The End of a Jewish Metropolis? The Ambivalence of Reconstruction in the Aftermath of the Holocaust

David Engel

To think of Warsaw as a Jewish metropolis in the wake of the city’s thorough destruction and the annihilation of its Jewish community by German hands between 1942 and 1944 is to defy both intuition and common wisdom. In 1945, the Jewish Warsaw that has been the subject of this conference—the Warsaw that was, as the conference organizers put it in their initial prospectus, the ‘locus of a Jewish knowledge explosion’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; a ‘center of editing and publishing’ for Jews in Poland and beyond; a primary focus of Jewish economic activity; the home of a ‘dynamic [Jewish] religious life’ alongside modern Jewish mass political movements and a plethora of ‘voluntary associations in the spheres of philanthropy, education, social life, entertainment, and culture’; and a ‘target and starting point of migrations’—lay buried deep beneath the rubble of the former ghetto, with what virtually all observers regarded as a scant prospect for even a partial revival. Such appears to have been the unanimous view of the handful of foreign Jewish journalists and emissaries from abroad who traveled to the city during 1945 and 1946 and recorded their observations in print. S. L. Schneidermann, Henryk Szoszkies, Jacob Pat, Moshe Yishai, Shimon Samet, Ya’akov Zerubavel—all described their visit to Poland’s capital as an encounter with the dead.¹ Their descriptions of those encounters, moreover, educated hardly any sense of Warsaw Jewry’s former vitality. As these reporters walked through what remained of the streets of the former ghetto, they imagined the battles that a handful of Jewish fighters had waged against their would-be

murderers: it was the deeds of the few who had died with weapons in hand that the name ‘Warsaw’ evoked in their accounts, not the shops of the Nalewki, the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street, the Orgelbrand Press, the Instytut Nauk Judaistycznych, the *Yidisher kunst-teatr*, or the offices of *Haynt* and *Der moment*. That representation contrasted sharply with their depictions of other features of the postwar Polish Jewish scene. Whereas efforts to revive Jewish communities in Łódz and Kraków, to establish a new Jewish center in Lower Silesia, and to reconstruct the foundations of Jewish society under the so-called people’s regime figured in their reportage as proof of Polish Jewry’s indomitable spirit and unshakable determination to rise from the ashes, Warsaw took on the exclusive image of a memorial site for the recent catastrophe—hardly one befitting a metropole, Jewish or other.

And yet, it seems that, for a brief moment following the end of the Second World War, the possibility that Warsaw might actually emerge from the catastrophe as the demographic, institutional, and cultural heart of a reborn Polish Jewry could not be dismissed out of hand. Numbers tell part of the story. To be sure, the available population estimates for the period in question vary widely, and their reliability is by no means assured. Nevertheless, rough estimates are possible, and certain broad trends can be discerned.

To begin with, it appears fairly certain that more Jews emerged from hiding in Warsaw than in any other Polish city or town. Perhaps a quarter, maybe even a third of all Jews who survived the war on Polish soil did so in the Polish capital. It is not difficult to imagine why such should have been the case. Most obviously, there was a far greater pool of potential survivors there than anywhere else. On the eve of Operation Reinhard, fully 25 percent of the Jewish population in the entire Generalgouvernement was confined in the Warsaw ghetto. More than twice as many Jews lived there as in the second-largest ghetto on Polish soil, Łódz, which was located in territory annexed to the Reich. Moreover, although initial opportunities for hiding on the Aryan side were not necessarily greater there than in certain other urban ghettos, longterm survival prospects for Warsaw Jews benefited from the proximity of a ramified

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