



Review of the publication: Glenn Dynner, , François Guesnet, *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis. Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2015, ISBN 978-90-04-29181-2

Reviewer: Dr. Milosz K. Cybowski

Editor: Dr. Markus Nesselrodt

Date of publication: 19.12.2016

DOI: 10.11584/opus4-1014

*Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis* is an impressive collection of twenty five scholarly essays devoted to Warsaw and its Jewish community, from the earliest (mostly illegal) Jewish settlements in the Polish capital in the sixteenth century to the destruction and reconstruction of the Jewish community in the twentieth century. The book is divided into two parts: Part I ("The Rise of the Metropolis") discusses over four centuries of Jewish history in Warsaw prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Part II ("Destruction of the Metropolis and Its Aftermath") presents new approaches to the tragic events of the post-1939 era. As the editors argue in the introduction to the volume, Warsaw's status of 'the first true metropolis in diasporic Jewish history' was not only about the numbers of Jews living there, but also about the diversity of the Jewish community (p. 2). This element became one of the recurring themes in almost all essays discussing the pre-war period.

The very first chapter of this volume ("Illegal Immigrants: The Jews of Warsaw, 1527-1792" by Hanna Węgrzynek) is an excellent introduction to the complicated subject of Jewish residence in the Polish capital. Although Węgrzynek concentrates on the eighteenth century, she nevertheless outlines the previous restrictions imposed on Jews—their main aim was to defend Christian traders and craftsmen from Jewish competition—and the ways in which they managed to overcome these difficulties, effectively becoming a visible, even if not entirely legal, element of the city's life.

The following chapters concentrate on more detailed case studies related to Jewish commercial ("Merchants, Army Suppliers, Bankers: Transnational Connections and the Rise of Warsaw's Jewish Mercantile Elite (1770-1820)" by Cornelia Aust), cultural ("Distributing Knowledge: Warsaw as a Center of Jewish Publishing, 1850-1914 by Nathan Cohen and "In Kotik's Corner: Urban Culture, Bourgeois Politics and the Struggle for Jewish Civility in Turn of the Century Eastern Europe" by Scott Ury), political ("Hope and Fear: Y.L. Peretz and the Dialectics of Diaspora Nationalism, 1905-12" by Michael C. Steinlauf) and religious ("An Unhappy Community and an Even Unhappier Rabbi" by Shaul Stampfer) activities in Warsaw. One of the interesting features of many chapters presented in Part I of the book is the link between the growing diversity of the established Jewish community and the immigration of 'Litvaks',[1] to Warsaw who, in many instances, were the major drivers of modernisation and change.

Five articles presented in Part I of the book discuss the history of the interwar period (with eleven devoted to the nineteenth century). Among them we will find two of the best chapters in the whole collection. Natalia Aleksiu's "From Galicia to Warsaw: Interwar Historians of Polish Jewry" offers an insightful glimpse into the ways in which Jewish historians from Galicia enriched the capital's intellectual life (in the similar way Litvaks contributed to Warsaw's culture in the nineteenth century). Kenneth B. Moss's chapter presents a detailed and well-researched analysis of Jewish nationalism (primarily, but not only, Zionism) in Warsaw. As the author argues, the metropolis witnessed the rise and fall of different subcultures of that nationalism, but, more importantly, it became 'a center for *negotiating* Jewish nationhood' (p. 392).

Part Two of the book begins with a study by Joshua D. Zimmerman looking into the ways in which the Holocaust was presented in *Biuletyn Informacyjny* (the official newspaper of the Polish underground Home Army) between 1940 and 1943. It is followed by works by Havi Dreifuss, Samuel Kassow and Joanna B. Michlic. All four chapters approach matters related to the destruction of Warsaw's Jewry from different angles, but Dreifuss' analysis of Jewish Orthodox rabbis (who had fled to Warsaw shortly after the outbreak of the war) and their reactions to the Holocaust is particularly enlightening. As the author points out, for some of the rabbis gathered in the Polish capital 'the weakness of religious life in the ghetto and throughout the Jewish world was not the *result* of the tragedy but its *cause*' (p. 486).

The following four chapters offer some insights into the post-war realities of Jewish life in Warsaw. As David Engel suggests, post-war Jewish migration to Warsaw was often prevented or disrupted by the Communist authorities, leading to the sudden rise of other centres of Jewish cultural life in places such as Łódź or Wrocław. Warsaw, however, remained the place where the Central Committee of Polish Jews resided until 1950. As a part of its activities, the Committee created the Honor Court aimed at preventing 'Jews tainted by collaboration from occupying influential posts in the reconstituted postwar Jewish community' (p. 564). Yet, as Gabriel N. Finder argues, the real impact of the three trials of Jews involved in the alleged collaboration with the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto was very limited: only one person was found guilty and, therefore, excluded from the community, since the Court lacked the same legal status as the normal courts of law.

As the editors mention in the introduction, and as Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern highlights in the last essay of this collection, all authors attempted to follow Antony Polonsky's 'context is everything' approach to Jewish history. To try, however, does not always mean to succeed and a few essays presented in "Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis" offer plenty of context, but not enough content (particularly visible in Karen Auerbach's chapter). Moreover, despite the title of the book, not every essay puts Warsaw in the centre of analysis. Though not necessarily a serious drawback, in several cases the Polish capital remains on the margins of the main argument (as in the works by Cornelia Aust or Gennady Estraikh). It does not change the fact that the majority of the twenty-five chapters presented in "Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis" is highly enlightening, making this collection a very important contribution to history of Polish Jews.

[1] Jewish immigrants from Lithuanian lands who began to move to Warsaw in the mid-19th century. According to Scott Ury Litvaks, they 'were often portrayed as disruptive, foreign elements that upset the city's precarious social balance' of Warsaw's Jewish community (p. 211).

This review was originally published on [www.pol-int.org](http://www.pol-int.org).