

ON THE EDGE OF DESTRUCTION: JEWS OF POLAND BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS. By *Celia S. Heller*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977. xiv, 369 pp. Illus. \$14.95.

In twentieth-century Jewish history, the Jewish community of interwar Poland occupies a unique and extremely important place. It was by far the largest Jewish community in non-Communist Europe—over three million strong—and it was basically unacculturated, unassimilated, Yiddish-speaking, and strongly attached to its religious tradition while also undergoing a process of modernization within the context of a semidemocratic, nationalistic, and anti-Semitic state. These conditions, so different from those under which the two other large Jewries of Russian-Polish origin (in the Soviet Union and in America) lived, made possible the flourishing of autonomous Jewish culture and Jewish politics, and transformed Poland into the center of Jewish Orthodox life, Yiddish literature, Zionism, and Jewish socialism.

Despite its evident importance, the Jewish experience in interwar Poland has been largely ignored by Jewish scholars until recently. Celia Heller's book is therefore a pioneering effort, the first general book on the subject by an author who is a qualified scholar and who also has a good command of the relevant languages. Does she do justice to her subject? Unfortunately, this inelegantly written study, which often affects an unattractive chatty style, is not a scholarly book. Its approach is sociological, not historical; its weakness, however, lies not in its approach but in the fact that Professor Heller has done precious little research. The vast amount of untapped material on Polish Jewry found in libraries and archives in the United States and Israel has been ignored by Professor Heller. The only important primary materials the author has consulted are the autobiographies of Jewish youths, which were commissioned by the Jewish Scientific Institute in Vilnius in the 1930s, and are now located in the YIVO archives in New York City. The author refers to these autobiographies as "my greatest find," a rather misleading statement since they have been well used by other scholars, notably by Max Weinreich. Apart from this, Professor Heller conducted "ten in-depth interviews." Thus, for the most part, her book is based on secondary sources, which are few and far between and are often unreliable. The best secondary sources, doctoral dissertations produced at Israeli universities, are ignored. It follows that the informed reader will discover little that is new in her book. Her treatment of such subjects as Jewish politics in Poland, Polish-Jewish relations, and Polish policy toward the Jews is superficial and often misleading. On what authority, for example, does Professor Heller write that "In the inter-war period there was hardly a person outside the traditional Jewish community who during adolescence or young adulthood had not been a member of a youth organization" (p. 267)? Where is the source for the statement that Zionism "soon swept the young of the most traditional shtetlekh" (p. 266)? Did members of Poale Zion really join the Polish Communist Party because they failed to find "an adequate solution to their identity problem" (p. 258)? There are all too many examples of these kinds of unfounded or speculative statements, which derive from the author's failure to do the necessary research. It is indeed a pity that Professor Heller has missed the opportunity to produce the first serious and truly innovative volume on interbellum Polish Jewry.

It would be unfair, however, to leave things at that. *On the Edge of Destruction* has some useful and interesting things to say about the nature of the Polish Jewish community and the changes that occurred within it during the 1920s and 1930s. Professor Heller presents a graphic (if fairly familiar) description of anti-Semitism, which was probably stronger in Poland than anywhere else in pre-1933 Europe. Her division of Polish Jews into assimilationists, Orthodox, and those whose beliefs lay "between tradition and assimilation," is convincing, as is her description of the crisis

experienced by Jews who tried to become secularized and Polonized, but were firmly rejected by Polish society. She is at her best when discussing the phenomenon of Polish-Jewish assimilation, a subject to which her "ten in-depth interviews" were devoted and about which she has published several interesting articles. And she certainly succeeds, as correctly claimed on the book's dust jacket, in demonstrating the heterogeneous character of Polish Jewry and the tensions which characterized relations between fathers and sons and among Orthodox, secular, and secularizing Jews.

Professor Heller argues that the Jews were the Negroes of Poland, a rather debatable point given the utterly different economic activities and social status of Polish Jews and American blacks. She ignores the fact that the existence of a huge Jewish minority—which exceeded 30 percent in the largest Polish cities—was a serious problem for the young and economically backward Polish state. She fails to relate the Jewish question in Poland to the broader problem of Poland's attitude toward its national minorities (which constituted over 30 percent of the general population), and she does not make enough of the deep-seated distinctions between the three quite separate Jewries which together constituted the Polish Jewish community—Galician Jewry, Lithuanian Jewry, and the community of "Congress Poland." Nevertheless, her book does bring out the essential tragedy of the Jews in Poland, who were hated either because they had failed to assimilate and were therefore "alien," or because they had succeeded all too well in penetrating the Polish economy and Polish culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that extreme political solutions, whether they called for evacuation of the Jews from Poland or for revolutionary change within Poland, gained so much support from Jewish youths.

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DIE JUDEN DER FREIEN STADT DANZIG UNTER DER HERRSCHAFT DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS. By *Erwin Lichtenstein*. Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts, 27. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1973. xiv, 242 pp. DM 59.

Erwin Lichtenstein was a Syndic of the Jewish community in Danzig and editor of its newspaper from 1933 to 1939. He tells the harrowing story of Nazi persecution of the Jews and their ultimate fate. The book is based on his own extensive documentation, other private documents, and selected published documents.

When the Nazis came to power in the Free City of Danzig in May 1933, the Jews numbered some 10,500 out of a population of 410,000. About two-thirds had come from Poland and Russia in 1919–20 and one-third were German Jews already residing in the city. The Nazification of Danzig aimed to make it "Judenfrei," or free of Jews. It followed the same pattern as Nazi Germany, that is, exclusion of Jews from civil service, liberal professions, and the boycott of Jewish shops and business establishments. The process was somewhat slower in Danzig because the high commissioner of the League of Nations, Sean Lester, opposed the persecution, and because the Polish government defended the rights of its citizens, both Jewish and Christian. However, neither the League nor Poland could effectively stop the process, short of a Polish occupation of Danzig. Lichtenstein does not mention this solution, nor the fact that neither the Western powers which supported the League nor Poland could occupy Danzig without provoking a conflict with Germany. After Lester's resignation in 1936, the persecution of the Jews proceeded unhampered. While some Jews had left Danzig before 1939, the main exodus took place during that year. The Danzig Nazis allowed some groups to leave in 1939–40, but after that, the remaining Jews were deported to Nazi death camps in occupied Poland.