Jewish Approaches to Making a Home in Post-War Poland, 1944–1949

Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak

By the conclusion of the Second World War in Europe in May 1945, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP) had registered 46,662 Jews living inside the borders of the new Polish state. The Jewish population of Poland steadily increased in the immediate post-war years, from 106,492 in January 1946 to a peak of 240,489 by June of the same year. The population increase was the result of two repatriation agreements: the first between Poland and the governments of the Soviet republics of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, and the second between Poland and the government of the Soviet Union. The majority of the survivors were single or widowed men, with fewer women and relatively few children or elderly people. The Jewish population was highly mobile both within Poland, most moving from smaller towns to larger towns or cities, or outside Poland through either legal or illegal emigration. An extensive social reshuffling, planned and enforced as part of the new policy of ‘productivization’ of the Jewish population, also occurred within the survivor community.

Regardless of whether they managed to survive the war in a concentration or labour camp, in hiding in the forest or on the ‘Aryan’ side, or as participants in the resistance movement, the survivors’ sense of identity had been shaken. It made no difference whether or not they had identified with the Jewish community before the war; Nazi racial law in occupied Poland had erased all earlier identifications—or at least subordinated them to Nazi concepts. However, despite some common features, there were differences in the survivors’ psychological responses after the war.

Yael Danieli’s research on survivor families indicates that there is a connection between the circumstances in which Jews survived and their accommodation to post-war

3 Through the policy of ‘productivization’ the authorities attempted to change the social-professional structure of the Jews by replacing traditionally ‘Jewish’ occupations with ones regarded as more ‘productive’, i.e. in agriculture and industry. The programme was supported by all political parties except the Folkists, and by the Jewish as well as Polish authorities; its implementation was endorsed by international Jewish organizations like the Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and the ORT (Association for the Propagation of Professional and Agricultural Work among Jews.) Productivization was intended to create an image of the ‘new’ Jew, and indirectly to contribute to the fight against antisemitism by contradicting the stereotype. It was also supposed to help Jews re-establish their roots by creating workplaces for them.
circumstances. Similarly, survivors themselves stressed the significance of the conditions in which they managed to survive the war. ‘The ghetto enforced a continuous struggle for survival’, one survivor remarked.

Moreover, unlike in a concentration camp, you had to care not only for yourself but also for your family and your relatives. Your child was dying of hunger, your wife was succumbing to tuberculosis; all of this multiplied the despair and [either] gave you courage . . . or led to apathy and the erosion of the survival instinct. There were many more suicides in ghettos than there were in concentration camps. And there were group suicides of whole families.

Another survivor spoke of her life in the ghetto. ‘You could be yourself’, Helena Adler commented. ‘Germans weren’t standing over everybody’s shoulder all the time. Only Jews were around, the Jewish administration. There was no fear of informers. Those who were in hiding were more in danger of being denounced. Their psychology is tainted differently than that of the ghetto Jews.’ A survivor who hid on the Aryan side with a group of Jews recalled: ‘It gradually got better rather than worse—unlike in the camps, where people got more and more depressed.

In recalling the emotions that they felt in the immediate post-war period, survivors most often told of sadness, despair, emptiness and loneliness. These emotions were strengthened by the joy of liberation, which triggered ‘magical expectations’ of triumph and of finding family members alive. Anna Mous, who was born in 1922 and survived the war, first in the ghetto in Przemysł and after 1942 by hiding in the forest, recalled her disappointment in a post-war interview: ‘When the Red Army entered in September [1939], [the man who supplied us with food] sent a Soviet to our tunnel and he told us to get out. I returned to my friends in Przemysł. I couldn’t find anyone from my family, so I kept asking myself, why am I so eager to continue living? What for?’

In the account of Maria Klein, who escaped with her fifteen-year-old son from Lviv to Białystok (her other son and husband perished), she states: ‘Now I can fully grasp my tragedy. All delusions and hopes are gone. Nobody will return to us our dear deceased, so cruelly murdered.

Regina Fingier was a bacteriologist and graduate of the University of Strasbourg who was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto until 1942, when she went into hiding on the Aryan side. An informer landed her in the Pawiak prison and from there she was sent to

---

6 H. Adler quoted in ibid., 62.
7 M. Prokopczuk (pseud.) quoted in ibid., 105.
9 Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (hereafter, AŻIH) 301/317.
10 AŻIH, 301/12
Majdanek. She recalled: ‘I was in this concentration camp for eleven weeks. I lost my son and my reason for living.’

Hanna Barasz survived the liquidation of the Białystok ghetto, and then escaped from a transport to Treblinka and hid in the forest. Her four-year-old daughter perished. Barasz remembers: ‘Finally in mid-March, we heard the thunder of cannons and I knew the hour of liberation was coming…and then the moment we had waited for so long finally came…. Only now do I feel my loneliness. I am alone in the whole world.’

In the memoir of Nina Boni, who was born in Warsaw in 1930, the author recollects: ‘On January 15, 1945, the victorious Red Army entered. Only then did I start to cry. After a few days I discovered that my emotional state during the occupation had been better than it is now that I’m free. Now one misses relatives, misses school and education. During the occupation, I spent all my time thinking about how to avoid being caught and how to survive until the German crimes ended in order to avenge the blood of our dear ones.’

The distressed psychological state of the survivors was aggravated by their poor physical condition and material circumstances. A memo of the CKŻP to the British-American Commission for Palestine reads: ‘Those who survived in Poland are in most cases broken, physically and psychologically, by their horrible experiences in death camps, forests, and hideouts, at the cemetery of the millions of their brothers and sisters, mothers and children. They are mostly alone, with no homes, no families or friends, no moral or material support; they are destroyed people.’

According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, in 1945 and even in the first half of 1946, the Jews in Poland were plagued by hunger and disease. A report of the Section for Aid to the Jewish Population of the Presidium of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN, Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego) reads: ‘Most of our subjects remain without clothing, shoes, and underwear; [these items] were worn out by the many years spent in forests and hideouts.’ The report underscores the survivors’ catastrophic housing situation as well.

The psychological state of the survivors was also influenced by the fact that when they returned to their pre-war homes, many Poles greeted them with hostility. Nobody expected the return of the Jews. Their houses and workplaces had new Polish owners. Moreover, the new owners were afraid that the Jews would reclaim their property. Without any support from the local authorities, Jews were completely helpless; they were

---

11 AŻIH, 301/167.
12 AŻIH, 301/15.
13 Cited in M. Hochberg-Mariańska and N. Gruss (eds), Dzieci oskarżają, (Kraków–Łódz–Warsaw, 1947), 11
14 Przełom, 1 (August 1946), 11.
16 At that time there were approximately 2,200 persons.
17 Referat dla spraw pomocy ludności żydowskiej. Trzecie sprawozdanie z działalności za okres 16.IX.1944–10.X.1944’, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Referat dla spraw pomocy ludności żydowskiej, Mf 24269 XI/6 k.16 [???].
18 Ibid., k.16, k.23, 29, 37.
simply afraid to claim their property. An account of the experience of the Jews who emigrated to Palestine states: ‘But thus far nothing has been done to make possible the return of even a portion of the loot to the remaining Jews. The Jews see their stolen property with their own eyes, and yet they are helpless to do anything about it.’\textsuperscript{19} The hostile attitude of the lower bureaucracy is described in a memo sent by the Ministry of Public Administration to the administration of the Kielce województwo (district): ‘In Jędrzejów, the starosta Feliks rejects all Jewish cases. The same is true in Chęciny and Chmielnik. In Ostrowiec, the town council summoned the representatives of the Jewish Committee and demanded that they send all the Jews to work in the mines.’\textsuperscript{20}

Many survivors remembered with bitterness the questions, full of hostile surprise (‘Are you still alive?’), with which their pre-war neighbours greeted them. Survivors returning from the east encountered hostility from Polish society the moment they crossed the border. This account by Halina Jodko-Kamińska is shocking:

[In 1946] we reached Biała Podlaska. The train stopped for a long time so we went out to get some fresh air after the long trip in a stuffy car. I went with my mother towards the forest to see some greenery. On the road we saw a group of young people in riding pants, long boots, jackets, and caps.

‘Where are you coming from?’
‘From Kazakhstan. They let us go only now.’
‘You’re a Jew, aren’t you?’
My hair was red, I had bulging eyes and a sick thyroid gland. I explained to them that I wasn’t.
‘Which cars are Jews riding in?’
‘Why? They are travelling with us.’
‘You are travelling together with Jews?’ They were surprised.
‘We were deported together, and we’re coming back together. Why are you asking?’
‘We are from the forest. We’re the partisans and we fight.’
We went on. We passed some young people with a basket full of food. They asked us if there were any scouts. I said there were none. They told us that we should answer ‘yes,’ if anyone asked if we were scouts. This was to make known who was a Pole and who wasn’t. A ‘scout’ was code for a Pole. They didn’t want to give food to the Jews because [they believed that] the Jews had harmed people during the Soviet occupation. The train started to move away slowly and young people with iron rods ran up. They started beating the Jews who sat in the open doorways. We pulled our Jews to the back of the cars; we felt bad for them.
It got dark. The train ran on for half an hour and then stopped. A banging started up in the cars: ‘Hand us the Jews.’
We heard shots. The Jews begged, ‘Don’t give us away.’ We told them to lie down on the floor. I went to the edge of the car and asked what was going on.
‘Hand us the Jews.’

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Haaretz}, 19 Apr. 1945, 2; 2 Sept. 1945, 3; quoted from Weinryb, ‘Poland’, 244.
\textsuperscript{20} Ministry of Public Administration, Political Department, Nationalities Section, 787, pp. 8, 12.
“They suffered in Siberia just the same as the rest of us”, I said. The people outside answered: ‘You don’t know how much harm they did here. They collaborated with the communists, and they were even harming you there.’

‘That’s correct, but leave these [Jews] alone.’

Somewhere at the back of the train, a fight had started, and a Jew was dragged out and beaten. The Poles in the last car fought off the attackers, pulled [the Jew] back into the train, and the train rolled on. The railroad service people told us they had seen such incidents several times before.21

The scale of the problem is evident from a letter dated 25 June 1946 to the Head Representative of the Government for Repatriation, Minister Wolski. According to the letter:

The Political Department of the Ministry of Public Administration has informed us that it has received information from the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland regarding assaults by the NSZ [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, National Armed Forces] bands on trains carrying people repatriated from the Soviet Union. On June 8 and 23, several repatriates were beaten and abducted by the NSZ. We consider it necessary to escort the trains with repatriates from the Soviet border to their places of destination.22

According to the data of the CKŻP, 350 Jews were killed in 1945, and about 800 were killed during the first months of 1946.23 The Kielce pogrom in July 1946 convinced many survivors that Polish antisemitism was incurable and that, as a result of war-induced demoralization, it had assumed a murderous character. Yet Kielce was just a symbol. There were also pogroms in Rzeszów in July 1945, in Kraków in August 1945, and elsewhere. Although the situation seemed to have improved in 1947, documents from the Ministry of Public Security show that there was a threat of pogroms even in 1949.24

It is clear that some of the survivors had no desire to remain in Poland. They did not want to live, —and could not live, in the place where their families, friends, and acquaintances had perished along with their entire pre-war world. Many repatriates from the east regarded Poland as a stop along their route elsewhere (primarily to Palestine). Their belief that they were disliked by the Poles made it easier for them to leave. Likewise, for those who did not agree with the new political order in Poland, the decision to emigrate was an easy one.25 The motivations of such persons seemed clear; their decision to leave Poland was predetermined by their rejection of a future in Poland.

Yet these psychological, ideological, and political arguments were not conclusive for those who decided to stay in Poland. For some Jews there was nothing to decide; no

---

22 Ministry of Public Administration, Political Department, Nationalities Section, 786 k. 42.
23 Weinryb ‘Poland’, 252
25 According to D. B. Weinryb, one of the reasons why people chose not to settle in Poland was that they were afraid that it would become the seventeenth republic of the Soviet Union. See Weinryb, ‘Poland’, 245.
alternative existed in their minds. Emigration was a kind of referendum, a test; those who could find a comfortable place for themselves remained in Poland. Yet in the years that followed, they were repeatedly forced to face the question of whether to stay or to leave. In post-war Poland, only a few persons of Jewish origin were able to integrate into Polish society without having their presence questioned.

Assimilation

It is difficult to assess the number of people of Jewish origin who—either as a result of their war experiences or because of the post-war situation—broke their ties with the Jewish community and began to identify fully as Poles. Their estrangement from their Jewish roots may have resulted from opportunism, changes caused by their war experiences, or the natural conclusion of processes that had begun before the war. It is obvious, however, that assimilation was an option available above all to people who spoke fluent Polish; that is, to members of the intelligentsia and townspeople.

As a first step towards assimilation, many Jews changed their names to Polish-sounding ones, or permanently adopted their wartime ‘Aryan’ names. A report by the Kraków District Commissariat for the Productivization of the Jewish Population for 1 November 1947–1 August 1948 states:

An additional problem in compiling accurate figures [of the Jewish population in the Kraków district] is that there are people who declare themselves to be of Polish nationality but at the same time register in Jewish committees. There is also the phenomenon, impossible to assess in terms of numbers, of some persons of Jewish origins and the Israelite faith breaking with the Jewish community.26 This phenomenon is insignificant in terms of numbers yet it emerged strongly in our area in 1945, and encompassed mostly the so-called intelligentsia and professionals.27

The extent of the move towards assimilation is reflected in an appeal to the Presidium of the CKŻP on 9 February 1946. The transcript of the meeting reads: ‘In light of the upcoming census, Dr. Herszenhorn proposes that we appeal to the officials of Jewish committees, especially the heads of Jewish institutions, to stop using Aryan names and to return to their real names.’28

Herszenhorn’s proposal indicated that the practice of adopting Polish-sounding names was not limited to those who had severed their ties with the Jewish community. The post-war Zionist press also devoted critical attention to this phenomenon. For instance, Głos Akademika printed:

A certain P. (name known to the editors), an activist in the Academic Circle in Wrocław, and one of the leaders of the Zionist Ihud organization there, has taken a step that may be of some help to him in achieving his goals, but at the same time

26 The Commissar’s error here reveals his lack of knowledge of Jewish matters. Persons of ‘Israelite faith’ certainly would not have broken with the Jewish community; especially for them the practice of religion was a necessity.
27 Ministry of Public Administration, Political Department, Nationalities Section, 787 k., 55.
28 AŻIH, Protokoły Prezydium CKŻP, 303/2.
compromises him as a Jew—and especially as an Ihud member. Colleague P. changed his name to P-ski, explaining that it was for practical reasons. It is interesting to note that his father had a law practice in Kraków before the war and was not ashamed of his Jewish-sounding name. Suddenly his son feels a need to change his name to the better-sounding P-ski.  

Various considerations went into the choice of a name. There were some who internalized their Aryan surnames, or had grown up with those names. In some cases, the decision to change a name was the result of a deliberate calculation. Głos Akademika stated:

Alas, there are still individuals among us, especially among university students, who have not found their place in the Jewish community. They are lacking courage. They are lacking courage now, when no danger is looming and when with one decisive step we can restore everything dear and precious to all of us. The real powers behind them are opportunism and moral weakness. Their passivity and estrangement from the life of their nation pushes them farther and farther away from Jewishness.  

In the post-war situation, ‘religion ceased to play the organizing role in the group’, and ‘even religious and practicing circles tended not to be ostentatious, and to perform their rites inconspicuously’. Though this step undoubtedly made it easier, withdrawal from Judaism and religious practice was not equivalent to assimilation because secularization was already advanced. The act of being baptized reflected a conscious decision to assimilate. Except for the cases of a few individuals who chose to be baptized out of deep religious conviction, the question of religious conversion among Polish Jews has yet to be researched. It seems, however, that conversion was a marginal phenomenon, for the simple reason that one did not need to be baptized in order to blend in with the surrounding Polish society (except in those rare cases in which a Jew lived in a village or small town without Jewish community).

In many cases, assimilation was the conclusion of a longer process of becoming Polish identified that had begun much earlier. It was often, according Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, ‘an escape from Jewishness, a conscious escape from a group which at various times had been hurt, persecuted, and subjected to antisemitism. This is not just the formal act of changing one’s name. Playing the role of non-Jew has deep consequences. People of this type speed up the natural process of assimilation by taking a consciously positive attitude towards it. A new cultural type appears.’

No longer a stranger excluded from a community, one can begin to feel a sense of unity with other members of the larger community. But if the prerequisite for this connection is assimilation, then re-emerging differences can be questioned. For example, there were real differences between Poles and Jews, especially in their wartime experiences. Artur Sandauer emphasized the internal tension of the strategy of assimilation when he wrote:

---

29 Głos Akademika (student supplement to Nasze Słowo), no. 4, 20 June 1947.
30 Głos Akademika, no. 2, 18 March 1947.
31 Hurwic-Nowakowska, Żydzi Polscy, 105, 112.
32 I. Hurwic-Nowakowska, Żydzi Polscy, 141.
Assimilation, the history of which we have tried to describe here using the examples of a few Polish writers, proves essentially impossible. One can’t have a neutral attitude towards one’s own Jewishness. It is a heritage too heavy to pass over. One can either renounce it or, to the contrary, show it off. The former would produce a non-authentic and erased personality, whereas the latter would produce a self-hating and self-demonizing personality. Like Tuwim’s opus, Rozenzweig’s memoirs end with self-demonization.33

Was the strategy of assimilation doomed to failure? Apparently it was, if it was the result of a one-time choice. But if it were the result of a process, it might not fail. A single decision can be easily reversed; it is much harder to reverse the course of gradual change over time. Moreover, choosing a Polish identity required that the individual deny his Jewishness. Those who grew into their Polish identity over the course of several years never had to make such an explicit denial.

Interrmarriage

Interrmarriages undoubtedly aided assimilation. They were a sign that Polish Jews were breaking away from their isolation. Intermarriage was also a result of the significantly larger number of men among the survivors: 84.4 women for every 100 men.34 Not surprisingly, it was mainly Jewish men who entered into mixed marriages. A study covering the years 1944-1945 by Bogusław Chruszcz clearly indicates that there was a strong element of compensation in the marriages of Jews.35 Jews were an exclusive group in which heterogamic unions were the result of disruptions in the demographic structure. Thus the farther away in time from the war, the less frequently such marriages occurred. According to Chruszcz in the period he studied, only 9.3 per cent of the Jews newly married were in heterogamous unions, and mixed marriages constituted 17.1 per cent of all marriages in which Jews participated.36

In many cases these marriages came out of unions formed during the occupation, the result of the special relationship between a person who was hidden and his or her rescuer. The fact that one’s life depended on this relationship meant that all previous relationships were obliterated. Henryk Grynberg describes this phenomenon in his novella ‘Zwycięstwo’ (The Victory):

Nor [did] any of the Jews hold marrying Christians against them. Who else were they to marry? There wasn’t anybody else. They slept with these girls when they had no one else and [at a time] when it made no sense to give second thoughts to

---

33 A. Sandauer, O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku (Rzecz, którą nie ja powinienem by napisać....) (Warsaw, 1982), 96.
such things since any girl could be their last. They were indebted to Śliwa, the Sobotkos, and the girl who looked after Aron when he was wounded. They felt bad about having to convert, but what significance could that have after all that had happened? Even Fryd, the only one who went back to kosher food and wore a hat when eating, didn’t hold it against them. He just didn’t accept the wedding invitation.  

Interruption is a particular strategy of assimilation. It serves as an entry into the community and provides the individual with a sense of connection. The Jewish partner must then decide whether he or she will become a full member of the ‘host community’ or maintain the status of ‘resident alien’.

Jewish Community

Another strategy for post-war Polish Jews—the opposite of assimilation—was to recreate Jewish community. The foundation of this strategy was the conviction that the communist authorities in Poland would establish equality for all citizens regardless of their nationality or faith. After the war, Głos Bundu stated:

The war has ended. New life emerges amidst the ruins and the destruction. It is new and it is to be different than before—just and free. In liberated Poland, Jewish life is taking shape once again. It is different both because the Jewish masses saved from the massacre are diminished by 95 per cent, and because the new system of government, unlike the pre-war system, does not differentiate between Jew and non-Jew.  

At least initially, representatives of all legally operating Jewish parties expressed similar sentiments. It is difficult to determine whether such statements reflected these Jewish activists’ authentic state of mind, whether they were motivated by fear of censorship, or whether they were the result of communist propaganda. It is a fact, however, that despite the hostile attitudes towards Jews, there was much in the post-war system that seemed to support the illusion of equality created by the communists in Poland. After the war, many people of Jewish origin held offices and positions that had been beyond their reach before the war. Undoubtedly, the opening of these new paths of advancement garnered Jewish support for the new communist government. But by strengthening the stereotype of the ‘Jew-communist’, which had fuelled hatred toward Jews, the new mobility contributed to the failure not only of this strategy, but of all Jewish strategies for making a home in Poland.

In the immediate post-war period, the Jewish community made a conscious effort to secure the conditions necessary for Jewish cultural survival. When Hurwic-Nowakowska interviewed Jews about their potential emigration, they mentioned as possible destinations places with Jewish communities. An official in a Jewish institution remarked: ‘I plan to stay in Poland in a Jewish community. That is why I deliberately settled in Rychbach and not somewhere else. But if Jews [were to leave] Poland and

---

37 H. Grynberg, Zwycięstwo (English translation, The Victory, trans. R. Lourie (Evanston, Ill., 1993), 18.) [??? to which edition does this footnote refer?  
39 Hurwic-Nowakowska, Żydzi Polscy, 87.
caused Jewish community in Poland to disappear, I would try to live elsewhere with other Jews.\footnote{Ibid., 88.} The Polish cities with Jewish community attracted those who identified strongly as Jews; often they were Yiddish-speakers who engaged in religious practices or at least performed some Jewish rituals. But this was also the group most inclined to emigrate.

Revenge against the Nazis was an obvious imperative for people who were active in Jewish institutions. For example, the activists of the Central Jewish Historical Commission [Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna] were consciously motivated by revenge as broadly understood. The Commission’s report, states:

> We have begun to gather information not just for the sake of knowledge; we want to create a knowledge-monument to our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. We want to commemorate our murdered parents and brothers and our heroes’ children. We want to unmask Hitlerism, racism, and antisemitism, and to call for just punishments for these crimes.\footnote{N. Gruss, ‘Rok pracy CKŻP’, 6.}

As a strategy for making Poland a home for Jews, the creation of a Jewish enclave was bound to fail. First, the communist authorities were not inclined to tolerate Jewish autonomy. Secondly, hatred of Jews was still strong within the Polish population. Finally, the individuals who chose this strategy were also the ones who were most open to the possibility of emigration. Events in Palestine and the ultimate establishment of the state of Israel played an important role in their decisions.

### Participation in the Communist Utopia

Another strategy for making a home in Poland was through communism. The subject of Jewish participation in the post-war Communist Movement, or more generally of the relationship of Jews to communism, is a deeply emotional one. For this reason, it has been dealt with in relatively few scholarly works.

In general, individuals of Jewish origin who participated in the Polish communist government had been active in the underground Communist Movement before the war. Their participation was also a result of the fact that the left-wing resistance displayed a more favourable attitude towards the Jews than did the Home Army. Negative attitudes towards the Jews were in turn justified by the enthusiasm with which, in the opinion of many Poles, the Jews had greeted the Red Army in September 1939, as well as by their later collaboration with the Soviets.

Like the Polish communist authorities, the Jews feared the underground armed forces. At the same time, they welcomed the communist authorities’ proclamations of their intent to battle antisemitism and to establish equality. The Polish and Soviet governments’ support for the newly founded state of Israel also won Jewish approval. Another positive factor was the commonly held conviction that the survivors owed their lives to the Soviet Union. The following November 1948 statement by Adolf Berman, a member of the main council of the Polish-Soviet Friendship Society, is characteristic:

> A handful [of Jews] have survived the destruction. Those who survived know that they owe their lives and their freedom to the Soviet Union and her invincible Red Army. . . . . Thanks to the victory of the Soviet Union and to the help of the
democratic government of the Republic of Poland, the surviving handful of less
than 100,000 Polish Jews can now safely and productively work in hundreds of
cooperatives, factories, mines, and iron plants. They can develop their national
culture, literature, and scholarship, create their schools and theatres, and actively
participate in the reconstruction of our country and the life of our nation.\(^\text{42}\)

Because of their earlier participation in the Communist Movement, Jewish
communists were well prepared to hold power; moreover, the authorities trusted them,
especially since most of them had spent the war in the Soviet Union, protected from the
influence of the London Government. Among the communists of Jewish origin, there
were some activists who acknowledged their Jewishness and conducted ideological work
‘on the Jewish street’. Others could be characterized by Julian Stryjkowski’s well-known
dictum that a Jew who becomes a communist stops being a Jew. These were committed
internationalists who took their orders from Moscow. They regarded themselves first and
foremost as part of the communist movement, less often as Poles, and almost never as
Jews.

The Jewish individuals who held top offices in the state in the initial post-war
period came from this group. Because the new regime tried to demonstrate its Polish
character, they were required to shun any identification with their Jewish identity. The
limitations imposed by the authorities were internalized, as this dramatic statement by
Feliks Mantel reveals:

The position of Jews was precarious and the situation could not be aggravated.
Not all Jews understood this, and often groups of high-ranking Jews pretended to
be Poles, even among themselves, because of their Aryan looks and Polonized
names. This occurred quite often at the diplomatic posts abroad and with \textit{ad hoc}
foreign envoys. Everyone laughed at this masquerade.\(^\text{43}\)

Entry into communism afforded great opportunities for revenge against the Nazis.
Moreover, the communist authorities’ involvement in the trials of war criminals, together
with the fact that official propaganda promoted Jewish martyrology, turned revenge into
an act of historic justice devoid of any national character. At least, communist activists of
Jewish origin could look at it this way. Their isolation and their striving for the ideal
system reinforced their illusions. At the same time, their shared experience during the
war and their sense of belonging to this community, whose members had consciously and
in a similar way renounced their national roots, strengthened their solidarity. Yet for
much of Polish society, they were simply Jews.

This strategy of becoming Polish through communist participation finally
collapsed in 1956, when individuals of Jewish origin within the regime were reminded of
their outsider status. For Jewish activists involved in the ‘Jewish street’, this strategy had
exhausted itself even earlier; its end was marked by the wave of Jewish emigration in the
earliest post-war years. With this emigration, more and more people came to feel as

\(^{42}\) ‘Społeczeństwo żydowskie a Związek Radziecki; Przemówienie dr Adolfa Bermana,
członka Rady Naczelnej Towarzystwa Przyjaźni Polsko-Radzieckiej na drugim zjeździe

Mantel revealed: ‘I became aware of my enormous alienation. The foundation among the masses, the background of my activity, was no more.’

Immediately after the war, Ludwik Hirszfeld had written:

Jews have a choice—they can either pray differently than the surrounding society, speak and eat differently, and always feel like strangers, or they can decide to become the children of the country, to make themselves entirely the same as the rest of its citizens. However, if they want to preserve their difference but remove the curse of non-reciprocal love from future generations, they must acquire their own homeland and toil on its soil, and shed their blood for it if necessary.

Hirszfeld’s claim is confirmed in the conclusions of Hurwic-Nowakowska’s study. She writes:

Alongside the accelerated assimilation, there is a process of shaping Jewish national ideology, which opens a path to the Jewish nation in the newly created Jewish state. Both the process of assimilation and the forming of Jewish national ideology aid in the deterioration of the Jewish community in Poland. These processes run very deep and affect Jews in all social strata; moreover, the constant departure of many individuals from the preserved group contributes to its crumbling.

Translated from Polish by Gwido Zlatkes

______________________________

44 Ibid.
45 L. Hirszfeld, Historia jednego życia (Warsaw, 1957), 425.
46 Hurwic-Nowakowska, Żydzi Polscy, 163.