasteczkowe w województwie kieleckim 1918-1939*, Kielce 1990, s. 111-112.

¹⁵ M. Maciągowski, J. Kotlicki, *Sztetl Łopuszno – pamięć przetrwała*, Kielce 2004, s. 45.

An extremely frequent occurrence was where, in the one building, two or more families lived and ran totally separate households. Most often, they would be households of people who were related to each other, e.g. parents with married children. In poorer families, the furniture consisted of the most needed items produced by local craftsmen. There would be beds, benches with backrests, dressers and wardrobes, or trunks for underwear and clothes. In wealthier families, the furniture was more expensive and, apart from being functional, simultaneously fulfilled a decorative role. Stanisław Zychowicz, describes his inter-War family home in Chmelnik thus, "The home in which I grew up once belonged to a Jew. My great-grandfather bought it from Kaufman together with an allotment and furniture and fixtures. One item was a beautiful dresser decorated with motifs associated with Jewish culture. You could recognise, among them, the ark which Noah sailed, a dove with an olive branch and the rainbow which appeared over Mount Ararat. In the centre of the dresser was an alcove which was made to resemble the inside of a synagogue. Inside was an enclosed shelf corresponding to the balcony for women. On its own, it is very beautiful and has characters on it that I have never been able to read"¹⁶. In Jewish homes, it was customary to leave an area unpainted on one wall to symbolise the destruction of Holy Jerusalem. On the eastern walls would be a symbolic picture of the panorama of Holy Jerusalem or of the Wailing Wall, or a plaque decorated with symbolic-ornamental elements, called *mizrach* (the east). In almost every Jewish home, even in the most humble and poor, would be a bookcase full of books, a legacy passed on and added to from generation to generation. Removed from public life, cut off from the current affairs of the world by the walls of a ghetto, these God-fearing Jews drew knowledge and comfort from these books. At dusk, almost every Jew would leave the bustle and tumult of everyday life and would hurry to the *beth hamidrash* to study rabbinical tracts. When children established their own homes, their parents would present them with religious works¹⁷.

Home and family were the focuses of religious life. All religious ceremonies and commandments relating to the Jewish community were passed on by the family. That which made a Jew arose from within the family and existed thanks to the family: "The family is like a pile of stones. If you take one stone away, the whole structure may collapse". This is the way that the Talmud sees the ties between individual members of a family and the whole family as well as between the family and the whole community¹⁸.

Family ties had special meanings. A famous ancestor was the subject of pride, dishonour would cast a shadow on many generations. Elders were respected and cared for, children were indulged, being seen as the hope for the future. They were to guarantee the

¹⁶ M. Maciagowski, P. Krawczyk, *Żydzi w historii Chmielnika*, Kielce 2006, s. 238.

¹⁷ E. Rabin, *Żydowski dom*, w: *Judaizm*, Kraków 1989, s. 105-106; R. Żebrowski, Z. Borzymińska, *Po-lin. Kultura Żydów polskich w XX wieku (zarys)*, Warszawa 1993, s. 43-44.

¹⁸ C. Kugelman, *Die Jidysze Myszpoche (Rodzina żydowska)*, „*Powiększenie*” 1990, nr 1-4, s. 135; A. Unterman, *Żydzi. Wiara i Życie*, Łódź 1989, s. 242.

fulfillment of the mission of the Jewish people as commanded by God. Jewish proverbs convey the immense hope that parents placed in their children: "Which child is your's? – The mother would reply, 'The most beautiful – my children are miracles from God'¹⁹. Tradition dictated that children should be raised with a respect for their parents, for elders and for the learned. When a mother would recite the morning prayer, *Mode ani* (I thank you), with her small child, the child was told to repeat, "I will do what my father and my mother tell me to do and will do whatever good deeds that good and pious people tell me to do. May blessings and auspiciousness fall upon my head! Amen"²⁰.

Family celebrations and religious holidays contributed to the integration of the entire Jewish people, irrespective of place of residence. They provided a feeling of safety, peace and quiet. Amongst Jewish holidays, the *shabbat* held a special place, being designated a sacred day. The Sabbath was a symbol of Jewishness. According to an old Jewish saying, "It is not Israel who preserves the sabbath, it is the sabbath that preserves Israel". Saturday is a group, family holiday. In childhood memories, it is associated with the home, with tradition, with the figure of the mother standing over the candles in a ritual gesture of blessing. "Unforgettable and charming, these Saturday nights remain in our memory, when our mothers spoke, in hushed tones, in the darkness of the room, of 'the God of Abraham'. Nostalgia, the nostalgia due to the passing of Saturday is deeply ingrained within our characters and cannot be forgotten. All Jewish homes were then wonderful Rembrandt paintings, compositions of light and dark with our mothers at the centre", as outstanding Jewish poet, Icyk Manger, remembers the Sabbath²¹.

Associated with the mother, the Sabbath is a land of the feminine mildness, warm and maternal. Women always attached greater importance to family life than did men. Even for women who were engaged in a occupation, the family constituted a basic value. Isaac Bashevis Singer, in his autobiographical novel, "Love and Exile", writes, "In his letters to me, my father constantly warned me to live like a Jew and, God forbid, to not forget or disgrace my heritage. My mother, however, pleaded with me over and over to look after my health, to not catch cold and to not tire myself out. She wished me a long life and expressed the hope that I would marry well and that she would live long enough for me to give her grandchildren"²².

With regard to the size of families, we do not have at our disposal complete, measureable data. Data from the general census of 1921 and 1931, only contains information about domestic households. Unfortunately, it is not possible, on the basis of this data, to state whether these households contained only family members or also contained individuals who were not related, e.g. foster children, domestic workers,

¹⁹ R. Lilientalowa, *Dziecko żydowskie*, Kraków 1927, s. 26, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, s. 49.

²¹ Cyt. za: E. Prokop – Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne*, Kraków 1992, s. 240.

²² I. B. Singer, *Miłość i wygnanie. Wczesne lata – wspomnienia*, Wrocław 1991, s. 136.

apprentices, trainees, etc.. According to the 1931 data, in the Kielce Province, the average number of people in small town households was 4 amongst Poles and 5 amongst Jews. Data relating to people of the Mosaic faith, confirmed by Jewish community council material, indicates that, in small towns in the Kielce Province, the average Jewish family was comprised of 5-6 people²³.

Incomes of the provincial population were dependent upon the size of the family, what they produced and the services that they provided. Lists of contributors to the Jewish community council provide valuable information concerning the financial circumstances of Jewish families. It constituted more or less 10% of the amount of the income tax paid to the State. I will use examples, here, of religious communities from the inter-War Częstochowa district - from Janów, Kłobuck and Krzepice²⁴.

Categories of payers according to the level of communal contribution in cities and towns – settlements of the Częstochowa District in 1929.

Location	No.of Community Members	No.of Families	No of Total Payers	Those who paid in złotych				
				to 5 zł	5-25 zł	25-50zł	50-100 zł	Over 100 zł
Kłobuck	2456	approx.490	391	146	186	47	10	2
Krzepice	2512	approx.500	313	2	263	31	13	4
Janów	300	approx.60	48	-	30	7	9	2
Przyrów	670	approx.135	92	10	64	14	3	1

Source: Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach, Urząd Wojewódzki Kielecki 1918-1939, sygn. 1563 k.25-32; 1763, k. 93; 2646 k. 18-20

This data shows that, even in a boom economy, more or less a quarter of Jewish families were exempted from contributing to the community because of poverty, over half of the Jewish families who paid a contribution less than 25 złotych had an average income, a dozen or so per cent (contributing from 25 to 100 złotych) constituted the richer families, and only 1 or 2 individuals can be recognised as wealthy (contributing above 100 złotych). Only data from the community council in Kłobuck, from the period of the Great Depression, has been preserved. They show that, in 1932, a process of impoverishment evidently took place amongst Jewish families. The number of contributors reduced from 391 to 362, out of which 161 paid a contribution up to 5 złotych, 151 from 5 to 25 złotych, 35 people from 25 to 50 złotych and only one person paid over 100 złotych²⁵.

Research conducted by the Bureau of Economic Statistics at "Cekabe" also shows that, in cities of less than ten thousand inhabitants, one sixth of the Jewish population,

²³ Statystyka Polski, Seria C, z. 86. Drugi powszechny spis ludności z 31 XII 1931r. Województwo kieleckie, Warszawa 1938, tab. 15; APK, UWK I, sygn. 3354. Stan majątkowy gmin wyznaniowych żydowskich woj. kieleckiego na dzień 1 I 1938r.

²⁴ Zob. szerzej: K. Urbański, Gminy żydowskie w województwie kieleckim w okresie międzywojennym, Kielce 2006, s. 234-238, 250-254, 363-366, 412-415.

²⁵ APK UWK I, sygn. 1691. Liczba płatników składki Żydowskiej Gminy Wyznaniowej w Kłobucku w 1932r.

either partly or almost exclusively, survived on money orders sent to them by people who had left the country. A significant reduction in the value of these money orders received, during the Great Depression, led to material ruin for a considerable number of Jewish families²⁶.

In the pages of "Nasz Przegląd", A. Wajntal, a well-known inter-War publicist, writes this, in 1936, about Chmielnik as an example of the poverty of small town families, "We enter a dark, dirty room which serves as a bedroom, diningroom, a children's room and a kitchen. The woman wipes a chair with a rag and asks me to sit down, children (eight of them) gather around her. Words of complaint come flying out of her mouth, 'Oh sir, it's so bad for us (...) We eat only black bread and potatoes. For us, herring is a feast. Gone are the days when we ensured that we had it on Saturdays. Now, we thank God when we have bread'. I leave the hawker's home overwhelmed by the poverty I see everywhere. I visit a few other shawker, everywhere the same gloomy picture, everywhere I feel sorry for their cruel fate. Shoemakers, tailors, stallholders all live in a similar manner. The shoemaker makes a pair of shoes with uppers for 1.80 zł – he works on them for 10 hours, the tailor sells a man's coat for 11 zł, but can only sew two such coats per week²⁷.

The poorest would come to the community council for help. Belonging to the community gave them the possibility of benefitting from its institutions and, for the poor, the chance of getting even the most modest help, such as temporary benefits for the unemployed and poor, thus helping to them to survive. It goes without saying just how much that meant, especially in the years of the Great Depression. The community councils, as well as religious matters (organising and maintaining the rabbinate, establishing and maintaining the synagogues, prayerhouses, kosher slaughterhouses, ritual bathhouses and cemeteries, watching over the religious upbringing of the youth), could conduct charitable and cultural-educational activities, support social welfare institutions, schools and other cultural institutions²⁸. To illustrate this, from an overall budget of 14,519 złotych, the Krzepice Jewish Community Council, in 1933, allocated: 300 zł. for repairs to the cemetery wall, 400 zł for the *Chevra Kadisha*, 850 zł to help the poor, 400 zł for coal for the poor, 3,000 zł for *matzah* for the poor, 100 zł for maintenance of the orphanage, 50 zł for pensions, 700 zł for the building of a house for the gravedigger and for the mortuary, 200 zł for renovations to the *mikveh* and 200 zł to repair Council buildings. The above shows that the council allocated 30.3% (4,400 zł) of its budget towards temporary assistance for the poorest. The rest went towards maintaining the orphanage, the rabbi, the

²⁶ Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych (MSW), mikr. 839/10 k.57.

²⁷ A. Wajntal, Na dnie nędzy małopolskiej, „Nasz Przegląd”, 24 III 1936, s. 9.

²⁸ Zob. szerzej: J. Sawicki, Studia nad położeniem prawnym mniejszości religijnych w państwie polskim, Warszawa 1937, s. 164; R. Renz, Aktywność społeczno-kulturalna gmin wyznaniowych na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku, w: Aktywność kulturalna kościołów i grup wyznaniowych w Polsce w XIX i XX wieku, pod red. M. Meduckiej i R. Renz, Kielce 1995, s. 119-121.

assistant rabbi, council clerks and for the repair and equipping of educational-cultural and charitable institutions²⁹.

During the inter-War period, the Częstochowa council maintained a horticultural school and various trade schools, similarly as did councils in Sosnowiec and Radom. In smaller towns, councils participated in the maintenance of public trade schools which were attended by Jewish youth. Also, the fate of Jewish cultural institutions depended upon the political orientation of the members of boards of management and of the community councils. "The need to subsidise libraries was not always taken under notice. It would happen that the elders would hinder the opening of a library, considering it to be a source of threat to them", writes Marta Pawlina Meducka³⁰.

It should be stressed, here, that community councils exerted a huge influence on the lives of its members, above all in small towns where everyone knew everyone else. Decisions of the community council not only had religious significance, but also secular. Participation on the council board permitted one to be involved in decisions affecting religious life and also the worldly life of Jews. Various Jewish groups tried to obtain a majority in council elections in which, in accordance with tradition, only men participated. According to the regulations, elections were to be universal, equal, secret, direct and proportional. The right to vote was open only to people of the male gender over 25 years of age, whereas itinerants who were Polish citizens of the Mosaic faith were also entitled to vote providing they had lived within the council's district for at least one continuous year and were at least 30 years of age³¹. The right to vote at council elections discriminated against women who constituted over half of the Jewish population, as well as against young people under the age of twenty five. This situation was beneficial for the orthodox.

"For example, no one was worried that the split in votes, during local government elections, would provide anti-Semites with any political gain", writes Jerzy Tomaszewski³².

In smaller cities, there was fierce rivalry for the running of the community councils in the smaller cities between orthodox and zionist groupings, as well as between various local specific interest groups and followers of various *tzaddiks*.

Results of elections from the 1930's indicate that, in the community councils of the smallest towns in the Kielec Province, the orthodox won around 60% of the total council seats. Their greatest electoral support was gained in cities and towns such as Bogoria, Chęciny, Daleszyce, Koprzywnica, Lelów, Przyrów, Przytyk, where community councils were almost exclusively comprised of Agudat representatives. In second place were the

²⁹ K. Urbański, *Gminy żydowskie małe w województwie kieleckim w okresie międzywojennym*, Kielce 2006, s. 253.

³⁰ M. Pawlina-Meducka, *Kultura Żydów województwa kieleckiego (1918-1939)*, Kielce 1993, s.30.

³¹ M. Ringel, *Ustawodawstwo Polski odrodzonej o gminach żydowskich*, w: *Żydzi w Polsce odrodzonej. Działalność społeczna, gospodarcza, oświatowa i kulturalna*, t. II, pod red. I. Schipera, A. Tartakowera, A. Hafftki, Warszawa 1936, s. 247.

³² J. Tomaszewski, *Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów*, Warszawa 1985, s. 173.

Zionists with close to 30% of the council seats. Their greatest representation was in Głowaczów, Gniewoszków, Koźnice and Osiek, where they comprised close to two-thirds (62,5%) of the overall council membership. The influence of other groups was slight. Single representatives of the Bund sat on community councils in Busko Zdrój, Kazanowie, Ostrowiec and Staszów, while for the leftist Poalei Zion in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Iłża, Klimontów, Olkusz, Ostrowiec and Zawichost. In cities and towns in Częstochowa County, the orthodox and their sympathisers predominated. In the 1936 elections, the orthodox won 75% of the seats in Krzepice, 62.5% in Przyrów, while their non-party sympathisers took 100% of the seats in Janów and 62.5% in Kłobuck³³.

Political influence on boards and in the administration of community councils in the big cities varied, where, apart from the orthodox and the zionists, socialists sat (the Bund and Poalei Zion), as well as representatives of the Democratic Folkist movement and independents. In Częstochowa, the most seats were won by the independents (28%), Democrats - Bund sympathisers (22%), the orthodox (17%), the zionists (11%), the Bund (11%), the Mizrahi (5.5%) and representatives of Poalei Zion Right (5.5%). A similar composition of political strength was shown in councils in Będzin, Kielce, Radom and Sosnowiec³⁴.

Community council issues evoked immense passions within the wider Jewish community. They were often the subject of stormy debates and, not infrequently, fistcuffs. The majority of groupings accused community council board members of close-mindedness, nepotism, and, above all, clericalism. The orthodox consistently defended their religious status. They looked upon the development of zionism with distrust and aversion – as a movement profaning the messianic ideal. They detested Folkism and despised its secularism. They looked upon the socialist movement with terror, as a disaster which strikes at the heart of domestic life, which loosens family ties between older and younger generations³⁵. On 26th June 1933, the Szydłowiec Rabbi, Mejlech Rabinowicz, wrote to the Stopnicki alderman, "In the name of the complainant parents and all Jews, I turn to you requesting that you curb the audacity of the youth, to disallow the organisation in Szydłowiec of *Hechalutz (The Pioneer)* due to the fact that this organisation leads to the moral corruption of youth, which is forbidden by religion (...) I am morally convinced that, if you were to place obstacles in the way of this organisation among our youth, then together with their parents, I will be able to lead those young people towards moral, cultural and religious behaviour"³⁶.

³³ APK, UWK I, sygn. 1765, k.11-15; Załącznik do nr SP WM. 8/152/37.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Z. Urbański, *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce*, Warszawa 1932, s. 237-238; P. Johnson, *Historia Żydów*, Kraków 1993, s. 430.

³⁶ APK, UWK I, sygn. 2598. Pismo H. Rabinowicza – rabina osady Szydłów do starosty stopnickiego z 26.VI.1933 r.

Those orders and administrative bans were not enough. During the inter-War years, family life within the Jewish population underwent change. Jewish youth were less likely to listen to their parents or to a rabbi. Rather, they preferred to place their hopes in one or another youth organisation. The position of their parents, once absolute, weakened in the inter-War period and was not strong enough to determine the attitudes of the youth. In the 1930's, Maks Weinreich, in a sociological-historical study of Jewish youth, stressed that "to an ever greater degree, young people are fleeing from traditional ways of living, so that complaints by the older generation are growing"³⁷. Young people in socio-political organisations saw in them, not only a hope for the future, but also attractive possibilities for spending their free time. A Gniewosów resident of that time, Eliza Wajnberg, who, against the will of his father, left a yeshiva in Zwolen after six months because he couldn't see any future in the studying of books, remembers his involvement in a youth organisation thus, "When I returned to Gniewosów, I helped my father (on market days, I carried bags of corn). It was not only me who felt useless. For many boys, there were nothing to do in a small town. Only after joining *Hashomer Hatzair* (The Young Guard), life became interesting. While our parents were waiting for the Messiah, we sang pioneer songs and learned about Israel"³⁸.

Compulsory primary school education, the activity of political parties, cultural-educational institutions and youth organizations influenced a change in the mentality and lifestyle in small towns. It is, however, worth remembering that despite the changes occurring in the everyday lives of Jewish families, a deep attachment to religion and tradition was evident. The ordinary person could not imagine a religious life outside the community council and not under the control of the rabbinate. Despite the establishment of various modern forms of charitable assistance, amongst a decided majority of Jews, the prevailing view was that the most important institution was, to be precise, the community council. It was easiest to turn to it for help. The Jewish community council influenced all fields of social and religious life. It constituted a basic element of the culture of Polish Jews.

³⁷ M. Weinreich, *Studium o młodzieży żydowskiej*, Poznań 1937, s. 17.

³⁸ E. Wajnberg, *Jidysz Geizelsafflech leben sztetl*, in: *Sefer Gniewosów*, Ed. D. Sztokfisz, Izrael 1971, s. 108.

Summary

In inter-War Poland, Jews constituted a significant part of the material and spiritual landscape of small towns. The pre-War *shtetl* is, above all, a disparate environment of cultural customs. Not only did the inhabitants of those towns cultivate their own system of values, they also maintained traditions, rituals and religious rites. The landscape of small towns incorporated numerous places of Jewish sacred and secular architecture. The most significant of these were synagogues, prayerhouses, *mikvot* and cemeteries. Hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, or *chederim* were established as the size and importance of the community grew.

Everyday life of the small-town Jewish population was laborious and monotonous. Craftsmen and merchants spent most of their time in stores, shops, workshops which were, for the most part, located in their dwellings. Research conducted on small towns in the Kielce Province indicates that, during the inter-War period, almost 80% of population lived in one or two-room houses, in which, on average, there were 3-4 people to a room. The fact that two or more families, leading separate households, living under the same roof, became a common phenomenon. Most frequently, they were parents living with their married children.

Home and family were the focus of religious life. All the religious rites and commandments, relating to the Jewish community, were observed by the family. That which made a Jew, a Jew, originated from and existed due to the family. In the inter-War period, the Jewish family struggled with many material difficulties, especially during the Great Depression. Very often, a difficult material situation resulted in various family conflicts including those of lifestyle and culture. Young people were less inclined to listen to their parents and the rabbi and ever-increasing expectations were placed upon the various youth organizations. An important centre of Jewish life was the community council, which influenced all areas of social and religious life. Despite ongoing socio-cultural transformations, it remained a fundamental part of the everyday life of small-town Jews.

