In the history of Polish literature and—in a broader sense—Polish social thought in the second half of the nineteenth century, the most important influence was that of the ‘Positivists’: a group of writers which formed after the unsuccessful January Uprising against Russia in 1863. Rejecting the romantic and revolutionary attitudes characteristic of Polish thinking in previous decades, they focused instead on pragmatic action, referred to as ‘organic work’. For the Polish Positivists, educational matters held an extremely important place in their programme for the reform of Polish society. Their general view was that a new and better society could be shaped, first through widespread changes in the educational system, a topic of prominence in their journals; and, in a broader sense, through the spread of knowledge. Stressing the importance of education in establishing a well-developed society, one of the leading representatives of Warsaw’s Positivism, Aleksander Świętochowski, wrote that in considering the role of education in reducing crime when evaluating ‘the punitive and the exhortative’ methods in education in order to create a citizenry in which crime would be reduced only the latter could achieve this object. ‘Only that system will achieve positive results which manages to master human nature internally, not externally.’

It is interesting that Świętochowski also used these words when discussing the concept of Jewish distinctiveness which he characterized as ‘Jewish separatism’.

The issue of Jewish education emerged during the debate over the place of the Jewish community in Polish society. Although this question did not occupy a central place in that discussion, the fact that Jewish education was regarded as one of the principal sources of ‘Jewish separatism’ meant that the topic was discussed with great emotion. The institution that received the greatest attention was the heder.

What is the image of the heder that emerges in Positivist journalism? Eliza Orzeszkowa wrote of heders as seats of ‘superstitions, violent rapes, physical and intellectual torments, and fairytales under the name of science’. She claimed that the education obtained within their walls as well as in the bet-hamidrash was generally solely religious and did not provide young Jews with any knowledge of the modern world, the world in which they would be expected to live. ‘These students, living within the walls [of their schools] exist in the period of Akiba and Gamaliel, in the period when Roman emperors turned the Jerusalem Temple into ruins.’ In describing the typical product of a traditional Jewish school, she asked in a manner characteristic of the Positivists: ‘Has [he] ever heard about duties of inhabitants of this country towards this country, about returning of favours, about the solidarity of interests of an individual and society?’ Bolesław Prus had a similar view, claiming that heder education was ‘unpedagogic, unhygienic, behind the times by some nineteen centuries, and lethal.’ He called its programme ‘medieval to the highest degree’.

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1 A. Świętochowski, ‘Żyd w karczmie i Żyd w szkole’, Prawda 1881, no 48.
2 E. Orzeszkowa, O Żydach i kwestii żydowskiej (Warsaw, 1882), 36.
3 Ibid., 36.
4 Ibid.
5 B. Prus, in Kurier Warszawski no 61, 18 March reprinted in Kroniki, vol. IV (Warsaw, 1955), 44.
even traditional Jewish education altogether, as a hotbed of backwardness and illiteracy. He wrote that illiteracy ‘is to a nation what lack of blood is to a human being’.  

Heders are pictured negatively not only in journalism but also in some works of fiction written by Positivists. Before discussing the heder’s reform in 1879, Prus gave a grotesque description of traditional Jewish education. In his short story ‘Sen Jakuba’ (Jacob’s Dream), published in 1875, the main character learned ‘that all the wisdom of this world consisted in reading Talmud with a mournful voice by all students at the same time. If any of them was not shouting loudly enough, pronouncing fast enough, or lamenting mournfully enough, then a hard-hearted teacher used physical force on the most prominent part of the tucked up student’s personality.’

Orzeszkowa’s Meir Ezofowicz provides the clearest fictional image of the heder. In this work—paradoxically the greatest expression of interest in the Jewish world at that time—the heder is a gloomy and outmoded place where children are subject to mental as well as physical violence. The very description of the place is emotionally bleak: ‘This exterior was narrow, gloomy, stinking, and crowded. Under a small, black ceiling and between four narrow and black walls, on a floor hidden under quite an impressive layer of litter and dirt, in damp, dusty, heavy air a grey mass was swinging and seething with concerted, impetuous murmuring whose essence and components were impossible to distinguish at first glance.’

It is no coincidence that in such a space one of the most important scenes of the novel takes place when the title-character, Meir Ezofowicz, a young Jewish progressive, confronts the heritage he rejects—the traditional Jewish world. When the heder’s melamed, Reb Mosze, starts physically to abuse one of the boys, Meir defends the child, symbolically pushing and knocking down the persecutor. Meir then declares what obviously represents the writer’s views: ‘Reb Mosze! You are destroying the brains of Jewish children, and you are tearing pity from their hearts. . . . ’ To complement this dark picture, it is worth noting that the melamed, presented so negatively, is revealed to be a murderer.

This scene deserves special attention. As I have pointed out, Orzeszkowa’s novel without doubt could be regarded as the most comprehensive expression of interest in the Jewish question of this literary generation. She seriously researched the topic before writing her book, enabling her to create a reliable, although largely ideologized, vision of the Jewish world. It is also worth highlighting that Orzeszkowa was, in her own way, charmed by the traditional Jewish world—often despite the views that she presented in her programmatic journalistic articles. However, as far as heder is concerned, she was consistent: both her journalism and her literary visions are pejorative, illustrating her view that the heder’s educational agenda was destructive for Jewish youth.

The third representative of Polish Positivism, Aleksander Świętochowski, also speaks disapprovingly about heders. In 1879, Świętochowski went to great lengths in his radicalism, advocating the closure of the heder. He wished to involve Jews in public education common for all social groups. This suggestion, considered extreme, met with strong objection from the weekly journal Izraelita, representing the views of Warsaw’s maskilim. The paper instead supported a reform of the traditional Jewish school system. In reply to Izraelita, Świętochowski wrote in Nowiny: ‘We know heders but we do not accept them in any form, purified or dirty. We only want the citizens of one country to grow up together so that their brotherhood is not an idle expression.’
Świętochowski maintained this attitude in early 1882 when, after the Warsaw pogrom, he tried to understand the causes of the violence. He considered the main source to be mutual separatism and narrow-mindedness, which he felt could be overcome by education. He wrote that agreement between the two sides could be reached only when ‘by means of education we will purify the Christian people from wild impulses’ and at the same time destroy sources of Jewish separatism, including, above all, traditional Jewish education. In his view, enlightened Jews, as representatives of their communities, should ‘stand in front of the government and say: we are begging for obligatory education and for assimilating Jews with the rest of people with whom they live . . . we are asking that Israeli youth be included in the general plan of education; we are asking for severe laws against the present separatism.’

Similar were put forward by Orzeszkowa after the 1881 pogrom: ‘The first and absolute condition for introducing prosperity and improved morality to Jewish communities seems to be in abolishing . . . heder, these pillars which support an execrable edifice of separatism, these oceans of fairytales mixed with one drop of truly religious education. No one can or should demand that Jewish children be brought up unacquainted with the religious faith of their ancestors, but let them learn about it in the same way that children of other religions do in secular schools. . . .’ Orzeszkowa, like Świętochowski, wished for secular supervisors of Jewish communities to have a major role in introducing such changes.

In comparison to Orzeszkowa and Świętochowski, Bolesław Prus’s view of the heder can be perceived as moderate. Despite his opposition to the institution, in discussions on its reform he opposed its immediate abolition and replacement by modern elementary schools. Simultaneously, however, and with great sympathy, he highlighted attempts to introduce Jews to modern forms of education. His attitude towards the evening school for boys founded in Lublin is illustrative; there, in addition to arithmetic, geography, and calligraphy, students were taught Polish and Russian. Prus stated that ‘this civic deed . . . deserves the highest reward’ and that ‘Jews from Lublin are a good model for the whole country.’ With admiration, he also described the Higher Commercial School founded in Warsaw by Leopold Kronenberg. It should be noted, however, that Prus’s statements were made prior to the pogrom in Warsaw, an event which made the ‘Jewish problem’ more acute and, without doubt, influenced later statements about the education of young Jews. It is also intriguing that Prus himself did not comment on this topic immediately after the pogrom.

While the subject of Jewish education took on less importance in Positivists’ later statements, it did not entirely disappear. Discussion focused, however, on other areas. Violent verbal attacks on heder subsided, yet there appeared—especially in Prus’s statements—words of appreciation for at least some aspects of traditional Jewish learning, especially in comparison to home education. In 1907, pointing to the disastrous levels of illiteracy among young Polish men, Prus noted that almost all Polish Jews ‘can read, write, and count in their language’. In one of his last statements, he said: ‘Thanks to various controls and prohibitions, elementary “education” [of Jews] is of a much higher quality than among Polish people.’ In this assertion, the word education is underlined, proving that Prus never abandoned his hostility towards the traditional model of Jewish education. However, he could point to its advantages and to its efficiency, as far as elementary literacy was concerned.

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13 Ibid., 249.
14 E. Orzeszkowa, O Żydach i kwestii zydowskiej, 41.
The problem of traditional Jewish education was for Polish Positivists only part of a broader question of the possibility of assimilation for Jews living among Christians in Polish territory. In this respect, the Positivists did not differ greatly from representatives of enlightened Jewish circles who, from the beginning of the 1860s, proposed reforms in Jewish education.20 Hopes for reforms that would modernize the Jewish community through education were expressed, for example, by Julian Weinberg, from 1861. Weinberg stated that Jewish achievements ‘not filled with the juice of life from new discoveries in the domain of nature, and new discoveries in the domain of arts, make their [Jews’] view look narrow-minded, one-sided, and are tampering all progress and depriving them of the courage to abandon their habits and to take a wider road.’21 To Polish maskilim, education was the means of achieving the long-term goal of ‘Europeanization’ of Jews, as argued by Markus Jastrow, rabbi in Warsaw during the January uprising. In recalling Jastrow, it is significant to mention that Orzeszkowa accepted his views, illustrating that the opinions of Polish maskilim influenced the opinions of Polish Positivists. Such influence also influenced Orzeszkowa’s description of a heder in Meir Ezofowicz; a remarkably similar description had appeared several years earlier in Izraelita,22 representing the views of Polish Jews who strove to assimilate. However, despite the similarities, there were also differences: circles of enlightened Jews were writing about actual conditions and their suggestions were less radical than those of their Polish, progressive colleagues, whose main goal was not to modernize the Jewish community in Poland but to complete its assimilation into Polish society as quickly as possible. To the Polish progressives, modern education could best hasten the achievement of this goal.

20 Z. Borzymińska, Szkolnictwo żydowskie w Warszawie 1831-1870 (Warsaw, 1994); especially 116.
21 Ibid., 117.
22 Ibid., 273.