

RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND NON-JEWS IN POLAND, 1918 – 1956

A MICRO-HISTORICAL STUDY ON TARNÓW

The relations between Jews and non-Jews in Poland remain a topic of “explosive force”, maintained the Polish historian Marcin Kula.¹ True, the last decade witnessed repeated controversies on the subject, led with ferocity in the Polish public sphere.² These debates touched upon apparently “sensitive” aspects such as the self-image of the Poles as a collective and the hitherto consolidated conception of Polish history. Besides the increasing public interest in Polish-Jewish history, the scope of research on Jewish past in Poland has been constantly expanding within the last years.³ New publications have highlighted the Second Republic as a multi-cultural realm, antisemitism in Poland, the role of the Poles during the *Shoah* and the history of the Jews in the People’s Republic.⁴ Nevertheless, the field of interest remains by far not exhausted and many questions are still to be answered. This Ph.D. project investigates in the realm of the multilayered relations between Jews and non-Jews in Poland from a micro-historical perspective.

Two main goals conduct my research: Firstly, this study deliberately exceeds historic caesuras. The relations between Jews and non-Jews are examined in the time-period from the outsets of the Second Republic, during the German occupation and the *Shoah* until the post war years. The study thus consistently places the *Shoah* in the context of the ante- and postwar period. It shows the pre-war history of the Polish-Jewish relations, growing antisemitism and nationalism in Poland in the 1930s as well as the manifold aspects of everyday interaction before the war in a town, in which almost half of the population before 1939 was Jewish. These every-day contacts were not terminated abruptly by the German occupiers, albeit they were subverted from the advent of the Second World War. Yet, there was still evidence of help from the non-Jews towards their Jewish neighbors, business partners or acquaintances. On the other hand we also find cases of opportunistic attitudes and cruelty in the new situation of war – cases of exploitation of Jews by Poles, extortion, and even killing. The research project explores the role of the Poles as “bystanders” during the *Shoah*, and scrutinizes their role, liability as well as continuity and discontinuity of antebellum attitudes towards the Jewish population. The project also examines the question of how German racist segregation was perpetuated in post-war conceptions and is even palpable until this day.

Secondly, the focus of the study is Tarnów in Lesser Poland – it is thus a micro-historical approach to the broader field of interest. In 1939 around 25.000 Jews lived here, which amounted to almost half of the town’s population. In 1946 approximately 1.200 Jews lived in Tarnów, but the number decreased continuously. Yet, different Jewish committees and parties were formed. The second goal of the research project is to show case studies spanning the whole time under analysis and to depict how developments and events on the macro-scale, war and destruction, the (manifold) reshaping of East-

¹ Kula, Marcin: *Uparta sprawa. Żydowska? Polska? Ludzka?* Kraków 2004, S. 5.

² See the debat es around Gross, Jan Tomasz: *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka. Sejny 2000* [English publication 2001]; *Ibid.: Fear : anti-semitism in Poland after Auschwitz ; an essay in historical interpretation.* New York 2006. [Polish publication 2008], *Ibid.: Złote żniwa.* Kraków 2011 [English publication 2001]; Grabowski, Jan: *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942 – 1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu.* Warszawa 2011.

³ Craddy, Kate / Levy, Michael et al.: *Poland – A Jewish Matter.* Warszawa 2010.

⁴ Cała, Alina: *Żyd - wróg odwieczny? Antysemityzm w Polsce i jego źródła.* Warszawa 2012; Engelking-Boni, Barbara: *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942 – 1945.* Warszawa 2011; *Ibid.: "Szanowny panie gistapo" Donosy do władz niemieckich w Warszawie i okolicach w latach 1940 – 1941.* Warszawa 2003; cf Rother publications of the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów (IFiS PAN), publications od Dariusz Libionka, Natalia Aleksium, Grzegorz Berendt, August Grabski; Steffen, Katrin: *Jüdische Polonität. Ethnizität und Nation im Spiegel der polnischsprachigen jüdischen Presse 1919 – 1939.* Göttingen 2004 (short selection).

Central Europe fashioned the Polish–Jewish *Lebenswelt* and the entangled Polish-Jewish relations in every-day life. How did the Tarnovians cope and react to the upheavals and cataclysms of the 20th century – what strategies and choices of action did they develop? The aim of micro-history is to broaden the horizon by drawing the gaze away from a local society, a small group or an individual as a seemingly self-contained and autonomous entity and towards the multilayered networks and complex correlations the former are entangled in (Hand Medick).⁵ By analyzing experiences of an individual or a small group in a broader context and subjective perceptions in a historical frame this investigation promises new insights on the subject matter from an every-day and bottom-up perspective.

The study is not structured chronologically but follows theme-orientated case studies, each of them spans the time between 1918 – 1956 with different foci. They are devoted to various Polish-Jewish-non-Jewish realms of interaction and negotiation. The chapters are covering public space, local politics, places of work, schools, religious life and the fate of helpers and blackmailers and thus relate the interwoven, sometimes cohesive, sometimes hostile Polish-Jewish *Lebenswelt* of Tarnów. The study combines many aspects of Polish-Jewish history and different “eras”. It thus integrates various impulses from historical and sociological research and discusses them by exemplifying the case of Tarnów. Different sources in Polish, Yiddish, German and English were of great value for my research (local newspapers, protocols of the city council, Police records, court records, correspondence of party and club matters, records of various commissions, protocols of school conferences, memoirs, autobiographic texts and oral history interviews).

Case studies are complementing political and social history, moreover they are provoking important impulses in order to reconsider the relations between Jews and non-Jews. On the basis of Rogers Brubaker’s understanding of ethnicity without groups my study acts on the assumption of dynamic and situative ethnicity.⁶ Various, constantly interchanging and overlapping groups were fashioned in Tarnów, they were structured along political divides, economic or social status, common interests of their adherents. These groups of interest were forming different alliances according to their agenda and purposes. Ethnic, confessional or national categories could play a role therein but did not necessarily have to. The study thus asks in what way, when and to what interest was ethnicity mobilized? How were group affiliation, exclusion of the “Other”, secular identity options fashioned in a time, when religious alterity played a decreasing role.

The scale of analysis may be small, but not so the object of interest – the study of cases from Tarnów in the time before, during, an after the *Shoah* can thus contribute to the understanding of the complex and multi-layered dynamics of the relations between Jews and non-Jews in Poland.

⁵ Medick, Hans: Quo vadis Historische Anthropologie? In: Historische Anthropologie 9 (2001) S. 78–92, hier S. 87.

⁶ Brubaker, Rogers: Ethnicity without groups. Cambridge, Mass. 2004.