

Struggle for swamp. Ethnic problems of Pripet Marshes in Second Polish Republic.

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Abstract

The amelioration of the Pripet (or Polesie) Marshes, contemplated in interwar Poland, assumed the incorporation of this large (ca. 1.5 million hectares), previously idle region into the country's economic mechanism. It was thought that at the same time this would also solve a number of urgent social problems, such as the 'hunger for land' and resulting emigration.

However, the plan had a hidden intention too: the government planned only to settle ethnic Poles from the central and western districts on the reclaimed land, in order to modify the existing racial composition of the North-Eastern provinces. At that time, they were dominated by Belarusians, Ukrainians, and the indigenous people of Polesie – the Poleshuks. Draining the swamps would have opened the way to forming a sort of 'Polish wedge' between the Belarusians in the north and the Ukrainians in the south, both of whom showed strong separatist tendencies. The Poleshuks, in contrast, were seen as not having any distinctive cultural features and were as such predestined to be polonized by the surrounding Polish element, once the amelioration and colonization process had been accomplished.

Ethnic and political tensions around the project also involved the Polish Jewry, some of whom to seeking to settle Jewish farmers there too, but these proposals met with fierce opposition from Polish nationalists. This paper analyzes how political power was used to gate access to national resources on the basis of ethnic background. I will argue that Polish nationalists considered the arable land (even in spe – the project was eventually abandoned) part of their identity, and a 'last asset'. By limiting the Jews' legitimate ability to buy farms and engage in agriculture, the nationalist government sought to prevent them from assimilating into society, instead forcing them to leave the country.

Introduction

The debate over the draining the Pripet Marshes (in Polish historiography known as Polesie) lasted in Poland throughout the entire interwar period and it repeatedly intertwined with the parallel discourse on the future of Polish Jews. Every few years, Jewish newspapers printed in Poland, both in Polish and Yiddish language, called for

allowing the Jews to settle in the countryside and pick up agricultural activity. Every time such demands met with a negative reaction of nationalistic and anti-Semitic circles in the country. This was all the more so because the idea of organized agricultural colonization, particularly in 'Kresy' (the Borderlands) so called Borderlands, was pushed forward mainly by the American-Jewish associations such as Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), or American Jewish Committee (AJC), which offered not only technical but also financial assistance if the land was handed over to Polish Jews. For the nationalists it was the first step to implementation of an alleged plan to create Judeo-Polonia, a Jewish national home on the border between Poland and Soviet Russia¹.

The Jewish community in the country was rather sceptical as for the chances for such settlement action to succeed. Of course, it was seen as an opportunity for occupational activation of Jews, particularly those, who suffered the most from the changing economic conditions in the Second Republic of Poland. On the one hand those changes resulted from the modernization of domestic industry and, on the other hand, from the new legal regulations such as the state monopolies for making and selling common goods, such as safety matches for example. The introduction of new rules at the end of the 1920s affected producers and retailers, many of whom were Jews. Officially, the governments declared its support for the idea of shifting them from trade to other form of activity, however, one could not expect that an intention to engage in farming, expressed by the Jews, would cause too much enthusiasm among the rest of Polish society given the proverbial 'hunger for land' and acute overpopulation in rural areas.

¹ More on how this myth developed, see: Jerzy Jedlicki, *Resisting the Wave: Intellectuals against Antisemitism in the Last years of the "Polish Kingdom"* in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland* edited by Robert Blobaum, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2005, p. 61-63; Joanna Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2006, pp. 48-49.

The history of Jewish farmers in Poland has been relatively well studied. In the interwar period, both the origins of Jewish agricultural settlements and their current problems were studied, among others, by Dobrzyński² and Schiper³. More recent works include Tomaszewski's⁴ synthetic outline of the theme, and Kula's analysis of Jewish agriculture in interwar period in general⁵. Smilovitsky⁶ and Kowalska-Dąbrowska⁷ provided important for a comparative analysis accounts on Jewish farmers in interwar Byelorussia. Recently, several works have been published that depart from the mainstream studies of economic history of numbers and facts, and offer a look at the history of Jewish farmers through the prism of their own experiences⁸. None of these works, however, explain the organizational efforts of Jewish community to engage in agricultural activity in Poland, especially in the context of planned amelioration of Pripet Marshes, so widely discussed in the interwar period. It was a particularly important case, because, unlike in other regions where one could talk about individual farms or small settlements, in Polesie homes for hundreds of thousands of settlers were on stake.

The proposed article fills this gap by reconstructing the course of the discourse and discussing the arguments of its main participants. By situating the case in the broader context of the domestic and international political situation, it sheds light on possible premises for actions taken by Polish authorities. The article is mainly based on

² Bernard Dobrzyński, *Żydzi w rolnictwie na terenie byłej Kongresówki i Kresów Wschodnich*, w: *Żydzi w Polsce odrodzonej*, T. 2, I. Schiper, A. Tartakower i A. Hafftko (red.), Warszawa 1932, s. 408-423.

³ Ignacy Schiper, *Żydzi w rolnictwie na terenie Małopolski*, w: *Żydzi w Polsce odrodzonej*, T. 2, I. Schiper, A. Tartakower i A. Hafftko (red.), Warszawa 1932, s. 424-431.

⁴ Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Rolnictwo żydowskie w Polsce, 1918-1939* w: *Gospodarka, Ludzie, Władza. Studia historyczne ofiarowane Juliuszowi Łukasiewiczowi w 75. rocznicę urodzin*, pod redakcją Michała Kopczyńskiego i Antoniego Mączka Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krupiński i S-ka 1998., s. 337-343.

⁵ Marcin Kula, *Żydzi rolnicy (w okresie międzywojennym, poza Palestyną)*, *Przegląd Polonijny*, R. 24, z. 3 (1998), s. 5-23.

⁶ Leonid Smilovitsky, *The Jewish farmers in Belarus during the 1920s*, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 9:1-2 (Spring 1997), s. 59-71.

⁷ Ewa Kowalska-Dąbrowska, *Pomoc Jointu i Agro-Jointu dla ludności żydowskiej na obszarze Białorusi radzieckiej*, *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, R. 49, z. 2 (2014), s. 51-73.

⁸ Alina Molisak, *Żydzi-chłopi*, *Teksty Drugie. Teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacje*. Nr 6 (2017), s. 238-249.

contemporary press reports from both the Jewish and the *endek* (National Democrats) press.

The Society of Agricultural Settlements

It appears that the idea of settling Polish Jews in Polesie, and letting them engage in agriculture should be attributed to an American diplomat, Henry Morgenthau Sr. In 1919, he headed the American commission to investigate the allegations of persecution of Jews in Poland. According to a Zionist newspaper *Nasz Przegląd*, he even offered help in reaching “a big American consortium that would invest in this colossal venture”⁹.

The proposal went virtually unnoticed, and it was revived only in mid 1920s, following the information on progress of Jewish agricultural settlement in Soviet Russia. The newspapers in Poland, both *endek* and Jewish, regularly reported on colonization action carried out by the Land Use Committee of Jewish Workers (Komitet po zemel’nomu ustroystvu yevreyskikh trudyashchikhsya – KOMZET). In the Fall of 1925, the Soviet envoy to Poland, Peter Voykov called a special conference in Warsaw to inform the Jewish journalists on how the action was progressing¹⁰.

Characteristically, not all Jewish parties and circles in Poland supported the idea of massive agricultural settlement, either in Russia or Poland. The Zionists for example believed that settling on land and taking up farming would weaken the re-emigration movement to Palestine, where they wanted to rebuild a Jewish statehood one day. The Jewish Social Democratic Party (or Poaley Zion) was particularly critical about the settlement action in Crimea and Birobidzhan in the Russian Far East. One of the party’s activists, Abraham Samuel Juris, called the action a ‘pseudo-colonization’, and accused

⁹ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1928.

¹⁰ *Hasło Narodowe*, 1925.

the Soviet authorities of organizing it solely for the purpose of obtaining foreign capital to develop these areas and creating a kind of watchtower on a 'volcano of conflicting interests of Russia, China, and Japan'¹¹. No wonder that this particular direction of agricultural settlement enjoyed the *endeks* in Poland. They even encouraged Jews to go Far East, most probably assuming that the farther from Poland the Jews would settle, the better.

In the first years after Poland regained its independence, Jewish agriculture developed in an unorganized and rather sluggish manner. Here and there, individual settlers bought land and took up farming. In some cases the share of Jews in Polish agriculture even shrunk - as a result of a agricultural reform in Małopolska Wschodnia (Eastern Lesser Poland formerly known as Galicia), some of Jewish landowners fell under its regulations and their land divided between landless. As *Najer Volksblatt* appearing in Łódź reported later, in Małopolska, "not even one hectare of land was allocated to a single Jew [...], although he lived on it and cultivated it"¹².

Under the influence of reports from behind the eastern border, at the end of 1926, the Society for Agricultural Settlements (Towarzystwo Osiedli Rolniczych – TOR) was founded in Poland¹³. The founding fathers of it were, among others, an advocate Michael Suryc, the doctors Abraham Billauer and Jakub Goldinberg, a couple of influential journalists such as Salomon Biber, Oszer Perelman (co-founder of *Der Moment*), and Samuel Wołkowicz. Last but not least, there was a young re-emigrant from the United States, where he graduated as an engineer agronomist – Sigmund Lewin¹⁴. Most of them were sympathizers and activists of the Jewish People's Party, so

¹¹ *Naród*, 1929.

¹² *Nasz Przegląd*, 1927.

¹³ *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 1928.

¹⁴ Ponadto w gronie tym znaleźli się ponadto Finkelstein i Grafmann oraz dwaj inżynierowie – Kahacki i Berman, których dokładnych personaliów nie udało się ustalić.

called Folkists, who were programmatically opposed to emigration to Palestine, and who propagated the idea of maintaining the cultural autonomy of Jews in the country of settlement¹⁵. Undertaking the agricultural activity perfectly fit into this program, so naturally the settlement in Polesie has become one of the TOR's top priorities.

It seems that the emergence of TOR in this particular moment was not accidental. The Jewish community had high expectations as for the new Sanacja government established by Piłsudski after the coup d'état of May 1926. Jewish politicians and civic leaders supported him in hope that only strong and centralized system of power built around his personal authority guaranteed to keep the nationalists away from decision making in Poland¹⁶. These hopes were based not only on the imaginary assumption that any rapprochement was strictly impossible between the socialists (as Piłsudski and most of his aides used to be) and the nationalists, but also on actual promises of members of the dominant political group. In July 1926, the Prime Minister Kazimierz Bartel announced in Sejm (Polish Parliament) that the government would not let "the lawful rights of citizens of non-Polish nationality to be compromised" recognizing that "withstanding any category of citizens because of their language or faith" was as contrary to the "spirit of Poland" ¹⁷. Though the hopes that the Sanacja would abolish discriminatory laws and restrictions quickly gave way to disappointment, there was a prevailing opinion, nevertheless bitterly sounding, that at least the post-May governments were "not openly anti-Semitic."

The initiative to found the TOR coincided with the revival of the national discourse on Polesie's future that occurred in the second half of 1926. First of all, it was

¹⁵ W 1931 r. Suryc, Billauer, Goldinberg i Perelman wraz z grupą innych folkistów założyli Stowarzyszenie dla Rozwoju Pracy Rolnej i Przemysłu Nakładowego wśród Żydów w Polsce. Zob. Ireneusz Piekarski, Agroid i Birobidżan, *Studia Judaica* 10: 2007 nr 1(19), s. 101-117.

¹⁶ Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Zarys dziejów Żydów w Polsce w latach 1918-1939*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1990, s. 37.

¹⁷ Szukać z stenogramy

shortly after three experts of the League of Nations visited Poland to advise on the development of national waterways. They were also asked to comment on whether amelioration of Pinsk Marshes was feasible at all. The conclusions that James Case, Guillaume Nijhoff, and Pierre Watier submitted to the Polish authorities were enthusiastic¹⁸. They saw a huge potential for developing agriculture in there, and even promised to help reaching the financial circles who might be interested in investing their money in this enterprise. The cost would be enormous; the experts' estimates fluctuated around 450 million zlotys or 50 million dollars¹⁹.

It is worth mentioning that they were invited to Poland before the coup, but it did not prevent the Sanacja from claiming that it was only during their rule that the discussion over the development of Polesie began to take shape. The same applies to the First All-Polish Melioration Congress, during which the question of Polesie's drainage was widely discussed. However, the congress that gathered more than 250 engineers, agronomists, and scholars representing different disciplines of sciences was called before the change of power.

At the motion of the technical section, the Congress' resolutions included an appeal to the government to coordinate the efforts undertaken by different ministries and agencies, and whose responsibilities sometimes overlapped²⁰. The appeal criticised the government for previous idleness, which seemed to be addressed rather to pre-May elites, because the new Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reforms, Witold Staniewicz, had been working in this direction quite energetically since he was nominated in June

¹⁸ Sławomir Łotysz, *Transeuropejska droga wodna przez Polesie a kwestia jego osuszenia w II Rzeczypospolitej*, *Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki*, R. 63 nr 1 (2018), pp. 7-37.

¹⁹ League of Nations, *Advisory and Technical Committee for Communication and Transit*, Note by the Committee of Experts placed at the disposal of the Polish Government by the League of Nations on the drainage of the Marshes of Polesia, Geneva, 27 January 1927, p. 13.

²⁰ *Rzeczpospolita*, 1926.

1926; for example he formed an interministerial commission addressing the issue of Polesie's drainage²¹.

In the early September, that means still before the Melioration Congress, Staniewicz attended the opening ceremony of the Eastern Fair in Lviv (then Lwów). While there, he spoke at the local Land Office outlining the main guidelines of the new agricultural policy in *kresy*. The Minister promised to push agrarian reform more eagerly, indicating that it should become a means of improving the economic and social position of the local population. In his opinion, the separatist tendencies among the Byelorussians and Ukrainians living in the Eastern Territories were driven not only by ethnic reasons, but above all were determined by deplorable social conditions they lived in. Staniewicz spoke in a very critical way about the effects of previous colonial-like policy towards the Borderlands. "Let's try [...] to alleviate the antagonisms caused by disastrous military settlement", said he referring to an action of privileged settling Polish veterans in *kresy* carried in the early 1920s²².

In other words, while announcing the land reform in the Eastern Borderlands, he suggested that the government did not intend to use it as a means of colonization of these areas by ethnic Poles. In his opinion acting in compliance with the needs of national minorities living in there was the key to stabilize political situation on the border with Soviet Russia. Staniewicz put it straight forward: "further infliction of social antagonisms in our lands in the event of external complications might lead to catastrophic consequences for the Polish statehood"²³.

It is not sure whether in his reckoning Staniewicz took into account the expectations of Jewish population living in *kresy*. He was certainly 'well informed' about

²¹ Podobną komisję powołało ministerstwo robót publicznych.

²² Kurier Wileński, 1926.

²³ Kurier Wileński, 1926.

the doubts the Polish Jews expressed as to their chances to benefits from implementing the agrarian reform. At least that was what a Jewish MP David Schreiber thought while commenting on Staniewicz's speech in the Parliament in early December²⁴. Both Schreiber and his colleague from the Jewish Circle in Sejm, Henry Rosmarin, gave a number of evidences exposing the "purely theoretical sense" of Minister's claims that the Jews could benefit from the benefits of land reform just like everyone else. Another PM, Hersz Luzer Heller, has noted that in the enacted form the reform embraced only active farmers and did not assume creating new jobs in agriculture. In conclusion, he advised "Those who wanted to transfer the Jewish masses to productive work ought not to allow themselves to be misled by imagining that they would obtain land through the application of the Agrarian Reform Law"²⁵..

At the turn of 1926, *Dziennik Wileński*, an *endeks'* daily from Vilnius (then Wilno), in an unmasking tone unveiled the TOR's plans²⁶. According to the newspaper, the Society wanted to buy all swampy areas in Polesie that belonged to the state. After draining it out, TOR intended to transfer 30 percent of the land to the government for the benefit of agrarian reform. The remaining 70 percent was to be given to Jewish agricultural settlement. If the government agreed to such a plan, the Polish Jews, according to the newspaper, "would ask for financial aid to their fellow compatriots in America, and were rather sure that their appeal would find the right resonance"²⁷. Indeed, already at the beginning of 1927, Bernard Kahn, director of the Joint Distribution Committee for Europe, questioned by the correspondent of Jewish Chwila, declared support for the colonization action in Poland, if such plans were put forward²⁸.

²⁴ Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1927.

²⁵ Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1927.

²⁶ *Dziennik Wileński*, 1926.

²⁷ *Dziennik Wileński*, 1926

²⁸ Chwila, 1927..

After other newspapers reprinted the Dziennik Wileński's revelations, the Jewish drive to agricultural settlement in Polesie came up in the news in the country²⁹. The nationalistic and anti-Semitic press alarmed that Jews were going to take over the last asset the Poles had – the land. Even a year later, the same Dziennik Wileński announced in a grim tone: "Jewish settlement would be the first step to seize all Polish land" ³⁰.

In the meantime, the TOR struggled to officially launch its activities. Initially, everything looked promising. Already during the organizational meeting, which took place on January 8, 1927 in Warsaw, a land owner from Pińsk region, Naum Cukier, donated to the Society 200 acres of land, and one of the Warsaw scientific institutions proposed to assist in establishing a Jewish agricultural school³¹. However, when the organizing committee applied to the State Commissariat for the registration of the association, the application was rejected by the Ministry of Agriculture. According to the ministry, the existence of an organization supporting the agricultural settlement of Polish Jews was unnecessary simply because there was no free land suitable for this purpose. In addition, the ministry considered undesirable that traditionally urban population would move to the countryside, as it could cause "unnecessary and harmful manifestations of anti-Semitism"³².

To clear out this atmosphere of distrust, in February 1927, the moderately Zionist newspaper Nasz Przegląd published an extensive interview with Zygmunt Lewin, one of the founders of TOR and its leading agronomy expert³³. Speaking generally about plans for the development of Jewish agricultural settlement in Poland, Lewin dispelled the reporter's concerns about possible increase of anti-Semitism among Polish peasants by

²⁹ Kurierze Poznańskim, 1927.

³⁰ Dziennik Wileński, 1927.

³¹, Chwila, 1927.

³² Nasz Przegląd, 1927.

³³ Nasz Przegląd, 1927.

declaring that the TOR would not even touch the land intended for smallholding farmers. When asked whether the Society's main goal was to drain Polesie, Lewin replied: "If we only could afford such a great undertaking! We would give away a great service not only to the Polish Jews, but also to entire peasantry, and the whole country". He added that the TOR was considering parcellation of larger Jewish holdings (with the consent of the owners) for the model farms³⁴. As for possible financial support from the American Jews, Lewin said that "philanthropy can not build an economic life", but he added that the implementation of TOR's plans was far above financial possibilities of "one society and one generation". Therefore, as he explained, the Society would be "forced to turn to the wealthier part of Jewish society around the world with a request for assistance"³⁵.

An obvious recipient of such a request was the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an organization providing mainly financial support to Jewish communities around the world. The Vice President of the JDC, James N. Rosenberg referred to the expectations of Polish Jews, while speaking in Chicago at the United Jewish Campaign Conference in October 1927. He asked rhetorically: "Is it possible to hope that the Polish Government would make a grant of this land? Is it possible to hope that the Polish Government would, like Russia, make substantial loans to help in the development of these lands through the settlement of the Jews?"³⁶ He did not dare venture to answer any of those questions, but expressed hope that Poland, knowing how successful the Jewish agricultural work in Russia was, "might give favourable consideration to such a plan"³⁷. It would have substantially improved social condition of Polish Jewry. He argued that a mass emigration of Jews from Poland was a fantasy:

³⁴ O przypadkach przekazywania ziemi na rzecz TOR-u przez żydowskich obszarników na Polesiu prasa donosiła już na początku 1927 r. Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1927.

³⁵ Nasz Przegląd, 1927.

³⁶ Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1927.

³⁷ Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1927.

“Emigrate? To what country? Shall they go to the Saharah Desert?”- he asked again with a bitter resignation and concluded that the solutions for Jews’ social and economic problems should have been sought in their countries of residence³⁸.

Rosenberg knew well that neither the ongoing conference nor the Polish Jews, but only the authorities in Warsaw could answer those questions, leaving Saharah aside. But he had an incentive in mind. In his speech Rosenberg reminded about a loan of 70 million dollars, which the United States granted to Poland for the restoration of the domestic economy a little earlier. Was that a hint that a similar loan could be granted, or the former one revoked – it is not know. He also noted that – as far as he was aware – the majority of the Pripet marshes belong to the state. While recalling the experience the Jewish settlers gained from settling in Byelorussian part of Polesie, where the cost of draining one acre was between 30 and 40 dollars, he stated that in Poland, thanks to the use of modern machinery, the cost could be significantly reduced. He estimated that in the Polish conditions a family could be supported by a farm of 25 to 30 acres. In other words, one million acres could accommodate 40,000 families. An important step towards getting the Jews to fruitful agricultural work also in Polish part of Polesie was – in his opinion – the establishment of a TOR.

The reaction of Polish nationalist circles to reports from the Chicago congress did not come long after. The Kurier Poznański explained that the initiative came from Polish Jews, but the fact that an organization as influential as the Joint, was a showcase of “a pure Jewish impudence”³⁹. After analyzing the calculations presented in Chicago by Rosenberg, the newspaper said that as a result of such a colonization plan the Jews would become a 60 percent majority in Polesie, which was “almost twice as large as the

³⁸ Nasz Przegląd, 1927.

³⁹ Kurier Poznański, 1927.

Netherlands". Even more, the local Slavic population would become "an excellent workforce and assimilation material". This concern about the fate of "indigenous peoples", which the *Kurier* referred to as "the least cultured in Europe", did not result supposedly from Polish nationalists' respect for the cultural distinctiveness of Poleshuks, as the indigenous population used to be called. Normally the alleged openness to assimilation among them was considered a basis for the Polish plans to colonize these areas.

The *endeks* considered the *sanacja* governments' policy as too concessive in relation to emancipation ambitions of ethnic minorities, mainly the Jews, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians. The *Kurier's* has warned, therefore, that draining Polesie by a government representing this particular political option would give the entire region "into the hands of such or other minorities". The newspaper urged for patience in waiting "for a greater consolidation of Poland, not only in political, but also in economic terms, so that the Polish nation would benefit from this undertaking, not the chosen nation"⁴⁰.

The attractiveness of the colonization project sketched for Polesie by TOR and JDC was based on the assumption that the Polish government did not have sufficient financial resources to carry out such an enormous investment nor even a vague idea how to do it. This line of thinking might have changed, when, at the beginning of February 1928, the government appointed Bureau of Amelioration of Polesie (Biuro Projektu Melioracji Polesia – BPMP), which was given a wide authority and substantial funding. The new body had four years to prepare a general plan and find ways of financing it.

⁴⁰ *Kurier Poznański*, 1927.

Undaunted by this, through their political leaders, the Jewish community in Poland initially confirmed its dedication to actively take part in the project. In June 1928, during a budget debate on providing the first one-and-a-half-million worth financing for the Bureau, Hersz Heller declared that Polish Jews “must, but also want to move to productive agricultural work in Poland” in spite of all obstacles imposed by the government, such as refusal to register the TOR. He emphasized that aside of enormous financial resources, the planned amelioration of Polesie would have required a cooperation with the Soviet government. In both instances he offered help from the Jewish organizations, particularly those operating abroad. The assistance of such world-wide bodies as JDC or Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), very much experienced in this field, “could do a lot not only for the good of the Jews, but also of the [Polish] State⁴¹.

This voice was like crying in the wilderness, and for some time the Jewish circles in Poland lost their enthusiasm for this concept, expressing doubts that they would be given any concessions in reclaimed territories⁴². Establishing the Bureau could have been interpreted as a strong manifestation of the government’s determination to have this project done without succumbing to any pressure or baits, either from inside or outside the country.

Any hopes for the government’s empathy to the Jewish plans to engage in agriculture were dispelled by Bernard Zyngier, a prolific journalist publishing in several Yiddish newspapers appearing in Poland⁴³. In his opinion, it was simply unthinkable

⁴¹ Sejm RP. Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 19 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej z dnia 8 czerwca 1928 r., Warszawa 1928, s. 13-14.

⁴² The Jewish Transcript, 1928.

⁴³ Krzysztof Woźniakowski identyfikuje go jako znanego publicystę związanego z ruchem folkistów, Bernarda Singera (1893-1966). Zob. Nad najnowszym studium o krakowskim „Nowym Dzienniku” (1918–1939) (wokół książki Sabiny Kwiecień i Beaty Langer Prasa, książka, biblioteka na łamach krakowskiego „Nowego Dziennika”), Z historii Prasy Polskiej, T. 21, z. 3 (2018), s. 111. Wydaje się to wątpliwe. Jak zauważa sam Woźniakowski, Singer regularnie współpracował z Nowym Dziennikiem. Byłoby zatem dziwne, gdyby przedrukowując felieton z Ekspresu redakcja nie rozpoznała w Bernardzie Zyngierze własnego współpracownika.

since in Poland there were so many smallholding farmers dreaming of enlarging their fields, in addition to “600 thousand hungry peasants from Ukraine and Belarus” impatiently awaiting to benefit from the agrarian reform⁴⁴. “Don't slouch into the mud” – Zyngier called on those who were fooled by the promises about the land waiting for the Jews in Polesie. He also referred disparagingly to how the whole discourse sparked: “Two years ago [in 1926] some Jewish explorers came to Poland looking for land. A special association was established, the committees were formed with their presidents, some tracts of ground were found in Grochów, near Wilno, and in Polesie, so the discoverers shouting that there was land already, so only a few pennies were needed”.

Also Salomon Biber of Warsaw based *Der Moment* warned against any financial involvement in this undertaking. In his opinion, no one could guarantee that after Polesie is drained and cultivated, “the now-forgotten agrarian reform would not come into force out of the sudden, and whether Jewish settlers would not be recognized by some next anti-Semitic government” as those whose properties should have been parcelled⁴⁵. In turn, the editor-in-chief of *Lubliner Tugblat* of Lublin, Szaul Stupnicki, criticized the government's intention to charge the private owners of drained land with only a fraction of the actual expenses. According to the adopted regulations, they had to paid it back by giving one-fifth of their land to the state. He believed that the government should force the farm moguls and noblemen to drain their own swamps on their own. If they failed to do so, Stupnicki proposed provocatively that this land could be subjected to compulsory parcellation as being inappropriately managed, just like it was done with the Jewish farmers in Eastern Małopolska not so long before⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1928.

⁴⁵ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1928.

⁴⁶ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1928.

Also an editor of the *Najer Volksblatt* published in Łódź referred to the same example, which in the aforementioned report from August 1927 reminded that as a result of the agrarian reform, the Jewry in Małopolska actually lost more land than gained from parcellation. According to the newspaper, the Ukrainian peasants did benefit from it either, and the entire accessible land came to the hands of Poles, mainly military settlers⁴⁷. Basing on this example, all hopes for colonization in Polesie the Jews could still cherish, the *Najer Volksblatt* called “a fantasy”. According to its editor, the government would give land to those who “need it for living, and not to Jews to help them changing their social status”⁴⁸.

The Polish Netherlands

For a time, the question of Jewish settlement in Polesie seemed to be missing from the public space. It was recalled by Polish ambassador to the United States, Tytus Filipowicz merely two years later. In December 1930, he met in New York consulate with the representatives of the American Jewish Committee (AJC): the president Cyrus Adler, the secretary general Morris Waldman, and judge Stern. Filipowicz was assisted by the consul in New York, Mieczysław Marchlewski and in Chicago, Tytus Zbyszewski.

President Adler expressed his concerns about the difficult economic situation of the Jewish population in Poland and asked when the government in Warsaw was going to take appropriate measures to improve it. He was aware that rapid economic changes in Poland had “a disastrous effect especially upon the Jews, who, because of an historical development, happen to be, to an overwhelming extent, middlemen”. According to Adler, their “suffering has been aggravated by restrictions and by unfavourable

⁴⁷ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1927. Co charakterystyczne, efekty przymusowej parcelacji zupełnie inaczej postrzegała prasa endecka. Krytykowała reformę za to, że większa część ziemi trafiła w ręce ukraiński, zob. m.in. *Kto będzie za to wszystko odpowiadał? Los polskości w Małopolsce Wschodniej*. *Głos Lubelski*, 1936.

⁴⁸ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1927.

discrimination". To bring them relief, Adler appealed for the abolition of these regulations as well as the reduction of tax burdens. In his opinion, as a result of the tightening of the 'tax bolt' the Jewish population stood "in the face of economic collapse"⁴⁹.

The representatives of the AJC stated that it is the best interest of Poland's government (and its moral duty) to "to offset the hardships suffered by Jews in their dislodgment owing to newly-created State monopolies". Adler and Waldman added that Warsaw should ensure that "the Jewish employees are not discharged from their employment in these industries, and, to provide for the large number of Jewish merchants and artisans deprived of a livelihood by the new industrial development in Poland, the Government should encourage new industries in which the Jews might find opportunity for employment"⁵⁰.

Filipowicz declared goodwill of the government regarding the issues for which Polish Jews have begged for years. He announced that the anti-Jewish rules from tsarist times, which were still in power, will be discarded very soon. He also promised that the government works on reducing the tax burden on trade, and on increasing the employment of Jews in public administration and state controlled enterprises. Last but not least, Filipowicz assured Adler and Waldman that in a view of the ongoing preparatory work for draining Polesie, the government intended to propose "to colonize it with Jews"⁵¹.

Initially, the information about what Filipowicz had promised to American Jews in New York, went almost unnoticed in the national press. Only some three weeks later, Rzeczpospolita brought the story to the public, ironically commenting that "not the Jews

⁴⁹ Nasz Przegląd, 1930.

⁵⁰ Harry Schneiderman, Review of the Year 5691, American Jewish Year Book, Vol. 33, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931, s. 34

⁵¹ Nasz Przegląd, 1930.

alone, but also the indigenous Poles would enjoy themselves immensely” if promised reduction of taxes was burden came into effect⁵². However, the newspaper blamed the ambassador that, while expressing his regret at the economic hardships suffered by the Jews in Poland, he did not explain that it involved all citizens. The editors of *Rzeczpospolita* thanked the Jewish Telegraph Agency, which reported on the meeting and its conclusions just before Christmas, “so as it was a Christmas gift”. The newspaper concluded rather bitterly, that thanks to this, the public opinion in Poland could have been familiarized with some of the government’s policy, at least if Jewish question was concerned.

While referring to Filipowicz’s promise to make Polesie available for Jewish, the newspaper compared it to the “Zagłoba’s Netherlands”, a popular figure of speech used to describe an offer impossible to fulfil, because it assumes disposing someone else’s property. This saying was quite popular in Polish language after Henryk Sienkiewicz published his famous novel “Potop” (the Deluge). In it, a deputy of the king of Sweden attacking the Zamość fortress some time in 17th century, in exchange for surrendering it, made an offer to the commander of the defenders, Zamoyski. He promised to give him the entire Lublin province, to which the Swedes did not have any legal rights. Picking up this line of thinking, nobleman Jan Zagłoba, one of the main characters in this novel, advised Zamoyski to accept Lublin, and offer the Netherlands in exchange⁵³.

For *Rzeczpospolita*, an analogy between Filipowicz’s promise and the fictitious situation from the novel was all too clear. Here and there, the bidder did not possess or control an object of barter. Firstly, the drainage of Polesie was a matter of a distant future. Secondly, when the land is finally drained and cultivated, is going to be divided

⁵² *Rzeczpospolita*, 1931.

⁵³ Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Deluge. A historical novel of Poland, Sweden, and Russia. Vol. II* (translated by Jeremiah Curtin), London: J.M. Dent & Co 1895, p. 338.

“smallholding farmers and landless people from the central provinces of the country”, that means – mainly the ethnic Poles. The newspaper considered the whole matter as humorous. The editor assumed that the American Jews, who did not know Sienkiewicz’s novel and the conditions in the country could indeed take the ambassador’s words as a good sign, but at the same time he imagined that the Jews living in Poland must have had a lot of fun hearing about “the Polesie Netherlands”⁵⁴.

The editor was far from being wrong. Indeed, *Der Moment* considered the ambassador’s promises to be ‘funny’ in the context of the current situation in the country: “Jews are starving here and abroad our Polish diplomats are not stingy in sweet words”⁵⁵. Another newspaper complained: “Filipowicz broke the good news on the other side of the ocean but why don’t we hear it here”. In general, it was believed that the ambassador made such bold promises to make a good impression among the American Jews, and the whole case was calculated to stimulate Polish exports.

It seems, however, that there was much more on the stake than encouraging the sale of Polish products abroad. About the time Filipowicz met with AJC leaders, Poland was in a diplomatic dispute with Germany and awaited a hearing before the League of Nations. Berlin, who brought the case, accused Warsaw of not respecting the rights of the German minority in Upper Silesia, which violated the terms of the convention signed between the two countries on May 15, 1922⁵⁶. The motion concerned the incidents from November 1926. According to German statement, the local Polish authorities not only tolerated but even supported the acts of violence against Germans by members of the Union of Upper Silesian Insurgents (*Związek Powstańców Górnosląskich*). Berlin demanded to punish the guilty of atrocities, to dismiss the responsible officials, and to

⁵⁴ Rzeczpospolita, 1931.

⁵⁵ Jewish Daily Bulletin, 1930.

⁵⁶ Polsko-niemiecka konwencja Górnosląska zawarta w Genewie dnia 15-go maja 1922 r., Genewa: Druk Alberta Kundiga, 1922, s. 27-28.

pay compensation to the injured⁵⁷. At the same time, the secretariat of the League of Nations received a petition from the Ukrainian community leaders in Poland also accusing the government in Warsaw of disrespecting their minority rights⁵⁸.

On January 19, just the day the German motion was on agenda in Geneva, the severely nationalistic *Gazeta Warszawska* ‘denounced’ the reasons of government’s sudden sympathy for Jews, as an attempt to win their support on international stage. This opinion came from Stanisław Kozicki, a well-known publicist and a renowned policy expert in the nationalistic camp. He was a close aide of the *endeks*’ doyen, Roman Dmowski, and secretary general of the Polish delegation for the peace conference in Paris in 1919. Kozicki argued that in Geneva, only Jews could ‘save’ Poland. He assumed that due to the aggravating anti-Semitism in Germany, the influential Jewish communities in the West would support Warsaw in this dispute. He was convinced that it was an influence of “Jewish spheres” that made the “liberal opinion in England [...] so little moved by German and Ukrainian complaints about Poland”⁵⁹.

As it was meant to confirm the of Kozicki’s assertions, the very next day Stanisław Car, the chairman of the parliamentary law committee, co-opted to this body a representative of the Jewish Circle, Emil Sommerstein, who – surprisingly enough – managed to push through an amendment revoking the restrictions on using the Yiddish and Hebrew languages in the public space⁶⁰. He did it despite the sharp objections of the members of National Club, because he had a full support of Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government (Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem – BBWR), represented by Car himself. This made one of the Filipowicz’s promises as close of coming into effect as never before.

⁵⁷ Nowy Dziennik, 1931.

⁵⁸ Nowy Dziennik, 1931.

⁵⁹ *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1931.

⁶⁰ Nowy Dziennik, 1931.

The Kozicki's article caused a great resonance in the Jewish press in Poland, which accused him of hypocrisy. *Nasz Przegląd* advised him, not without a bitter irony, that if he had enough courage, to tell his party colleagues that "anti-Semitism is harmful and simply disastrous for Poland's interests abroad"⁶¹. To paraphrase Kozicki's own words, the newspaper urged him to explain to his own political camp that "if international sympathies are on Poland's side in these difficult moments, it should be owned not only to 'the international Jewry', but also to these Polish Jews, who [...] squeeze into the most influential spheres to win recognition and respect for Poland"⁶².

The hearing ended for Poland relatively mildly, which undoubtedly pleased Kozicki, but also must have led him to a bitter conclusion that the time would come to live up to promises given to Jews. In assumption of this, he immediately began to bargain. In his opinion, the abolition of tsarist restrictions, which did not have any "practical significance" was not "too generous gift", but other commitments – indeed were. He was reluctant to both reduction of tax burdens on trade and the admission of Jews to work in administration, but the most painful was the promised land concession in Polesie. Kozicki argued that a Jewish colonization in Polesie, albeit very distant due to the magnitude of engineering work to be accomplished there first, it was a price too high for a support showed in the recent diplomatic dispute. It was not even about the financial cost of fulfilling this promise, but the importance of the "territorial and strategic issues" associated with it⁶³.

Józef Chaim Heftman commented this reasoning not without bitter irony writing in *Der Moment*: "Thus the promise of the Polish ambassador brought the advantage to Polish diplomacy in Geneva [...] But the price was too high. The Polesie mud can not be

⁶¹ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1931.

⁶² *Nasz Przegląd*, 1931.

⁶³ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1931.

given for Jewish sympathies. It is far better for the mud to be fried with a great honour in the sun, than to drain it and colonize by the Jews”⁶⁴.

But Heftman had a bitter word also to his compatriots. He could not get over that the subject had been repeatedly brought back by the Jews abroad, while the those in Poland were more interested in ‘smaller’ questions, which should have been solved on the spot and as soon as possible, such as ban on trading on Sunday, Jewish education, opening jobs in municipal institutions, and alike.

This opinion was shared by the New York based Yiddish daily, *Der Tag*. In addition, the newspaper, apparently better embedded in the American conditions, loathed the hopes of Polish Jewry as for a quick and abundant flow of money for draining the marshes, even if Polish authorities agreed to the plan. “The American Jews – the newspaper added – are ready as a rule to help Jewish colonisation on prepared soil, but they will not undertake the drainage work, which is the job of the Polish government itself”⁶⁵.

Conclusions

Planned drainage of sparsely populated marshy region meant a significant increase in its settlement potential. It seems obvious that after such land is made available for colonization, most settlers comes from the outside of its boundaries. Such drive has always meant tensions and disputes about who they are going to be. When, in the second half of the 19th century, the Tsarist government drained a section of Pripet Marshes, the public opinion in Russia complained that the reclaimed lands were en

⁶⁴ *Nasz Przegląd*, 1931.

⁶⁵ *Chwila*, 1931.

masse settled by Germans “for whom it was not worthwhile to undertake such costly works”⁶⁶.

In interwar Poland, the public opinion had another unwanted beneficiary of drainage works – the Jews. It did not matter that the Polish Jews wanted to organize the necessary financial resources themselves and carry out land drainage works on their own. The Polish peasants, who were as poor as their Jewish ‘rivals to land’, struggled to survive, too, and their reluctance against a plan of Jewish agricultural settlement in Polesie was competently steered and fuelled by politicians and journalists from *endeks* political camp

They were very susceptible to manipulation, because they had solid grounds to feel abandoned in his hopeless situation. There was no powerful organizations such JCA or JDC willing to give a loan for purchasing a farmland. A Polish peasant was repeatedly being deceived with promises of agrarian reform, but for politicians in Warsaw he were just a pawn in a game; a dehumanized ‘Polish element’ bringing civilization to ‘deprived of any culture’ people of Polesie, and designated to stand up against a possible aggression of ‘Asiatic hordes’, to quote some of the most typical slogans promoting Polish colonization in Borderlands.

It can be argued that for Polish government the Polesie’s drainage has always been objectified in its political agenda, with wide economic and social importance of such enterprise left far behind. Even before the ambassador Filipowicz used it to win support of Jewish circles in a diplomatic dispute with Germany, Polesie served as a political bait. The Bureau of Amelioration of Polesie was established just one month before the elections to the Sejm and the Senate in 1928, which was evidently calculated to trigger a propaganda effect. After the years of unproductive debates on how to feed

⁶⁶ Gazeta Warszawska, 1890.

the 'hunger for land' of landless and smallholdings peasants here, the government presents a bold plan to drain millions of previously idle soil. It did not matter that the treasury was empty, because the preparatory works were to last four years, just until the next election. It was believed that such a move indeed "had a great agitation importance for Sanacja, especially in Eastern territories"⁶⁷.

Eventually though, Sanacja did very little to drain Polesie. The Bureau has been shut down after a couple of years in an atmosphere of scandal. The government's reluctance to give the Polish Jews right to settle in Polesie, either still marshy or drained, has been remembered. What was the reaction of the Jewish community to this refusal was recalled many years later by David Zygier, a journalist from the South African newspaper "Africopa", but originally from Bociiek in Podlasie. In his opinion, by rejecting the proposal to ameliorate Polesia the government retaliated for how the Polish Jews voted en masse in the first parliamentary election in 1922. They voted convergently with other ethnic minorities thus manifesting their standing as separate from the Poles⁶⁸. "I recall our indignation when we heard that the government had denied the Polish Jews permission to drain the Polesie Marshes for farmland at their own expense", Zygier wrote in his book. In addition to intimidation, refusal of trading permits, exclusion from public jobs, limitation of the number of Jewish students at the universities (numerus clausus) and confiscatory taxation, which 'wiped out' the means of livelihood of many Jewish families, this was another element of the policy of 'cold pogrom', as Zygier defined the Polish government's attitude towards Jewish population in the interwar period.

⁶⁷ Nowy Dziennik, 1928.

⁶⁸ David Zagier, Botchki: when doomsday was still tomorrow, New York : George Braziller, 2001, p. 180.

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