
Rejected Children

On Kamil Kijek's *Dzieci modernizmu: Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej*

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Abstract: This article discusses Kamil Kijek's book *Dzieci modernizmu: Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* [Children of Modernism: The Consciousness, Culture and Political Socialization of Jewish Youth in the Second Polish Republic]. Using young people's diaries which were sent to three competitions held in the 1930s by the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), Kijek studies the ways young Jewish people described themselves, their visions of Jewish or Polish-Jewish identity, and the influence exerted on their attitudes and ideological choices by schooling, the activities of political youth organizations and the antisemitism of interwar Polish culture. This was the first generation to grow up in newly independent Poland, in a state that simultaneously demanded loyalty from its Jewish denizens and excluded them from its symbolic universe. Kijek calls the worldview predominant among this Jewish generation "radical modernism" – a conviction that the world requires a radical transformation. The political shades of this view – Communism, Zionism, or the Jewish right – were of lesser importance, with membership in a particular organization often depending on the circumstances.

Keywords: antisemitism; Jewish-Polish history; modernity; youth organizations; interwar Poland; Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO)

"Jews and Poles Lived Side by Side for 800 Years But Never Learned to Live Together"

To find Kamil Kijek's 2017 book, *Dzieci modernizmu: Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* [The Children of Modernism: The Consciousness, Culture, and Political Socialization of Jewish Youth in the Second Polish Republic] (Kijek, 2017), in the Warsaw University Library, we would have to look in the DS section. The Library uses the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) system, one of the most prevalent classification systems in use by scientific and academic libraries across the world. In the system, the letter D denotes, in general, the history of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. General history topics are marked with Roman numbers placed immediately following the letter D.¹ Regional histories, meanwhile, are classified in subclasses and designated with a code comprising the letter D and additional letters.

1 And so, for example, D.731–838 denotes World War II; this particular portion of the Warsaw University Library also holds works related to World War II in Poland, including war crimes, concentration camps, occupied territories by country, the Warsaw Uprising, etc. D.720–728 marks the interwar period.

Like a handful of other European countries,² Great Britain enjoys its own subclass, DA, while DAW denotes Central Europe; Czechoslovakia (sic!) shares the DB subclass with Austria, Liechtenstein, and Hungary. DJK indicates a general focus on Eastern Europe, while DK denotes Russia, Soviet Union, former Soviet republics, and Poland. DS marks the history of Asia. Asia as a whole, similarly to how DT denotes the whole of Africa. Despite all that granularity, Kamil Kijek's book, an interrogation of the interwar history of the Polish state – its education policies and schooling programs, integration efforts, its social makeup, and the youth groups and political organizations active at the time, is not classified as history of Poland, but instead given letters that designate it as exploring Asian history. Likewise, issues such as "Jews in Poland – History" (DS.134.53–134.56, which is the exact subclass that Kijek's book was assigned to), "Jews in Łódź" (DS.134.6), "Jews in Warsaw" (DS.134.66), and Jews in Poland – Biographies, memoirs" (DS.134.7–134.72), "Jews in Russia (Federation)" (DS.134.8–134.93), "Jewish diaspora – Other regions or countries" (DS.135.A–Z), and even "Antisemitism" (DS.145–146)³ are all assigned to Asian history, which is especially ironic considering the latter, as if it never had anything to do with European history, and Polish history in particular. The DS subclass also covers a bevy of other subjects related to Jewish history, including the history of the Holocaust in former Polish territories, the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and other ghetto insurgencies, of Jewish armed resistance, of the Kielce pogrom, or the antisemitic campaign of March 1968.⁴

Well, such is the dispassionate, rational, objective logic of the LCC, which for some reason dictates that the section DS.101–151 "Israel (Palestine), The Jews" also holds books on "Jews outside of Palestine" (DS.133–151). This bizarre approach might prompt some to ponder the historiosophic or even religious reasons behind it, or go so far as to compose an essay interrogating the Western, Europocentric, vaguely colonialist aspect of this particular classification logic, but that is a subject for another story, whereas I am interested in the metaphorical potential inherent in this state of things. This bureaucratic demarcation – which in the physical reality of the Warsaw University Library

2 Germany is labeled DD, DF denotes Greece, DJ – the Netherlands, and DQ – Switzerland. France shares its label with Andorra and Monaco, Italy with Malta, and Spain with Portugal. See: http://www.loc.gov/aba/cataloging/classification/lcco/lcco_d.pdf

3 After "Antisemitism," the DS subclass continues with Jordan, Asia Minor, Armenia, Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, Iran.

4 The DS subclass of the LCC also includes works exploring subjects such as the history of the Holocaust in the General Gubernment (e.g. Dariusz Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*), works with fundamental significance to the history of and debate over "Polish-Jewish relations": such as Jan Tomasz Gross' *Sąsiedzi* and *Strach* (published in English as *Neighbors* and *Fear*); Barbara Engelking's *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień* (published in English as *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...*); the Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka-edited anthology *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950*; Mirosław Tryczyk's *Miasta Śmierci*; but also Hanna Krall's *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* (published in English as *Shielding the Flame* and *To Outwit God*), Anka Grubińska's *Ciągle po kole*, and Mikołaj Grynberg's *Ocaleni z XX wieku, Oskarżam Auschwitz* or *Księga wyjścia*. LCC assigns all of these to its "Asian history" section. However, one of the seminal works to have shaped the discourse on Poles "rescuing" their Jewish neighbors, Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna's *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* (published in English as *Righteous among Nations* and *The Samaritans*), is assigned to section D.804, World War II, war crimes, alongside other books on the subject of the Polish rescue of the Jews in World War II.

translates into a relative proximity of the aforementioned classes, the shelving cleaved only by broad passageways – nevertheless carries a pronounced symbolic meaning, implying not only that official, bureaucratic logic often imprints arbitrary divisions into living historic tissue, into social fabric, its efforts akin to mechanical separation and dissection, but that this artificial division somehow fits the story of Jews and Poles living in Poland – offering its bitterly ironic counterpoint.

A similar counterpoint is provided by a brief essay by Isaac Bashevis Singer (1993), dated September 17, 1944, published under the bitterly blunt title “Jews and Poles Lived Side by Side for 800 Years But Never Learned to Live Together.” The title is perhaps one of the most concise summaries of the breadth of Polish-Jewish relations as they transpired within a single geographic location the two populations shared, which itself underwent a plethora of perturbations and political transformations. It holds all the resentment, all the apathy, and a number of diagnoses of this failure to integrate, including those that imply either unilateral or mutual indifference, callousness, passivity, as well as outright hostility. Furthermore, one could say that the title is better than the text itself, which, we ought to acknowledge, is rather superficial (attempting to discuss 800 years in the span of five pages), while the diagnoses it offers are debatable at best.

To Singer, these 800 years are primarily a history of mutual *désintéressement*. When Jews arrived in Poland, they were a much more advanced society. This, Singer argues further, predestined them to high-ranking positions, which Polish kings granted them along with broad privileges; in light of that, “for hundreds of years the Polish peasantry saw the Jews as beings of a higher order, whom nature gifted many talents and powerful minds. The country’s intellectuals hailed primarily from its Jewry” (Singer, 1993, p. 86). Complacent in their belief in their own cultural and intellectual superiority, the Jews failed to take notice of the Poles’ own gradual development. “Consequently, the Jews and the Poles spent their years of cohabitation living in spiritual alienation from one another” (Singer, 1993, p. 87). And when the Haskalah emerged in Germany, Polish Jews committed themselves even more fiercely to religion, resulting in the Polish bourgeoisie seeing them as uncouth fanatics. While the bourgeoisie grew powerful, the Jews weakened.

The situation developed so that the relations between Jews and Poles were, in many respects, better than elsewhere. Even if there was hatred between the two groups, it veered closer to prejudice held by two strangers, it was not the resentment of two people with intimate knowledge of one another, knowledge of each others’ mistakes (Singer, 1993, p. 88).

This state of affairs changed only when Poland regained its long-lost independence. Many Jews began sending their children to Polish schools, while Jewish youth began learning Polish. “This single generation managed to inure itself to matters that their ancestors either omitted or ignored. But in most cases, this hard-earned knowledge only exacerbated their existing alienation” (Singer, 1993, p. 89). Later on, Singer asserts

that most of the “modern Jews” in Poland held either Zionist or Communist sympathies; even the Bunders, whom Singer saw as the gentler alternative, demanded national autonomy and argued for allowing them to use Jewish languages. “By no means have these efforts strengthened the Poles’ sense of ‘community,’” Singer remarked (1993, p. 89), in a remarkable feat of inverting the causal relationship between the two. The reversal, in turn, leads him to a conclusion that seems particularly surprising in light of what we know today:

The situation was not good – resembled a marriage that was a mismatch from the very beginning of the courtship and only grew more sour from there. Polish fascists and anti-semites used this unfortunate match for their own despicable ends. It ought to be said, however, and emphatically so, that although the position of Jews was difficult, antisemitism had not exactly taken deep root in the country. We could even go so far as to claim that up until their final days, the relationship between Jews and Poles was dominated by alienation rather than hatred – like an old couple, as strange to each other despite all their years together as on their first day of marriage (Singer, 1993, p. 90).

There is not much sense in using this space to discredit the anachronisms, the lapses, and the simplifications of Singer’s brief essay – although it should be surprising to see a piece like that penned by an author who left Europe precisely because of the rising tide of antisemitism. Suffice it to say that the aforementioned marriage had become a union of formally and legally equal partners rather late in their time together, while their cultural, moral and symbolic equality feels even farther off. Although a “mismatch” might mean “a lack of mutual sympathy,” more often than not it implies a relationship based on violence, imbalance of power, violation, and symbolic exclusion. A relationship in which one party is granted all the social and cultural privileges, while the other is mired in stereotypes, relegated into subordination, forced to react and submit to the stronger counterpart. I find the Singer essay particularly interesting not as a subject of a polemic, but rather as a context, a jump-off point for an interrogation of Kamil Kijek’s 2017 book, which itself explores a portion of the history of this failure to integrate. Restoring the proper order to cause and effect mentioned above, it examines the nuances and the complex situation of “modern” young Jews (or, more precisely, Jews who wished to lead more modern lifestyles) in the Second Polish Republic and takes a closer look at their treatment at the hands of the nascent Polish state and what place it saw for them – or did not – within its reconstituted statehood.

Singer’s writing is also brought up by Maria Janion in her essay “Pułkownik żydowski” (“The Jewish Colonel” (Janion 2014)), a study of Berek Joselewicz, a figure also explored, although from a more “non-Romantic” angle, by the Nobel Prize winner from the village of Leoncin, who called Joselewicz “the first modern Jew in Poland.” Joselewicz is a symbolic and metonymic figure – an examination of the contingencies that have to be met for a Jew to be enshrined in Polish history and, consequently, in Polish culture. These include involvement in the armed struggle for the motherland and suffering a heroic demise. Regardless, Janion argues, Joselewicz may also be seen as a figure of emancipa-

tion, as he is associated chiefly with the Kościuszko Uprising – an armed rebellion that was as much national as it was republican, and which might be viewed as a symbolic (and failed) attempt to establish a commonwealth of free and equal citizens, a dream of Poland that would finally “be heaven for the anguished Jewish nation, as Mickiewicz, Norwid and Słowacki had predicted” (Janion, 2014, pp. 11–12), to quote a passage from the narrator of *The Family Moskat*. In this interpretation, freedom meant more than just nascent statehood – it meant the liberation of the citizenry from the yoke of tyranny (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 1997, p. 31). After taking his oath in the Kraków Market Square, Kościuszko said: “Gentlemen, in defense of the fatherland, equality to me is most valuable, which is why the Jew, peasant, nobleman, priest, and burgher have my equal respect” (quoted in Janion, 2014, p. 19). Inclusion in the commonwealth of equal and free citizens (their equality following from their freedom), however, was clearly contingent upon the willingness to take up armed struggle. One could not be a full-fledged Pole behind the walls of one’s Hassidic community. Thus, over time, Joselewicz grew to symbolize “the good Jew,” who rejected the cowardice, isolationism, and “cosmopolitanism” stereotypically associated with Jews, and instead embraced a more knightly, martial, and, as such, a more “Polish” occupation, which eventually led him to death in combat. In the philosemitic variant of the stereotype, Joselewicz provides the alibi for the Romantic, heroic, martial self-narrative (cf. Krakowska, n.d.) – offering another avenue to explore Kijek’s latest book, in which, drawing on statements of young Jewish citizens of the Second Polish Republic, the author examines the pressure of the Polish cultural imaginary that they were subject to, even going so far as to explicitly label it “symbolic violence.” He reveals the desire and the rejection, the powerful appeal of the Romantic and heroic paradigms, the all-powerful grip of the idiom confronted with the impossibility of participating in it, the “inability to conceive of oneself as potential protagonists of history.” The consequences of said inability we will be exploring below.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to circle back to the “failure to integrate” metaphor, specifically Singer’s interpretation based on ignorance and lack of insight. In the drama of Polish history, Jews often serve as extras⁵ – exotic-looking elders in gabardine smock, itinerant traders with funny accents, evil Communists or, if need be, “Polish Jews,” liberals populating the *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News] editorial room. It is, obviously, a major simplification of the matter, but the history of interwar Poland

5 Let us take a recent example, tangentially related to Kijek’s book. Writing about the Vilnius of Tadeusz Konwicki and his nostalgic portrayal of the lost city in his *Kronika wypadków miłosnych*, Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdź (2017, p. 23) notes: “The depiction of Wicio and Alina’s journey significantly curtails the extent of Jewish presence in Vilnius (before the war, Jews comprised around 40% of the city’s population), reducing it to a single courtyard with ‘a flock of Jewish children’ running around. [...] But in 1939, which is when the story is set, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) would have been celebrating its fourteenth year. Although the Institute itself was a modern creation, with a modern social and research profiles, it had deep links to the local constellations of more traditional Lithuanian Jews and the historical presence of the Jewish community within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and still managed to operate as a respected research center acclaimed in international academic circles, progressive and interdisciplinary. This is also another dimension of Jewish life in interwar Vilnius; and only a very narrow perspective could have reduced it to ‘flocks of children’ and the highly stereotypical image of a traditional, isolated community, living its exotic life in the ‘back alleys of Vilnius.’”

continues to have very little to say about the lives of its Jewish community, with all its internal diversity: its institutions, athletic clubs, filmmaking industry, its literature, as well as its cultural and political life. Naturally, writing history in an inclusive manner, cutting across “ethnic” divisions, is a major challenge – it is impossible to write about Polish Jews without exploring attendant contexts, such as antisemitic attitudes that were so prevalent in the Second Republic and which, on account of them comprehensively pervading the political, moral, and social spheres of Polish life, necessarily prompted a separation between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” history. And, as we have seen, writing about Jewish history may land an author in the “Asian” section of the library. Kamil Kijek, however, takes up the challenge with considerable resolve, and his book stands as a splendid and precious attempt at fleshing out the complexity and diversity of the Jewish community and providing greater insight into the network of Jewish school and youth organizations, the conditions in which young Jews were schooled (or in which they decided to abandon their education), how they entered adulthood and started jobs, what they read and how they spent their free time. All these insights are steeped in the context of reemerging Polish statehood, reborn and quickly consolidating: its educational institutions and policies, its political and economic situation, and its specific interpretations of what constituted national identity.

What Is the Book About?

It explores the generation of Jewish youth that grew up in the Second Polish Republic. The specific character of this generation’s experience was dictated by the Republic itself: a newly reestablished state, still crafting its own political and civic identity. Contrary to their parents, who were subjects of Tsarist Russia or Austria-Hungary,

the young Jews who grew up in the 1920s and ’30s were overwhelmingly graduates of Polish public schools and were influenced by Polish high and mass culture. Simultaneously, they were shaped by a number of Jewish organizations – political, civic, and cultural – which, despite a bevy of difficulties they faced, flourished and thrived in the Second Polish Republic (Kijek, 2017, p. 13).

The nascent state, whose territories – themselves shifting rather dynamically, at least in the early years after the war – were inhabited by a number of ethnic minorities, Jews and Ukrainians chief among them, had to necessarily come up with some concept of civic identity for its citizens. Naturally, no single model of such an identity has been adopted, and the debates over its shape raged essentially throughout the entire interwar history of the country. As Kijek himself demonstrates, and as we know from elsewhere, despite the popularity of a number of concepts that saw national identity as deriving from either citizenship or the state as a whole, and despite Sanation’s declarative support for social solidarity, the construction of this identity nevertheless progressed by way of embracing exclusion, marginalization, forced Polonization, and the rejection of

cultural diversity of ethnic minorities (or cultural differences generally). At the same time, the Second Polish Republic did not exist in an ideological vacuum – aside from internal disputes about principles and interpretations of its own traditions, it has been mired in the same ideological ferment that gripped Europe in the 1920s and '30s and permeated by the spirit of “radical modernism,” which Kijek used as a theoretical frame underpinning his argument, but we will be exploring that in detail a little later.

For his source material and basic subject of analysis, the author chose autobiographies of young Jews (aged 16–22) submitted to three separate competitions organized by the Vilnius-based Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in 1932, 1934, and 1939, respectively. Founded in 1925 and conceived as a modern research institution focused on Jewish culture and history, the Institute quickly grew into one of the most important centers of Jewish thought in all of Europe. Kijek points out that in order to present itself as a national institution, impartially standing above politics and social divisions, the Institute assembled a research staff with mostly center-leftist and leftist views, standing in opposition to both orthodoxy and Zionism.

Fighting for the ideals underpinning “diaspora nationalism,” YIVO necessarily took a stand against all forms of Jewish “assimilation,” and thus condemned attitudes that strove to combine Jewish religious identity with Polish cultural or national identity, opposed the propensity for undue Polonization exhibited by some of the institutions of the Polish state, and lamented the plethora of acculturative processes that the Jewish community was subject to (Kijek, 2017, pp. 26–27).

Kijek also argues that the authors of the submitted biographies were well aware of YIVO's particular profile, which could have influenced their portrayal of their own beliefs and compelled them to model their biographies somewhat. Kijek himself is conscious of the, shall we say, constructivist character of the submitted accounts. He examines them not just to retrace specific biographies in search of “objective facts” in terms of historic events, but to reconstruct – and interpret – their worldviews, including the three titular elements: consciousness, culture, and political socialization. Although his gaze is inquisitive – the author exhibits a high degree of theoretical consciousness and a good grasp of technique – the approach itself is somewhat restrictive. While such a “cautious” reading of sources protects the author from hasty, premature judgments and intellectual naïveté, and seeks to answer questions like “What they wished happened” instead of “What happened,” the author does not seem entirely convinced that his autobiographical sources are telling the truth, in spite of the fact that he gave them a voice of their own. He hears them, but seems not to or, in other words – he hears them but does not seem to understand. Or, to put it still differently – he hears them but believes he understands them better than they understand themselves, a notion he lays out with complete honesty in the methodological premises in the very beginning of the book, where he also introduces the concept of “radical modernism” that would underpin his argument:

Herein, I define radical modernism as a “total ideology” in the Mannheimian interpretation, that is as a sort of collectively generated knowledge, marked by social and political entanglements, the sources of which cannot be exhaustively interrogated by the actors involved in historical events (Kijek, 2017, p. 21).

Following the author’s argument is a fascinating intellectual exercise, albeit not an entirely pleasant one: its main thread runs through multiple autobiographical accounts rife with poverty, lack of prospects, rejection, violence, failed hopes, frustrations, and disappointment – in fact, such a trajectory ought to underpin all reliable research into Polish interwar history.

The YIVO competitions drew submissions from all over Poland, and their authors hailed from all segments of society.⁶ The pool selected by Kijek represents a broad cross-section – boys and girls; from lower, middle, and upper classes; proponents of Zionism, young Communists; children from orthodox, secular, religious, socialist, and Polonized households; writing in Yiddish, in Polish, and in Hebrew.

The chronological order of the biographies organizes the structure of the argument; in such an interpretation, said structure, in turn, becomes somewhat teleological. The *telos* derives from the autobiographies themselves, meaning that the sources can be, or even “want to be,” read in such a manner; furthermore, when read thusly, they arrange themselves to support the logic driving the author’s argument.⁷

Subsequent chapters explore, respectively: the world of Jewish “tradition” and familial environments, the (usually) negative experience of *cheder* schooling, the scenery of the *shtetlekh* and the Jewish quarters; individual ambitions aroused by the “modernity” of the world outside the Jewish community; education in public schools and Jewish private schooling; patterns of participation in culture, both high and low; the experience of antisemitism and symbolic exclusion; finally – political activity, membership in Jewish organizations, and the formation of political consciousness and its attendant “radical habitus,” a concept that the author considers key to his argument.

The Jewish youths’ paths to disappointment and contention usually began with the family home, the streets in Jewish villages or districts, and early education in the *cheder*. The youths considered their lives the very antithesis of those led by their parents, they wanted something different for themselves, wanted a more civic, more secular (or quite the opposite – they wanted more religious orthodoxy, but without the burden

6 “In total, the three competitions drew 627 autobiographies and hundreds of other personal documents (letters, memoirs, first drafts), mostly from Poland, but a considerable portion came from a number of European countries, from Palestine, the United States, and South America” (Kijek, 2017, p. 32). Around 400 of them have survived the Holocaust and have been shipped to the Institute’s new New York City headquarters. From these, Kijek selected around a hundred, “selecting them to create the broadest possible cross-section of the applicants, socio-culturally and politically speaking” (Kijek, 2017, p. 33).

7 The claim of “writing to support his argument” is not intended in any way to undercut the argument itself – it is consistent, well documented with sources, and supported by a number of sociological and historical diagnoses. It simply seems to me that the conclusion of the argument should instead be positioned as the starting point for the inquiries comprising the book.

of “tradition”), more modern life, and had accordingly higher expectations of the state (even having any such expectations put them at odds with their parents’ generation, who usually held none). In the book, descriptions of that traditional upbringing, with the *cheder* as its metonymy, veer toward the derogatory, employing categories such as “dirt,” “chaos,” “violence,” and “confusion” (Kijek, 2017, p. 119). At the same time, the experience of childhood – and only in the chronological rather than the “sociological” sense (as many of the applications wrote about having had “lost their childhoods” in the modern sense of the term) – provided them the first lesson in what they believed to be the essential injustice of the world around them:

The most frequent themes in the autobiographies submitted by competition applicants included sensitivity to widespread poverty and demeaning living conditions, which were portrayed as driving the physical, mental, and spiritual degeneration of both the authors themselves as well as people around them. Furthermore, most applicants believed that it was the malfunctioning social safety net that was chiefly to blame for said poverty. It also ought to be emphasized that the authors, few of whom could be considered socialists or Communists, described the relationships in their immediate surroundings chiefly in class terms, sometimes resorting to explicitly Marxist categories. This is by no means proof of the popularity of Communist ideas among Jewish youth in the 1930s, but it could be considered evidence of a phenomenon which I came to call meta-socialist consciousness – a worldview that drew, albeit unconsciously or semiconsciously, on categories of perception and description devised by Marxist thought (Kijek, 2017, p. 121).

This passage offers a good illustration of the author’s thinking or his research methodology. In his view, the meta-ideological supersedes social reality, supersedes the “naked life,” which does not seem to actually exist in his sociological vocabulary or seems to subsist in a strictly subordinate role. To put it in simpler terms – after discovering the lenses through which the protagonists of his book may have viewed the world, he grew more interested in their strength and focal length rather than the picture they actually produced. It is as if only the emergence of specific categories allowed certain phenomena to be named. From the perspective of history of culture, the observation itself is indeed valuable – ways of looking at the world are determined by a bevy of cultural and historical factors, all of which change over time, such as overall level of knowledge, cultural capital, specific sensibilities, primary and secondary socialization, prevailing philosophical frameworks or the aforementioned meta-ideologies, which in this case would be the “meta-socialist” consciousness. The ability to sense social injustice and inequality, however, is not contingent upon a sophisticated theoretical language. This is by no means to say that a grasp of Marxist conceptualizations and a degree of sensitivity to the class-based character of social strata, to exploitation and poverty, to social injustice and lack of prospects were not part of the era’s collective mentality. Instead, I would argue that their acute awareness of injustice and violence did not derive from their preference of Communism-tinted glasses, but rather the fact that they were intimately familiar with both on account of their surroundings and upbringing, with their meta-socialist lenses only making the desperate picture that much sharper. Elsewhere in the book, the author writes:

The autobiographies of Jewish youth are usually “holistic” in character. Their underlying narratives are mostly logical arguments, bringing together all of the individual chapters and episodes of their lives into a single, cohesive whole. Most authors demonstrated a clear tendency to blame social factors, over which they had no control, for their personal dramas and failures. The consistency of this particular propensity says much about the social order prevalent in the country they grew up in (Kijek, 2017, p. 53).

An even greater emphasis appears in the footnote to the above-cited passage:

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the possibility that this withering critique of their circumstances was nothing but a red herring, deployed to deflect attention from the authors’ failures in life. Thus, it is not the fact of critiquing that is key in this instance, as much as the critique’s evident political context (Kijek, 2017, p. 53).

This is another instance in which the author’s ironclad logic seems to collapse – while constructing a broad context for the upbringing of Jewish youth, he simultaneously questions whether it actually had any “genuine” impact on those very lives that his book interrogates.

The chapters on education and schooling – both in public schools and private Jewish facilities – comprise, at least in my view, the most interesting part of the study. Kijek paints a broad backdrop for what education looked like in the Second Polish Republic, taking into account its institutional, social, and policy aspects. In theory, in interwar Poland, primary schooling was universal and available to all. In practice, however, access was severely curtailed, and contingent upon social and economic status. The very fact of Poland regaining statehood was key here – for the majority of young Polish Jews, universal primary education would be their first contact with state institutions and Poland’s state-sanctioned curriculum. The state allowed minorities, including the Jews, to establish private schools, with their own curricula, but as time passed, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment sought to enforce the state curriculum in all schools – including those that taught in Hebrew and Yiddish rather than in Polish.⁸ At this point, it should also be brought up that only primary schooling was free and universal in interwar Poland. Secondary education carried a tuition charge, meaning that students from poorer backgrounds were discriminated against. At the same time, Kijek writes, “only *gimnazjum* [middle school] students were given serious instruction in everyday matters of the state, taught about its economic and social problems, and given a more critical and deliberative interpretation of its history” (Kijek, 2017, p. 126). The overwhelming majority of Jewish children aged 7–14 attended state public schools alongside Polish students; the rest studied at special state schools for Jewish children, called *szabasówki* (Sabbath schools), which held no classes on Saturdays. Taking advantage of the lack of consensus among Jews themselves as to which of the two languages they considered official, the *szabasówki* curriculum did not include any Jewish language

8 In the early years of the reconstituted Polish state, the public education system was very complicated; the complexities were removed, but only to an extent, by the Jędrzewicz reform of 1932, implemented only in 1937.

courses – a contravention of the provisions of the Little Treaty of Versailles, which obliged the state to establish and financially support schools for ethnic minorities, and Jews were considered a religious minority at the time. In general, the *szabasówki* curriculum did not differ much from the official state curriculum, aside from the addition of coursework related to Jewish religion and culture.

The situation was different in secondary schools – as far as 1927, Jews made up only 25% of all high school students, but very few attended state *gimnazjum* schools, which were cheap, provided high-quality education, and offered the best prospects for passing matriculation exams – the overwhelming majority studied in private schools. The percentage of Jewish youth among state *gimnazjum* students continued to fall, on account of the antisemitic sentiments and other factors, including *numerus clausus* quota policies, which the state enforced in the 1930s also in mid-level education. Thus, Jewish youth was left with attending either bilingual schools, where most of the courses were taught in Polish (and which were ultimately chosen by the majority of Jewish students), or private schools founded by politically-inclined educational organizations – the orthodox Chorew, which bet on modern religious education, the Zionist (center-moderately leftist) Tarbut, which pursued modern, secular education with classes taught in Hebrew, and the CISZO (Central Yiddish School Organization) popular school system, affiliated with the Bund and Poale Zion-Left.

The portions of the book dealing with schooling and the attendant chapters on reading practices and self-didacticism make up the core, and ostensibly most important, part of the (auto)biographical and generational drama that the study sought to interrogate. It is in this part that all the paradoxes of modernity are brought into sharp relief. Most of the cited autobiographies describe first coming into contact with public schools or schools other than the *cheder* (meaning also Jewish secular schools) in highly enthusiastic terms, drawing on categories such as brightness, sunlight, or cleanliness. Schools are labeled “gateways to modernity” and a “friendly enclave.” The first generation to reach adulthood in the Second Republic was hungry for knowledge – secular, modern knowledge. Many of the applications that Kijek pored over featured joyful descriptions of the attributes typically associated with secular education: neat desks, notebooks, maps, female teaching staff, coeducational classes in primary school, as well as learning geography, arithmetic, and biology. School sparked their aspirations, socialized them into a more civic-minded life. Kijek argues, however, that at the same time, this education “had a pronounced secularizing and denationalizing influence” on Jewish students. It alienated them from their ancestral traditions and cleaved them from the realm inhabited by their parents. It was an instrument of Polonization – even in bilingual schools and Jewish-run educational facilities, students were taught Polish, alongside history, geography, culture. It brought Jewish youth into direct contact with state-sanctioned mandatory reading lists, which included Sienkiewicz and Mickiewicz, immersing them in the Romantic lexicon. If we add to that their extracurricular reading

practices, their unrestrained participation in mass culture⁹ (Helena Mniszkówna's *Trędowata* [The Leper] and Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz's *Znachor* [The Quack] topped the popularity lists among Jewish and Polish students alike!), and the pressure of state propaganda, if we abide by Kijek's injunction to examine "life as a whole" – then we will soon recognize that Jewish youth was much more deeply Polonized than it realized. However, Polonization in terms of language does not imply acculturation or assimilation, which, in turn, leaves us with additional complications and nuances.¹⁰ Young Jews held much respect for Marshal Piłsudski, loved Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy*, loved their geography and Polish classes, while their school trips – even those organized by Jewish schools – were designed to strengthen their love of the homeland, taking them to such significant locations as Gdynia, Wawel, Silesia, or the Central Industrial Region. At the same time, they were seeking some new form for their Jewish identity and finding none within the realm of the Polish state. Instead, they encountered rejection. Soon realizing that they could not use that Romanticist lexicon to explore and tell their own stories and that they were forbidden from participating in the national mythology, they nevertheless drew on the language of Romanticism to express their yearning for their own homeland, their own state. In that respect, one passage from the autobiography of a *gimnazjum* student from Kovel is particularly striking:

In my mind's eye, I saw not Poland, not the Diaspora – but the beloved Motherland (to use Kasproicz's interpretation of the term), Palestine. At the time, I was ready to suffer through poverty even a thousand times worse if it meant toiling away on my own Jewish land. Back then, I thought myself undergoing the hakhshara or protecting that little stretch of garden from some sort of enemy (Kijek, 2017, p. 245).

The author writing under the pseudonym "Mars" said:

Once, walking through the reading room, I heard the "Strzelec" [Związek Strzelecki "Strzelec," or the Riflemen Association, was a paramilitary organization; in interwar Poland it focused its efforts on urban youth – transl. note] choir carrying a song, and my heart called out for a similar experience, but to whom would I sing it? The "Strzelec" boys have their homeland, and can put their love of it into song – while I have none; I broke down crying... (Kijek, 2017, p. 246).

"Refleg," a proponent of the rightwing Betar, included in his autobiography a passage from a poem he wrote, which clearly carried distinct traces of Mickiewiczian influence:

Grant me a pair of golden gleaming wings – And watch me soar, swift like lightning.
[...] The tragic past is our and dreadful – written not in black ink, but in blood [...] Now,
o Nation, abandon despair! [...] Gaze eastwards, where the sun rises – spilling light into
the darkness of your ghettos (Kijek, 2017, p. 246).

Charged with building Polish identity and strengthening citizen loyalty to the homeland, the state education system had nothing to offer to non-Poles, and went as far

9 The term itself encompasses not only texts of culture (literature, films, plays) released in Polish, but also Yiddish translations and adaptations of works published in Poland and abroad.

10 The shortcomings of the categories of assimilation and linguistic acculturation are explored in detail by Kijek (Kijek, 2017, pp. 233–240).

as to ignore their existence. In her study of the content of primary and lower middle school textbooks, Anna Landau-Czajka noticed: “very few of these books carried any mention of any other ethnic groups that lived in Poland alongside Poles” (quoted in Kijek, 2017, p. 254). So the state sought to Polonize those who it subsequently refused to consider Poles, full-fledged citizens. Furthermore, minority youth were also likely to come into contact with antisemitic sentiments expressed by peers or teachers. Intellectually stimulated and furnished with a considerable symbolic capital which it could not tap to purchase a sense of belonging to a community, it continued to experience painful discrimination. For this new generation, even a more pronounced sensitivity to antisemitism was seen as modern – no longer considered necessary evil or the “natural” order of things, such sentiments were condemned as “dreadful, undeserved distress, designed to be hurtful to distinct individuals.”

The sense of rejection was further amplified by the economic conditions and widespread social injustice. The Jewish youth exhibited high civic aspirations – they wanted to be, as Kijek mentions, “productive,” socially useful, they wanted higher education and they wanted to “live with dignity.” And the Polish state was either unable or unwilling to satisfy these aspirations. Young people often had to abandon their education, an event which the submitted autobiographies mostly framed as a great personal tragedy, to seek employment: usually only temporary, bringing barely any satisfaction and even less money.

Lonely, frustrated, and doubly alienated – both from the world of their parents and from Polish society – young Jews tended to internalize the framing of the “Jewish question” as an “objective” and “structural problem” – meaning one impossible to solve within the existing social order. Thus, they sought answers within their own communities, isolating themselves from the majority that rejected them in the process. Although it might sound somewhat dramatic, but borrowing a phrase from Kijek we might say that they found themselves facing a choice: emigration or revolution.

Radical Modernism

Meaning either Zionism or Communism. Zionism offered the opportunity for a real homeland, the chance to build a better, more just order, for physical labor that had a clear purpose, for “productivism,” the implementation of the idea of strength and activism, for rejecting the powerlessness and weakness that characterized their parents’ worlds. Likewise, Communism also carried a promise of radically transforming the world for the better, it also offered the opportunity to shed an identity that felt imposed and stamped with a stigma of strangeness and alienation. It allowed and facilitated the transcendence of national, ethnic, and religious categories. And these were no mere

opportunities offered to draw in recruits. The right-wing Betar provided uniforms, singing and marching, working to overturn disparaging stereotypes that portrayed Jews as “weak” or “effeminate.”¹¹ But more than in any political program, Kijek is interested in the very modus of participation in political organization or, to use his phrasing, in the “radical habitus.” The organizations were often in conflict with one another, which did not preclude Kijek’s autobiographers from frequently shifting their allegiances. What was actually important, Kijek later argues, was activism itself – the pursuit of action and radical, modernist social consciousness, as in “Something has to be done with this world.” The organizations also offered a safe haven from antisemitic sentiments, a chance to rest and relax after hard work, an active social circle, an opportunity to build new skills or escape everyday loneliness. Assembly venues quickly became second homes to many members. At the same time, Kijek adds, all areas of life grew politicized. He believes that the line between education and indoctrination was highly fluid at the time, while the “alternative education” offered by these organizations was subordinated to their political agendas.

Ideology dominated over all, even the seemingly “pure” cultural efforts, focused on literature or theater. A survey of the submitted works, particularly from authors who had to abandon learning early, reveals how quickly they grew to believe that their new ideological knowledge will help them make sense of the world around them. Thus, the organizations feeding them this knowledge allowed the youth, at least in the symbolic dimension, to renounce and abandon traditional society (Kijek, 2017, p. 336).

And so, when they read, “they chose their readings according to their politics and interpreted them along the same lines”;¹² if they fell in love, they did so with friends from the organization who were “intelligent, smart, serious, experienced by life, and habituated to organizational life” (Kijek, 2017, p. 366),¹³ while radical collectivism and the

11 On the figure of the “New Jew,” formed by the ideology and praxis of Betar, see Zawadzka, 2012.

12 The part of the book dedicated to the reading practices is, in my view, the most brilliant portion of the study. The author both understands and illustrates different modes of “reading,” interpreted broadly, as different forms of consuming the written word: reading newspapers collectively, “knowing something by hearing of it,” the symbolic power of certain titles and authors. Distrustful of official statistics (indeed, there was a library in nearly every little Jewish town, but it was used for a variety of cultural purposes) and declarations of the authors he surveyed, Kijek notices that they could not have been consuming all the literature they laid claim to, because they simply lacked the time to do so, meaning they had to consume it by means other than solitary, focused reading. This does not imply, however, that the literature they thusly consumed had no impact on them.

13 A passage from the autobiography of “Margalit.” Later on, the author described her first love in the following words: “He was characterized by an unusual energy, idealism, a will to action, and a deep loyalty to the organization he devoted years of his life to and was practically the leader of [...]. We were locked in a complete, unbridled exchange of thought. Aside from that, he strove to purge me of all my flaws, whether innate or acquired, such as vanity or a propensity for swindle. [...] After a few months, my attachment to him ran deep and my love for him was true. My feelings were reciprocated and to this very day we are bound by an unbreakable, deep friendship.” Kijek calls it “the most vivid example of ideological indoctrination of the competition applicants” and seems to have trouble believing someone actually, genuinely fell in love with an intelligent, highly ideological fellow organization member, or a female friend who was a “very agreeable and an interesting person, primarily because she had a good grasp of economic and social problems” (Kijek, pp. 366–367). While I agree with Kijek that such a description of the object of one’s affection may seem (especially from a contemporary perspective) rather stilted and unnatural, primarily because of its emphasis on characteristics that are “appealing from an organizational standpoint,” I would argue that the shift in the patterns and modi of falling in love or establishing intimate relationships was driven by a more complex tangle of factors than Kijek would believe.

unreserved critique of the uninvolved and those lacking a clear ideology was common in both left- and right-wing-leaning organizations. In the author's interpretation, radical modernism was a total ideology from that particular period, which defined those shared characteristics of mass movements that transcended differences between their specific agendas or bases they drew on. These shared characteristics included: a belief in the imminent collapse of capitalism in its liberal incarnation and the necessity of replacing it with new forms of socio-political organization, a replacement possible only by way of radical social transformation; lack of faith in the democratic political process and a willingness to embrace revolutionary change in the pursuit of political and social objectives; a fondness for collectivism and discipline, combined with an aversion to "traditional" forms of politics (like party activity, attempts to secure parliamentary representation and influence legislation) over which the youth preferred striking, political demonstrations, and labor union organizing. Kijek stresses the totalism of political organizations, at the same time pointing out how their closed off, isolationist character greatly contributed to their failure to prepare their members for living in a modern state and a modern society, instead reinforcing escapist and antisystemic attitudes.

This vision of radical modernism and its attendant radical habitus is consistent and rather persuasive, but the problem lies in the fact that rather than make it a point of departure for his sweeping inquiry, he positions the concept as his argument's endgame. Although a meticulous scholar of historical sources and a sophisticated sociologist, he nevertheless proves himself unable to transcend his own liberal paradigms, his own deeply internalized belief in the one proper way of practicing politics and influencing social reality. The paradigm seems to "shine through" the author's detached argument, for example when he writes that the youth saw values such as liberalism or reformism as alien, and that their political language lacked categories such as compromise, political pragmatism, or *Realpolitik*; or when he brings up Osias Thon in the conclusion, an "old, nineteenth century liberal" and one of the biggest Jewish authority figures from the interwar period, who lamented that "the revolutionary idea won the struggle for the soul of mankind, winning over the idea of reform" and that "brutal egoism is the only sport the youth is interesting in playing," as evidenced by their fondness for "holding strike actions," "mass demonstrations," and "playing cat and mouse with the police" (Kijek, 2017, p. 417), all the while showing no understanding of the objective and meaning behind their efforts. In a similarly patronizing manner, Kijek seems to say that the youth was led around by the nose by ideologues and radical political organizations. On the other hand, however, Kijek's entire study is a veritable catalog of the contingencies, qualifications, and requirements that the youth he surveyed had to meet in order to gain passage into the world of traditional, liberal, parliamentary politics. Furthermore, their experience of the injustice, inequality, and violence of their world seemed to clearly imply to them that traditional liberal democracy was failing – assuming that it had actually succeeded somewhere, interwar Poland was definitely not one of these places.

But Kijek's explanations fail to prove satisfactory in one other respect. While he manages to convincingly interrogate the circumstances that prompted the youth to join political organizations, his portrayal transforms these organizations into impersonal, alien, mysterious causal forces – as if the very young people making up their ranks bore no influence over their shape and were reduced to mere puppets subject to dehumanizing ideologies. Another passage seems a testament to what could be a lapse in empathy, perhaps revealing the author's own place within a defined intellectual paradigm: “without full awareness of the sources feeding their own thinking, the Jewish youth, when describing their family homes, their everyday lives, education, and work, usually followed in the footsteps of sophisticated futurists” (Kijek, 2017, p. 413). But perhaps Kijek has got it backwards? Perhaps one did not need literary or poetic sensibilities to experience poverty, injustice, violence, and a sense of impending doom. “Cultural sensibility was augmented by real-life experience,” Kijek writes, ostensibly unable to conceive of real-life experience shaping, rather than merely reinforcing it. Although the author warns his readers in the conclusion against embracing a teleological interpretation of history, he himself seems to believe that there is only one correct trajectory of political development, as evidenced by the passage wherein he writes that if it had not been for the war,

with time, much of the youth's ardor would have been tempered, melting away that which compelled them to embrace revolution and contest the entire socio-political reality. Aside from this radical habitus, the interwar period also shaped the “cultural Polishness” of the Jews, their growing patriotism, and their loyalty to the state. This loyalty carried considerable civic potential, which could have manifested itself more fully had the war not broken out and had Polish politics moved toward making society more accepting of the Jews and embracing a vision of the country that saw it as a commonwealth of all Second Republic citizens, regardless of their ethnic provenance (Kijek, 2017, p. 427).

Polish politics moved in a different direction, however, and war eventually had broken out.

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

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Odrzucone dzieci. O książce Kamila Kijka *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej*

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest recenzją książki Kamila Kijka *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej*. Autor wykorzystuje pamiętniki młodych ludzi, nadesłane na trzy konkursy Żydowskiego Instytutu Naukowego w latach trzydziestych XX wieku. Bada, jak przedstawiciele młodzieży żydowskiej opisywali samych siebie, jaka była ich wizja żydowskiej lub polsko-żydowskiej tożsamości oraz jaki wpływ na ich postawy i wybory ideowe miała edukacja szkolna, działalność młodzieżowych organizacji politycznych i antysemityzm międzywojennej kultury polskiej. Badane pokolenie było pierwszym dorastającym w warunkach odzyskanej niepodległości, w odrodzonym państwie polskim, które jednocześnie wymagało od Żydów lojalności i wykluczało ich ze swojego symbolicznego uniwersum. Zdaniem autora, dominującym światopoglądem młodzieży był „radykalny modernizm” – przekonanie, że świat wymaga radykalnej przebudowy. Polityczne odcienie tego poglądu – komunizm, syjonizm, żydowska prawica – miały mieć mniejsze znaczenie, a przynależność do poszczególnych organizacji politycznych była często rezultatem zbiegu okoliczności.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: antysemityzm; polsko-żydowska historia; nowoczesność; organizacje młodzieżowe; Polska międzywojenna; Żydowski Instytut Naukowy (JIWO)



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