Jewish Life in Przemyśl in Autonomous Galicia: An Evaluation

Waclaw Wierzbieniec

Historical circumstances affecting Przemyśl in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century bore auspicious consequences for the local Jewish population. Throughout the city’s history, Jews had clearly distinguished themselves from the rest of the population, who were Polish and Ukrainian. There were marked differences in the Jews’ religion, language, communal organization (characterized by the kehillah), and sense of national separateness; these distinctions were especially clear from the end of the 1800s. Economic competition expanded in Przemyśl from the second half of that century, significantly influencing the distances separating the Jewish and Christian communities. This process was linked with an increasing exchange of services.

This survey attempts to evaluate the demographic and occupational evolution of Przemyśl’s Jews, noting changes in their socio-political life in the period of autonomous Galicia. This is not a simple task, as existing historical studies of the city only occasionally consider Jewish topics. Consequently, though Przemyśl’s Jewish community was one of the largest in Galicia, facts about its history in the period of autonomy are little known.

According to one insufficiently documented theory, the oldest reference to a Jewish settlement in Poland suggests a presence in Przemyśl in the 1030s. However, reliable sources noting a permanent presence of Jews stem only from the first half of the fifteenth century. In 1559, King Sigmundus Augustus granted Przemyśl’s Jews a privilege that confirmed their right to dwell in the city and permitted them to purchase houses from burghers. This privilege was reaffirmed and broadened many times, enabling Jews to conduct economic activity on equal footing with the burghers and to maintain their kehillah. In the pre-partition period, competition with the burghers on issues involving commerce and crafts led to many anti-Jewish incidents. Also, high levels of taxation in the second half of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century left Przemyśl’s Jewish community in financially dire straits. Despite this, the Jewish population of the city constantly grew. In the mid-eighteenth century, there were 1,692 Jews in Przemyśl, representing approximately 50 per cent of its population.

After the first partition of Poland in 1772, the autonomy of Przemyśl’s Jews was limited, as was that of the rest of the Jewish population inhabiting the area incorporated by Austria. Jews were organized into kehillot, and despite the many restrictions imposed on them—including high fees for marriage permits, difficulties in obtaining a certificate for living in the city or opening a business—the Jewish population of the town grew continuously, by 1857 reaching 4,180, or almost 40 per cent of the total population. Also, the continuous strengthening of Jews’ economic standing marked a clearly discernible trend that found expression in the growing number of Jews who owned real estate, artisan shops, and commercial enterprises. Furthermore, by the first half of the nineteenth century, Hasidism had gained strong support among Przemyśl’s Jews; simultaneously, advocates of the Haskalah became active. The trends and changes within the Jewish population in the period of autonomy reflected in a micro-scale a whole array of problems common to all Jews in Galicia.

The Jewish population of autonomous Galicia grew steadily, while its percentage within the general population slowly decreased. The demographic proportions in Przemyśl were similar: absolute numbers indicate a further growth of the Jewish population even as its percentage in the city’s population decreased. Thus, between 1869 and 1910 the Jewish population in Przemyśl
increased by almost 270 per cent (from ca. 6,000 to ca. 16,000) at the same time that its percentage decreased from 41 per cent to 30 per cent.

As already noted, Przemyśl, located at the Polish–Ukrainian border, was inhabited mainly by Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Jews were the largest ethnic group in terms of their numbers. At the beginning of autonomous period, however, Jews lost their dominant position; as a national group, they held the second place (after the Poles) until the Holocaust.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Przemyśl’s total population was 46,000, and it was the third-largest town in Galicia, after Lviv and Kraków. In demographic terms, what distinguished Przemyśl from other towns in Galicia in the second half of the nineteenth century was its exceptionally strong rate of natural growth, including the growth of its Jewish population. In this respect, Przemyśl held first place among large Galicia towns that had populations greater than 25,000 in 1910.

The growth of the town was significantly influenced by immigration prompted by the building of a railroad, the establishment of a garrison, and the development of middle schools. In 1859, Przemyśl was connected by railroad to Kraków, and in 1861, with Lviv. Then in 1872, a rail line opened that connected Chyrów to Hungary. The city was thus linked to the main industrial and commercial centres in Galicia, a factor that influenced its economic development and hence its population growth. The prospect of war against Russia was the reason behind the Austrian military decision in 1873 to upgrade the fortifications in Przemyśl and its surroundings to first-class operations. In 1883, Przemyśl was granted the status of a fortress (Festung), with a garrison. At the turn of the century, the garrison crew formed approximately 20 per cent of Przemyśl’s population. A subsequent development of middle schools caused an increase in the number of students; by 1900, more than 1,000 students had come from outside the city to study in Przemyśl.

The fortress, however, had the greatest impact on the economic development and growth of the population. A large part of the predominantly Jewish local small-scale industry and trade was directed toward servicing the fortress. Providing for the army had a positive influence on the economic situation of the Jewish population, stimulating its increase.

Przemyśl, again, was one of the largest Jewish centres in Galicia. From the end of the 1800s, it was the fourth largest town in terms of the size of its Jewish population, after Lviv, Kraków, and Kolomyia. Thus, the words with which Vasili Kesliyev, a visitor from Russia in 1866, started his description of Przemyśl are not surprising: ‘Jews, Jews, Jews—wherever I turn, I am in the kingdom of Jews. Probably here everything goes on in such a way that without Jews you can’t make one step.’ This image possibly derived from the fact that the local Jewish population was dominated by Orthodox Jews and Hasids, the followers of tsadikim from Błażowa, Sadagora, and Belz who in 1884 established their organization, Mah[.].zikei Hadat (Strengthening of the Faith), which remained active until the Holocaust.

The Jewish population played an important role in the city’s economy, and it was economically the strongest element among local ethnic groups. Many factors testify to the economic strength of the town’s Jews. One such factor was the ownership of real estate. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a noticeable trend among Przemyśl’s Jews to settle outside the traditional location, the so-called ‘Jewish town’ near the San River downtown, site of the oldest synagogue (built in the sixteenth century) and the offices of the kehilah. This area was inhabited by the poorest part of the Jewish population. Well-to-do people settled in other parts of the city such as the midtown in the market square area. The Lwowskie Przędmieście and Zasanie quarters experienced a particularly rapid increase in the number of estates owned by Jews, as well as in apartment buildings developed by them and often rented out
to Jewish tenants. The erection in 1892 of a synagogue in Zasanie, and in 1902 of a new synagogue (the so-called Scheinbach synagogue) in Lwowskie Przedmieście mark particularly telling examples of the development of Przemyśl by its Jewish population. At the end of the autonomous period in 1914, Jews owned about 40 per cent of real estate in Przemyśl. Expanding their development initiatives beyond the so-called ‘Jewish town’ and the downtown in general at the turn of the twentieth century, they contributed to providing Przemyśl its fuller architectural shape. Many of the houses developed by Jews in that period have architectural value and testify to the high level of the builders’ art and craftsmanship of that period.

Przemyśl was largely a centre with small factories, artisan shops, and construction enterprises; hence, groups of large-scale businessmen were not among its Jewish population. One exception was the Fraenkel family, who owned one of the largest steam mills in Galicia, which was established in 1866. As in other such centres, Jewish workers dominated local crafts and commerce and were active in the town–country trade. For example, in about 1914, Przemyśl had 52 Jewish butchers, 63 bakeries, 59 tailor shops, and 32 carpenters. A small fraction of the Jewish population were employed as clerks. Within the professions, Jews strongly dominated the legal field; by the end of the autonomous period they totalled 70 per cent of the town’s lawyers.

In the field of commerce from the beginning of the 1880s, Jews encountered increasing competition from the Polish and Ukrainian populations, who at that point founded various cooperatives. Sometimes extra-economic means were imposed; for example, in 1911 a city council proposal, subsequently rejected, tried to restrict the access of the Jewish population to only selected city markets.

Real estate ownership and the significant role of Jews in industry and trade were important in shaping the awareness of competing economic interests; these factors deepened the sense of separateness between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations. It must be strongly emphasized, however, that among Przemyśl’s Jews there was great diversity in levels of financial stability. The vast majority of Jews were not rich. There was a sizable group of poor people who had to rely on assistance from charitable organizations and the kehilah. Organized help came mainly from the more influential members of the community. Low-interest credit was also granted by the Jewish Consolation Association (JCA), established in Przemyśl in 1913, and from Jewish credit unions; twenty-one such organizations operated at various times from the mid-nineteenth century until the outbreak of World War I.

The most important centre of life for the Przemyśl Jewish community was the kehilah. In addition to providing the means for fulfilling religious needs, it provided its members a sense of security and needed material aid. Galician autonomy prompted the regulation of internal structures within kehilot. Although Jews acquired full legal emancipation, they were not recognized as a separate nation. However, they were granted the status of a religious community, giving them opportunities for internal self-organization.

As was the case with other Jewish communities in Galicia, the kehilah of Przemyśl, which in 1874 received its own statute regulating its internal structure and activities, was in charge of the affairs of synagogues, houses of prayer, cemeteries, charitable institutions, and foundations. The kehilah also nominated the rabbi and other persons indispensable for implementing religious goals. The main aims of the kehilah were thus to deal with religious matters and charitable aid.

The territory of the local kehilah encompassed 110 localities surrounding and including Przemyśl. These were mainly neighbouring villages and hamlets; the few Jews who inhabited them constituted only a small percentage of the entire religious community. The elective offices of the Przemyśl kehilah included the council (rada) and the board (reprezentacja). The council was made up of twenty-four members who selected, from among themselves, a chairman and
deputy. Other members were divided among three sections: religious; charity and learning; and economy and finance. Each section had its chair. The board consisted of the chairman, the deputy, and the chairs of the sections.

Only the men who paid a tax for the community (the so called kehilah dues; składka gminna) had passive and active electoral rights. Before each election, a census of persons eligible for voting was conducted; these names were placed on the list according to the amount of taxes paid, from the highest to the lowest levels. Then, on the basis of this list, three electoral circles were created from a division of the total sum of taxes into three equal parts. The first electoral circle was the least numerous as it included the richest electorate who paid one-third of all taxes. The third circle was the largest; it consisted of persons who paid the lowest taxes.

Regardless of the number of voters, each circle elected eight members to the kehilah, totalling twenty-four councillors. The anti-democratic element of the electoral procedure was an issue in the power struggle within the organization. A sign of the internal cultural diversification of the Jewish community was the emergence in the 1870s of a group of Przemyśl’s progressives, mainly from members of new professions. This initially small group of assimilators, who advocated modernization, became a threat to the Orthodox Jews ruling the community. The struggle between the progressive and the conservative forces continued with various peaks and ebbs until the outbreak of World War I. The anti-democratic electoral procedure gave the power of decision to the wealthiest Jews from the Orthodox circles. This point was often brought up by the progressives, who demanded transforming the kehilah into a democratic institution that would deal not only with religious issues and charity, but would also organize lay education. In attempts to exclude the progressives from influencing the community, the ruling Orthodox often manipulated the means of assigning the kehilah’s dues, sometimes eliminating the names of persons with different opinions at election time, or assigning them to a tax level so high that they either could not afford it, or did not want to pay. At the same time, followers of the Orthodox ideology might have their own dues lowered, or were granted a subsidy from the kehilah coffers to enable them pay. As a result, the elected council did not fully reflect the divisions within the Jewish community, especially at the end of the nineteenth century.

The vast majority of kehilah members did not have electoral rights because they did not pay the kehilah dues. In 1902, there were only nine hundred names on the electoral list, from all three electoral circles; the first circle contained a mere fifty-two electors (out of a total of 14,000 Jews living in Przemyśl).

The partial liberalization of the electoral law introduced in the Przemyśl kehilah in 1901 reflects the power struggle between the Orthodox and the progressives. At the same time, it might provide an indicator in determining the influence of the progressives in the communal authority. It is possible that this liberalization marked an attempt at compromise between the two groups. The first circle, along with those paying the largest taxes, was also to include people with university education, as well as state officials and retired army officers. Largely because of these new rules, the Przemyśl progressives in 1902 managed to elect five representatives from the local Polonized intelligentsia. One of the first initiatives by that group was its introduction of Polish—as opposed to German or Yiddish—as the official language of the council’s meetings. It is possible that other religious communities in Galicia underwent similar changes at that time; in that same year a similar resolution introduced Polish (instead of German) as the official language of the kehilah in Jarosław. Despite the fact that until the end of the autonomous period the progressives did not manage to increase the number of their members in the council, they succeeded in convincing the other representatives to elect Dr. Jakub Glanz as chairman of the kehilah. His selection resulted from a compromise with Orthodox Jews: Glanz was supposed to limit his role to outside representation (the objective was to find a suitable person to effectively
represent the community before the regional self-government, the state, and military authorities) while the deputy chairman, the Orthodox-affiliated Mojžesz Scheinbach, would run the day-to-day work. This compromise, however, had no practical bearing for the Przemyśl Jewish community because, as already mentioned, at the end of the autonomous period the council did not fully reflect the divisions in the community that had already been clear in the 1890s.

To gain greater influence in the kehilah, in 1908 the local progressives established the party of Independent Jews. It opposed the kehilah’s non-democratic election law, and called for self-help among the Jewish population in stimulating the economy.

In the autonomous period, the kehilah fulfilled its religious mission despite conflicting interests within its administration and constant financial strain; it also performed an integrating function within the local Jewish community.

The scope of the kehilah’s activity was limited by the resources at its disposal. These came primarily from dues, though other sources included fees for religious services and the revenues of its institutions, including the mikveh at Rybi Square (which was always crowded with stalls and was the central place in the so-called Jewish town) and from the leasing of places of ritual slaughter (these places were the targets of attacks by the local socialist press, which published articles complaining about shohetim who purportedly left cattle and poultry half-killed). The kehilah revenues were distributed to maintain the Israelite hospital, support individual persons, organize the Passover relief that delivered matzo and money to the poor, and gave salaries to the officers of the kehilah, including community rabbis (during the period under discussion, Izaak Schmelkes and Gedale Schmelkes were the rabbis).

Small support was assigned to an array of charitable organizations. Unfortunately, it is not possible to establish how many such organizations were active in Przemyśl or how broad was their reach. Only a few of these organizations were registered and received limited financial support from the kehilah. We cannot tell how many Jewish associations, organizations, and unions existed. And as with other towns in Galicia, we lack a comprehensive survey of the networks available to such institutions. The same lack of information applies to the interwar period.

Many associations in Przemyśl were simultaneously religious and charitable, and sometimes also educational. The traditional ones, linked to the kehilah, were the hevrar kadisha, the burial society; the bikur h[.]olim, supporting the sick who could not afford health care; the moshav zakeinim, the nursing home for the elderly; the association Poel Emet that provided material aid for performing religious practices; the association Mishnayoth, which organized morning prayers; and Skheves Akhron, which gathered shoemakers for religious practice. These organizations were founded by particular professions, gathering tailors, shoemakers, butchers, and other workers, or existed to perform certain rites, for example for the dead; or to maintain certain religious principles such as celebrating the Sabbath or bringing religious and material aid to the sick. They often united people from different social strata. Some of these organizations maintained their own houses of prayer where, alongside synagogues, the religious life of the local Jewish community was concentrated.

In addition to the cited synagogues, the largest places for religious practices were the prayer house ‘Klaus’ owned by local hasidim, and the prayer house (sometimes called a synagogue), the ‘Tempel’, where the progressives gathered. The dynamics of religious life were also influenced by religious education that was offered at numerous heder and three Talmud Torahs. Synagogues and houses of prayers were also important to the social life of Przemyśl’s Jews because of their multi-functional character. Beyond religious services, they were places where news was exchanged. Polish historic anniversaries took place there as well; for example, on 3 May 1891, the Tempel held a religious service to commemorate the hundredth anniversary
of the 3 May Constitution; the mayor, Aleksander Dworski, was a participant. At the end of the service, the Tempel choir sang ‘God Who Gave to Judah…’ (Boże coś Judę…) with the following refrain (the same song was sung under similar circumstances in synagogues in Rzeszów):

Izraelowi wieczne daj zjednanie,
Z Narodem Polskim bratem naszym Panie!

(Lord, grant Israel the eternal unity
With our brother the Polish Nation!)

On the fiftieth anniversary of the January insurrection, 23 January 1913, a solemn service for the insurgents killed in action was held in Przemyśl’s old synagogue. After the service, kehilah chairman Jakub Glanz delivered a speech honouring the insurgents, among them Jews. These occasions were well attended by the Jewish youth, students at the local schools.

In addition to the influence of Jewish organizations, the development of the social life of the Jewish population was also affected by an array of purely professional organizations such as the association Yad Kharutsim, for artisans. The town also had an association of merchants, as well as other lay organizations, that contributed to overcoming traditional barriers and religious limitations. Such institutions were organized by Polonized intelligentsia, socialists, and Zionists.

During the autonomous period, an important factor contributing to the Jewish community’s internal cultural diversity was the development of modern secondary education. Przemyśl was one of Galicia’s important centres for Polish and Ukrainian education. At the end of the period, Przemyśl had five gymnasia, including two Ukrainian ones; two Polish teachers’ seminars for women; Krajowa Szkoła Kupiecka (The Country’s Merchant School); three Polish industrial supplementary schools; and two religious seminaries: one Roman Catholic, the other Greek Catholic. Two Ukrainian gymnasia, one for boys and one for girls, made Przemyśl the second (after Lviv) centre of Ukrainian education in Galicia. The largest number of Jewish students attended the gymnasium named for the Polish poet Juliusz Słowacki, established in 1849. In the 1870s, that institution had eighty Jewish students, and before the outbreak of World War I, its 250 Jewish students made up 52.7 per cent of all its students. A much lower percentage of Jewish students attended the gymnasium at the Zasanie; in the years 1907–1914 they totalled approximately 20 per cent of its students. A few Jews also studied at the Russian gymnasium.

Despite the large numbers of Jews receiving a secondary education, there was also a trend, visible in the Orthodox circles, of not sending children to Polish public schools. The percentage of such Jewish children was relatively high; in 1880 it totalled 61.6 per cent. This fact illustrates the division between the conservative group that wanted to keep the existing ghetto limits intact and that of the progressives who actively participated in emancipating the inhabitants of the traditional shtetl.

The so-called progressive Jews—the largely Polonized intelligentsia and well-to-do groups involved in industry or commerce—gravitated around the association Modlitewny Związek Izraela (The Prayer Union of Israel), which was established in Przemyśl in 1879 with the aim of erecting a modern prayer house similar to those found in other towns of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and cities of Western Europe. The other reason for this initiative was to enable Jewish officers largely coming from the western provinces of the empire to participate in religious rites according to their expectations. Initially, the service was performed in German in a rented hall. But in the mid-1880s, these sermons and prayers were replaced with Polish versions. The completion and the opening of their own synagogue (the Tempel) took place in 1890 and was applauded by Polish circles. The local Polish press enthusiastically reported on the opening
of the synagogue: ‘The service started with a prelude played on a pump organ, and then the cantor said the welcoming blessing. . . . The initial prayer “How beautiful are thy tents” was sung by the cantor and the choir. . . . The celebration concluded with the singing of Psalm 30 (Song at the sanctification of the temple), with the carrying of the Torah, and with the prayer for the ruling house and the homeland. . . . ’ In Galicia, similar synagogues existed, among others, in Kraków, Tarnów, and Lviv. A characteristic of the Przemyśl synagogue was that it held special services for Jewish youth before the start and at the end of the school year.

The pro-assimilation movement gained strength in Galicia from 1870s, making the deepening processes of emancipation in the Jewish community its objective. It tried to achieve this mainly through promoting the Polish language, and it found many supporters in Przemyśl. They were mostly students or alumni of local high schools and persons who had returned to Przemyśl after completing studies at universities in Kraków, Lviv, or often in Vienna. The main aim of those involved in propagating the slogans of emancipation through Polonization was to spread education among the Jewish masses, with the hope of bringing them closer to the Polish population through teaching them the Polish language and culture. Toward this goal, the progressives in Przemyśl undertook numerous and sometimes ephemeral initiatives. One of the first expressions of the pro-assimilation trends within the Przemyśl Jewish community was the establishment in 1865 of a two-class Jewish school for boys with Polish as the language of instruction; by the time of World War I, it had nearly one hundred students attending it annually. There were final exams, and their results were enthusiastically reported by the Polish-language press: ‘The most important thing is that Jewish children speak Polish well and have a good command of the language without a Jewish accent.’

Members of the Jewish intelligentsia tried to propagate the slogans of assimilation among the young people employed in commerce and crafts who did not know Polish well; such students were exposed to the adverse attitudes of certain Poles. Toward this end, Towarzystwo im. J. I. Kraszewskiego ku Szerzeniu Oświaty w Języku Polskim Między Młodzieżą Staratorozakonną (The J. I. Kraszewski Association for Spreading the Polish Language Education among Jewish Youth) was established in 1879; its movers were several students from Przemyśl. The idea of the association drew on the words of Jakub, the hero of Józef Kraszewski’s novel Żyd (The Jew): ‘Where the well-being of our homeland is concerned, there are neither Christians not Jews, but only Poles.’ The organization planned to influence youth by awarding written and oral essays on Polish language, literature, and history, and giving prizes for progress in learning Polish. These ambitious plans did not succeed because internal quarrels about methodology led the goals to be abandoned. Only after 1884, when a chapter of the Agudat Ahim society was established in Przemyśl, did an evening school open for boys, as it claimed, from artisan, industrial, and mercantile origins. In this school, which existed for six years, about fifty students a year learned Polish.

One of the institutions that united Polonized Jewish intelligentsia in the city was the Academic Library, established in 1892. At the end of the autonomous period, it had approximately 250 members and more than 30,000 volumes. Even as they integrated, the progressives did not give up attempts at influencing the Orthodox and Hasidic circles. In 1902, the Jewish popular university Toynbeeala was established with the goal of spreading Polish education among poor Jews of Przemyśl. Its establishment was greeted with wide acceptance that found expression in the local press:

The currents of modern light . . . do not yet reach, and most often cannot reach, the large Jewish strata [here in Przemyśl]. That mass, separated by the wall of tradition, customs, and habits from the stir swelling around it and near it, puts up obstinate and mulish resistance to the outside attempts to civilize them. . . . Therefore all Jewish intelligentsia,
regardless of their convictions and political aspirations, should work hand in hand to lift
their people from the abyss of backwardness.

Despite the broad acceptance of the Polonized Jewish intelligentsia, the Toynbee-hala did not
last; it seems to have folded just one year later, in 1903.

Other initiatives of this circle included joining Zjednoczenie (The Union), founded in
Lviv in 1907 with the goal of integrating Jewish and Polish communities, and the establishment
in Przemyśl in 1912 of a T.S.L. Circle (Towarzystwo Szkoły Ludowej; Association for the
Popular School) named for Bernard Goldman, which offered educational activities to the Jewish
community.

Despite the initiatives, the activities of the assimilators did not effect major changes. The
distance between the ideas of the progressives and those of the Orthodox in Przemyśl was so
great that indeed they represented two varying ‘worlds’ with different languages, dress codes,
and forms of behaviour. In his memoirs about his childhood town, Stanisław Ehrlich, a son of a
well-known Przemyśl lawyer, raised in European culture, stated:

These kids usually spoke incorrect Polish, and the kids of assimilated intelligencia from
‘good families’ called these pronunciation and linguistic mistakes żydziezięnie ['kike'ish], and as a rule, they did not play with them and did not stick together. There was the
blockage of a ‘peer unity.’ We were mutually alienated. We felt uneasy, reluctant towards
these ‘poor relatives.’ Nobody talked about it, but this social ladder where they occupied
some lower rung was distinctly felt. . . . The assimilated gymnasium students scorned the
pronunciation of their colleagues who grew up in the ghetto, and if they failed to follow
the patterns of behaviour accepted in ‘good families’, they were isolated and called
‘shameless shaigeleses’.

The pro-assimilation movement in Galicia at the turn of the century encountered
obstacles resulting from rising antisemitism among the Christian population, based
primarily on economics, but also from the socialists and Zionists who now had greater
influence. In Przemyśl, the process of Polonization was also an important ground behind
the development of the socialist and Zionist movements. A large group of assimilated
activists identified with these latter movements and became organizational leaders. The
emergence of these two trends revived the process of modernization and did not
challenge Jewishness; instead, they enriched it with new elements. Nonetheless, Zionism
and socialism also tended to divide the town’s Jews.

The socialist movement included in its ideology an element of class struggle that gave
workers a vision of economic improvement. The ideology of rejecting nationalism and in
Przemyśl was a platform that saw collaboration among Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. Przemyśl
was not a large industrial centre, yet by Galician measures it had a relatively large working class.
Workers were employed mainly in the factories that supplied the local garrison. Jewish workers,
whose numbers steadily increased especially in the 1890s, most often had jobs in small
workshops owned by Jewish industrialists; this situation enabled them to follow religious rules,
as the work places were closed on Saturdays.

Professional organizations that were created for educational purposes united Poles, Jews,
and Ukrainians. One such organization, Siła, was established in 1891. The Social-Democratic
Party in Galicia (Sojedemokratyczna Partia w Galicji), created in Lviv in 1982, gave
Przemyśl’s workers the opportunity to participate actively in political life (later it changed its
title to the Polish Social-Democratic Party of Galicia and the Tesin Silesia; or Polska Partia
Sochal-Demokratyczna Galicji i Śląska Cieszyńskiego; PPSD). One of its leaders, Henryk
Lieberman, was of Jewish descent; his activities in Przemyśl helped to increase the party’s
influence in the Jewish community. The Przemyśl chapter of PPSD was multi-national; besides
Poles, its members included Jews and Ukrainians. It also reflected the cultural divisions existing within the Jewish population: the party included Polonized Jews who had only loose contact with their Jewishness, as well as Jews who wanted to cultivate the Yiddish language and Jewish culture within the organization. Polonized Jews, including Herman Lieberman who had a law office in Przemyśl, and attorney Józef Mantel, were repeatedly elected to the local leadership of the party; Mantel’s memoir serves to demonstrate their attitude toward Jewishness: ‘I wasn’t used to religion, I didn’t see it at home. . . . Father never attended synagogue, maybe except the eve of the Day of Atonement in order to listen to the beautiful melody of Kol Nidrei. . . . I never practiced Jewish religion, I did not know the Jewish religion, I knew neither Hebrew nor Yiddish. . . .’

Jewish workers, whose numbers increased in the Przemyśl chapter of the party, and who were shaking off the influence of Orthodox Jews, demanded that meetings and lectures be conducted in Yiddish. They also wanted access to their literature. This phenomenon occurred not only because of their desire to preserve their cultural identity but also because they often did not know Polish well. In order to meet the requests of Jewish workers, the Social-Democratic Party of Galicia created the Educational Associations for Male and Female Workers, and the Sales Associates Brotherhood (Bruderlichkeit [Stowarzyszenia Kształcące dla Robotników, Robotnic i Pomocników Handlowych ‘Buderlichkeit’]). This association was established in Przemyśl in 1895 with one hundred members; its objective was to provide cultural and educational activities. It also identified with socialism and assumed a hostile attitude toward Zionism. During its meetings, Yiddish, German, and—less often—Polish were used. ‘The Brotherhood’ was backed by the newspaper Postęp (The Progress), published by H. Lieberman in Rzeszów; he used its columns to defend equal rights for Galician Jews and to promote educational activities aimed at political activation for Jews. Because of their roles in integrating Jewish workers and promoting social democratic slogans, the PPSD and the Brotherhood encountered hostility from Orthodox Jews and Zionists. The situation deteriorated to the point that a local rabbi issued a herem (ban) against members of the Brotherhood.

The main concentration of the PPSD on issuing proclamations in Yiddish did not satisfy the section of its members who wanted greater autonomy within the organization. For example, at the annual party meeting in Przemyśl at the end of 1904, Józef Siegman declared on behalf of some Jewish members that they would not pay their dues unless the party committee called a Jewish congress at least twice a year. The fact that some of the Jewish members did not accept the policy of the PPSD resulted in the emergence in Przemyśl of the Jewish Social-Democratic Party (Żydowska Partia Socjal-Demokratyczna; PPSD) in 1905. Initially its numbers totalled approximately seventy persons, mostly Jewish former PPSD members. Among the creators of the new party were members of the local Jewish intelligentsia, including the lawyer Leib Landau who, after World War I, headed the Przemyśl kehilah. The emergence of the PSD stimulated the PPSD’s activities in the Przemyśl Jewish community. Party propaganda within the Jewish proletariat increased as well, and within the party a separate Jewish section was established that in 1909 consisted of about thirty workers. The emergence of the PSD weakened the socialist movement in Przemyśl as it caused friction between those who had left the PPSD to join the PSD and those who remained in the PPSD to work in its Jewish section. Another factor that contributed to increasing divisions among the Jewish proletariat in Galicia was the emergence in 1904 of the Poalei Zion Party, which had a chapter in the town. However, the element that united the Jewish proletariat was the celebration of the first of May; there, Jews were given the opportunity to meet Polish and Ukrainian workers. Together they partook in the activities; speeches were delivered in Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish.
Another movement that altered the views of Przemyśl’s Jews was Zionism, a trend that built up the national self-identification of the community even if during the autonomous period the Zionists lacked sufficient political power to influence the policies of the kehilah or the city council. The emerging Zionist organizations were initially small and structurally weak. Only at the end of the autonomous period was there a noticeable increase in the kinds of associations influenced by Zionist ideology. Changes occurred because of the extraordinary levels of energy of local Zionist activists such as the chairman of the Zionists’ union, Klemens Robinsohn, who belonged simultaneously to several organizations. An event that accelerated the growth of the Zionist movement in Przemyśl was Gedale Schmelkes’s return in 1905 to the post of the city rabbi; he was among the few rabbis in Galicia openly active in Zionist organizations.

The first of the city’s organizations to declare its goals as Zionist was Yishuv Eretz Israel (the Settlement of Israel), which was established in 1875. Its activities were limited to collecting funds intended for intensifying Jewish settlement in Palestine and teaching Jews farming. Other Zionist organizations included Drashe Tora ve Daat (Students of the Torah and Knowledge) and Yeshurun; these provided a cultural and educational focus. Yeshurun gained popularity by offering diverse activities; particularly popular were the so-called Maccabee evenings, or meetings commemorating the capture of Jerusalem by Judah Maccabi in 164 BCE. The Zionist movement in Przemyśl assumed a more developed form after the establishment in 1893 of the Zion Union. It was registered as a chapter of the same union in Vienna; however, both in ideology and structure it was connected with the Galicia Zionist movement with its centre in Lviv. The organization found wide support: in the first year of its existence it had three hundred members. Its leaders included members of Przemyśl’s assimilated intelligentsia. The memoirs of Stanisław Ehrlich, cited above, comment on the distance between advocates of assimilation and the followers of the Zionist movement:

After forcing my way through the barrier of my family’s secrecy, I finally learned that my grandfather, the owner of ‘The Banking House Jakub Ehrlich’ at the Gate Square in the heart of Przemyśl’s commercial district, had participated in the first Zionist congress in Basil. . . . Grandfather’s involvement in the Zionist movement stirred among the assimilated Przemyśl intelligentsia, and even more so in our family, if not a scandal, at least a great commotion. His move was considered irresponsible and extravagant. . .

One the union’s activities was the establishment of a five-grade elementary Hebrew school for boys, Tikvatah Israel (The Hope of Israel). At the turn of the century, approximately one hundred students attended it annually, and its students and alumni provided important support for the growing Zionist movement. Despite this, however, from the end of the nineteenth century, its membership steadily decreased, and by 1904, it had only one hundred members. One negative influence on the Zionist movement was an increased socialist influence in the Jewish community. The gap between the Zionists and socialists can be illustrated by an incident that occurred in December 1903 at a synagogue. When at the end of the celebration of the Maccabees’s deeds the choir sang the Zionist song ‘Where tall cedars…’, one local socialist began to shout: ‘Shame on the Zionists!’ In addition, the kehilah leadership displayed a negative attitude toward Zionism by refusing to grant the Zion Union funding for its activities. Only after Schmelkes returned to the office of the kehilah rabbi did support for Zionist movement in Przemyśl begin to grow. The Zion Union changed its name to the Zionist Union; and in 1908 it had about 150 members; its lectures and discussions drew large audiences of some seventy people on average. Zionist ideas were particularly attractive to the youth, and not just because they envisioned their own state in which they would not have to feel as if they were second-class citizens. Access to the organization enabled them to come out of the ghetto; they felt free of the complexes that ghetto life entailed. Zionism provided the opportunity for self-fulfilment in a peer
group that for many served as a second home. In Przemyśl, the two Zionist youth organizations most active at the beginning of the twentieth century were Agudat Herzl (Herzl Union) linked with the Zionist Union, which was organized by alumni of the local gymnasium, and the association Herut (Freedom), which was affiliated with the Poalei Zion and which attracted university and high-school students. There were also other active Zionist youth organizations, including Gvurah, or the Women’s Union Hadassah for girls.

Przemyśl’s Jews who were involved in the Zionist movement pursued restoration of Hebrew as the Jewish national language. They opposed the traditionalism of religious orthodoxy and its authorities. At the same time, they opposed the assimilationists and socialists, and drew from Jewish tradition and symbols. The small number of intelligentsia linked to Zionism, and the more numerous small artisans and tradesmen, found in the Zionist movement a chance to change the social order that they no longer accepted. The Zionists of Przemyśl gained much wider influence during the second republic, when they had many representatives in both the kehilah and the city council, and gained real influence on decisions affecting the Jewish community as a whole.

This attempt at a general evaluation of Jewish life in Przemyśl during the period of Galicia’s autonomy indicates some, in my opinion important, problems of that community. In general, we may say that the Jewish population displayed an enormous potential for social energy and created many centres of social life, resulting not only from class divisions but also from the processes of acculturation and modernization. Jews showed great dynamism and a high level of self-organization in communal life that found its reflection in many institutional forms of activity. The main centre determining the social life of the Jewish community was the kehilah, which contributed to the integration of Jews on religious plane. The range of its activity depended on the resources it was able to gather and assign to particular goals. The kehilah had no monopoly for organizing religious life and social aid; this proved advantageous to the development of the Jewish community. Also, characteristic of the Jewish population in Przemyśl was its political dynamism, which increased during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Our survey of political topography indicates that the socialist current enjoyed greater social support than the Zionists who, on the other hand, had many diverse forms of activity. Despite the processes of acculturation and modernization in the multi-national and multi-cultural structure of the city, the Jewish population remained a community with distinctly varying ethnicities, cultures, and customs.