

The fight for moral capital among the Polish intelligentsia. Wojciech Roszkowski as an actor of history and the present

The publication of Wojciech Roszkowski's textbook for high schools, *Historia i teraźniejszość. 1945–1979* [History and the Present. 1945–1979], has led to the fiercest controversy over the place of history in Poland's public life since Jan Tomasz Gross' *Neighbours*. The aim of the article is to examine the debate surrounding the textbook, particularly taking into account Wojciech Roszkowski's trajectory and position among the Polish intelligentsia. Firstly, I demonstrate that the textbook crowns the author's journey from solitary activity as a writer in the opposition movement and solitary work in the underground, through the mainstream of the elites of the Third Polish Republic to the heterodoxy of the conservative counter-elites. Secondly, I place the textbook in the tension between the Polish intelligentsia and the world of politics. Thirdly, I reconstruct the romantic, highly polemical, lofty and doom-laden structure controlling the historical narrative of the textbook, which strikes at the dominant, orthodox, progressive beliefs of the Polish intelligentsia. In conclusion I argue that the debate surrounding the textbook has stemmed from the author's exceptional position and trajectory, the fight within the Polish intelligentsia as well as the unique, "hot", monumental and explosive narrative of the textbook.

* * *

Źródła do dziejów Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku (do 1939 r.): t. I: I. Chorosz, *Podróż po przemysłowej strefie osiedlenia. Polski przemysł włókienniczy. Żydowskie wytwórnie i żydowscy robotnicy*, tłum. Jan Szumski, wstęp i oprac. Artur Markowski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2019, ss. 212; t. II: *Kazania dla młodzieży żydowskiej w Galicji*, wybór i oprac. Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2021, ss. 342; t. III: *Pogrom domów publicznych w Warszawie*, wybór i oprac. Aleksandra Jakubczak, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2022, ss. 278

The first three volumes in this ongoing series of annotated source collections on 19th-century Polish Jewry, overseen by Artur Markowski, provides a wonderful service to historians. Each collection entails a window onto one of the least explored yet most crucial periods of Polish Jewish history, the late 19th-century transition to modernity. The cataclysmic changes of that time are well-known: industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and attendant inter-ethnic tensions and violence. Yet the current collections take us deep inside several such phenomena, affording a glimpse of the human dimension of a world turned upside-down.

The first series of texts, *Podróż po przemysłowej strefie osiedlenia* (Journey to an Industrial Zone), compiles fascinating economic reportage about Jewish industrial workers in centers like Białystok, Łódź, and Mińsk. These essays originally appeared in the Russian language journal *Woschod* from 1901–1902, and were written by a maskil (Jewish Enlightenment-based reformer) under the pseudonym I. Chorosz. As the editor, Artur Markowski admits, they can be quite technical: weaving technologies, dying processes, and so on. Yet the picture that emerges from them is striking. Apart from a handful of successful Jewish industrialists, the main subjects of the essays — Jewish workers — had clearly fallen behind. A division of labor had emerged between Polish Catholics, whose technical training and ability to work on Saturdays landed them better, mechanized jobs; and Jews, who were typically confined to grueling piecework by hand in deplorable conditions, often alongside their wives and children. At least they had work, however Chorosz poignantly describes one unemployed artisan who can only scrape up a few rubles each week by delivering learned Talmudic discourses. Increasing numbers of younger Jews were drawn into Socialist movements and away from religion, or tempted to leave for America. We gain a much better sense of the forces behind Jewish radicalization and emigration, as well as the corresponding generational divide. The solution, according to Chorosz, was to modernize Jewish education, including establishing technical schools in the Yiddish language.

The second volume, *Kazania dla młodzieży żydowskiej w Galicji* (Sermons for Jewish Youth in Galicia), presents printed religious “admonitions” for Jewish youths in public schools from the end of the nineteenth century. Ironically, the sermons represented an effort to fight secularization and religious apathy in an environment that encouraged acculturation and assimilation. The preachers of progressive synagogues and teachers who authored the sermons attempted to inspire the Jewish youth religiously by employing a Christian genre to be read in the classroom in a ceremonial tone or, “when it is needed, with passion.” Most sermons related to weekly Torah portions and holidays. Jewish gymnasium students in Lwów (Lemberg) and elsewhere were exhorted, on the pattern of biblical characters, to love their Fatherland and be strong in both religious belief and knowledge, for “belief and knowledge go hand in hand.” Biblical diseases and plagues were invoked to emphasize the importance of hygiene, but were also interpreted metaphorically as the contemporary “moral plague” of irreligion. Patriotism, piety, and Enlightenment are the mantras in these quaint artifacts of programmatic acculturation.

The third volume, *Pogrom domów publicznych w Warszawie* (Pogroms against Brothels in Warsaw), builds on Keely Stauter-Halsted’s work on the curious “pimp pogrom” that occurred in the capital in May, 1905, resulting in the destruction of around 150 Jewish establishments of ill-repute at the hands of Jews themselves. The impressive linguistic range of the editor and translator, Aleksandra Jakubczak, enables us to see the same set of events from different Polish and Jewish perspectives. Jakubczak explains the Jewish-instigated “pogrom” as an attempt by Jewish Socialists to morally purify Jewish neighborhoods and, in addition, as a contest with the Jewish underworld for control of the “streets.” We are given a spectrum of press reports, from the anti-Jewish Polish weekly *Rola* to Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers of various (unmentioned) ideologies. The former bemoan the ways in which Jewish-induced violence have “dishonored” Warsaw; the latter attempt to diagnose the causes of Jewish involvement in prostitution (“all other occupations are closed to Jews”)

and stress the involvement of Christians, too, in the attacks. Even without much-needed introductions to each perspective, it is an important first step towards widening the lens on violent events in Polish Jewish history.

The introductions to these volumes could have benefitted from more reflection on what post-colonial theorists term “structures of domination,” i.e., the position of Jews vis-à-vis their more numerous and politically powerful Polish Christian neighbors. Although some Jews in the Kingdom managed to achieve tremendous economic success by the second half of the nineteenth century, most were extremely poor and vulnerable. It must be recalled that Polish Jews were not fully emancipated by the law on Jewish rights of June 5, 1862. Most Jews continued to endure legal disabilities, lack of political representation, special taxation, and informal discrimination—from economic boycotts and violent assaults, to outright pogroms.

Markowski is most conscious of Jewish disadvantages, noting how Jews were virtually pushed into small-scale industry in cities yet deprived of necessary technical training. He is probably correct that Chorosz’s proposed solution—more technical training and modernization—was “overly refined” and “naïve”. However, it would help to know why such solutions were impractical. Was it that Jews in the kingdom would have likely suffered from discrimination regardless of their technical knowledge and willingness to “modernize”? Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska is right to emphasize that progressive Jewish sermons were patterned on Christian models. However, it is important to consider the ramifications of accepting, in this manner, Polish Catholic intellectual and religious hegemony in a context of ongoing discrimination and outright persecution. The issue of positionality is most urgent in Jakubczak’s presentation of a “pogrom” provoked by Jews. What are we to learn from this unique case, especially as it compares to actual pogroms against Jews at that time? Are we to conclude that Jews, too, were pogromists? Or, more plausibly, is the lesson that in the turn-of-century context of chaotic violence even Jews could occasionally become perpetrators against their own co-religionists? These volumes are extremely valuable in their presentation of lesser known dimensions of 19th-century Polish Jewish life, and invite further reflection and analysis.

Glenn Dynner
Fairfield University
ORCID: 0000-0001-6666-8204

* * *