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Jewish Settlement in Lower Silesia 1945 – 1950

Currently, the issues of Polish-Jewish relations and anti-Semitism in Poland are the topic of hot discussions and debates. The falsified image produced during the communist period needs evaluation and reliable research. Besides some more general and often widely discussed papers, e.g. *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: an Essay in Historical Interpretation* by Jan Tomasz Gross, a number of more detailed works concerning these particular communities appeared during the last years. The research related to the presence of the Jews in the so-called “Regained Territories” is also related to the growing interest in the history of these regions, as they, and especially Lower Silesia, became the centre of the Jewish life in Poland after the war.

1. The Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Poland

The idea of Jewish resettlement in Lower Silesia after the war was strongly supported by the Polish government. In order to show to the outside world that they could manage the extraordinary work of resettling the “Regained Territories”, they tried to mobilise all available forces. The Jewish settlers were also engaged into the reconstruction of the areas joined to Poland. Moreover, there were already about 7,000 Polish Jews, who had managed to survive in the camps of Lower Silesia and who were willing to stay in these areas. In June 1945, the Province Jewish Committee (Wojewódzki Komitet Żydowski called WKŻ) of Lower Silesia issued a memorandum to the Ministry of Public Administration, stating that for many Jews a return to their previous places of residence was impossible. The annihilation of their families and homes was impossible to bear by the ones who had managed to survive. It was important for the Jews at that time to live together among people who had experienced similar cruelties and were friendly and helpful to each other.¹ Moreover, many of the Jewish settlers wanted to gain some compensation for their suffering during the war by taking over the property of the Germans.² It should be mentioned here that in these years few concepts concerning the future of the Jewish community in Poland existed. The community was extremely divided. There were eleven political parties, out of which eight were registered.³ Zionist parties were aimed at emigrating because the Jewish state in Palestine remained the crucial idea. The Jewish Fraction of PPR – Polish Worker’s Party (communists) – and Bund (socialists) opted for staying in Poland in order to restore Jewish life in Poland.⁴

2. The Jewish Population in Lower Silesia

The first Jewish committees, e.g. Dzierżoniów, Bielawa, Wałbrzych⁵, were founded spontaneously already in May 1945. The Jews who had survived in Silesia were trying to organise themselves in order to provide safety, basic healthcare and food supplies for the survivors. It can be estimated that in September 1945 there were about 10,000 Jews in Lower Silesia. (Table 1) In the beginning, the settlers were mainly choosing smaller towns of the region, especially Dzierżoniów, Ludwikowice, Wałbrzych. WKŻ had its headquarters first in Dzierżoniów and only in April 1946 it moved to Wrocław.⁶ In the beginning of 1946, the repatriation of the Polish Jews from the Soviet Union started. It was estimated that about 125,000 to 150,000 Jews were still in the Soviet Union at the end of 1945. The first transports were sent mainly to Dzierżoniów, Wałbrzych and Wrocław. WKŻ planned later to settle the arriving persons in the smaller towns of Lower Silesia, nevertheless often it was introduced by force as most of the newcomers preferred to live in bigger cities, because of the greater safety and economic reasons.⁷ In the summer of 1946, there were already about 90,000 Jews in Lower Silesia. In the whole of Poland about 192,000 Jews were registered, which gives an insight into the movements of the Jewish population. When we compare the number of Jews in the pre-war centres of Jewish settlement, like Lublin (with ca. 40,000 before the war and 4,500 after), Warsaw (375,000 and 8,000), Kraków (60,000 and 13,000) and Łódź (223,000 and 30,000)⁸ with the resettlement of Lower Silesia it becomes easily visible what kind of social and population changes within the Jewish community took place in Poland after World War II.

3. Emigration and the Decline of the Jewish Life in Poland

In February 1946, the Emigration Office was opened in Warsaw. It was followed in March by the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and in April by the Jewish Agency for Palestine (Pal-Amt). Nevertheless, already in 1944 illegal organisations – so called *Bricha* – helped Jewish emigrants to cross the border in order to get to Palestine or the USA. One of the ways used to get the Jews out of the country led over the southern border (office in Wrocław).⁹ Thus, Lower Silesia was a stop on the way to emigration. The reasons for emigration were various. Growing anti-Semitism in Poland, the emergence of the state of Israel and also terrifying memories of Holocaust resulted in the mass emigration of Jews. Many Jews were also dissatisfied with the political changes in Poland and the communist reality, which they had got to know during their exile in the Soviet Union.¹⁰ As Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, noted they „wanted to run away from communism as far as possible, and the best solution was to separate by an ocean.”¹¹ Between July 1946 and the beginning of 1950, about 60,000 Jews left Lower Silesia. (Table 1)

Date	Number of Jews
May 1945	7,000
July 1946	90,000
February 1947	52,000
Beginning of 1950	30,000
1960/61	7 - 8,000

Table 1 Jewish population in Lower Silesia 1945 - 1960

The relatively independent political and social life in 1945 and 1946 began to change from 1947 and 1948. The new Polish government was established and built certain structures in order to control the country.¹² Political pressure and repression led to the dissolution of all the parties, which were absorbed by the PPR, creating the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party). Jewish Fraction also joined PZPR, demanding the same from Bund, which, however, was not unanimous. Similar processes also transformed the Jewish community and in general the local committees were becoming more and more unified and dependant on the WKŻ. In October 1950, the Jewish committees were united with the Żydowskie Towarzystwo Kultury (Jewish Association of Culture) creating a new organisation, dominated by the PZPR members – Towarzystwo Kulturalno-Społeczne Żydów w Polsce (the Culture-Social Association of Jews in Poland).¹³ Thus, the independence and the diversity of Jewish life were over. The process of the liquidation of Jewish life in Poland continued until 1968, when the anti-Jewish campaign broke out in the well-known eruption of the so-called March 68 ("Marzec 68")¹⁴. By then, many officials and public service workers had been fired and most of the Jews had left Poland.¹⁵

4. Summary

The Polish government as well as some Jewish organisations wanted to reconstruct the Jewish life in Poland after 1945 in the areas obtained by Poland after World War II, especially in Lower Silesia. It was easier to settle in these territories as far as emotional, psychological and economical reasons were concerned. However the tragedy of the Holocaust, the collapse of the pre-war social structures and the new political situation in the world, i.e. the emergence of the state of Israel and the political changes in Poland made these plans impossible. Between 1946 and 1968, more than 200,000 Jews left Poland.

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¹ Szaynok, Bożena: Osadnictwo żydowskie na Dolnym Śląsku 1945-1950, Wrocław 2000, p. 18-19.

² Egit, Jakub: Rok życia żydowskiego na Dolnym Śląsku, in: Nowe Życie, 15.07.1946.

³ Cała, Alina/ Danter-Śpiewak, Helena: Dzieje Żydów w Polsce 1944 - 1968. Teksty źródłowe, Warszawa 1997, p.79-84;

Waszkiewicz, Ewa: Kongregacja Wyznania Mojżeszowego na Dolnym Śląsku na tle polityki wyznaniowej Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej 1945-1968. Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis, Wrocław 1999, p. 24.

⁴ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 10, 14.

⁵ Wieczorek, Paweł: Wałbrzych. Żydzi wałbrzyscy po II wojnie światowej. in: historycy.pl: 8 (24) 2007, [Accessed 29.11.2007].

⁶ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 37, 56.

⁷ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 44-47.

⁸ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 54.

⁹ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 88-90; Waszkiewicz, Wyznania, 1999, p. 20.

¹⁰ Waszkiewicz, Wyznania, 1999, p. 31.

¹¹ Szczęsna, Joanna: Powszechna rzecz zabijanie. Wywiad z Markiem Edelmanem, in: Gazeta Wyborcza, 19.01.2008

¹² Kaszuba, Elżbieta: Między propagandą a rzeczywistością Polska ludność Wrocławia w latach 1945-1947, Wrocław 1997, p. 85, 89, 223.

¹³ Szaynok, Osadnictwo, 2000, p. 190f..

¹⁴ Cała/ Danter-Śpiewak, Żydów w Polsce, 1997, p. 176.

¹⁵ Cała/ Danter-Śpiewak, Żydów w Polsce, 1997, p. 93.