



She Still Speaks in Polish, but Laughs in Hebrew. The Party Polish-Language Press and Cultural Integration of Polish Jews in Israel (1948–1970)

Abstract

The importance of the press was gradually growing in the 19th century, both for post-war migrations of people, on their way between the world they were leaving behind and the world they wanted to belong to in their new place. It was a problem of Jews, who had come to Israel, especially after failed attempts at assimilation in the Diaspora and when their ties with the Jewish nation in Israel loosened, for they found themselves in a culture and identity void. The press in the languages of their countries of origin was becoming an important instrument in the process of their ethnic ‘winning back’. One of the methods to tie them to the state was a synthesis of Israeli matters with what was brought by them from the Diaspora that is the language of their country of origin. It was the press calculated for the period of their language adaptation, of finding their place within the State of Israel, the citizens of which they had already become on their way to the state, on board of the ship, and which in its very essence – of its national values – was totally alien to many of these newcomers.

The purpose of the book is to characterize the Polish-Jewish audiences of the press and books, organized around the party Polish-language press in Israel. The importance and role of this press in the process of adaptation of Jews coming from Poland in 1948–1970 was analyzed. At that time, the texts published in the press mirrored the course of the adaptation process, various states of identity and intercultural tensions, especially when the new *olim* were suspended between the heritage of their country of origin and values of the Jewish state, and only their joining together with the Hebrew-speaking majority would end their ‘cultural journey’. The line of research adopted for the book allowed me to describe also stories of Polish Jews in Israel, broadening the perspective with unknown so far fragments of their lives, with special emphasis put on their political and publishing activities.

The subject of research

The book is structured into of seven chapters, and all of them – except for the introductory one – are devoted to Polish-language publications of one of the six Israeli parties.

The first chapter describes political and ideological problems associated with the broadening of ethos of the Hebrew language and quantitative increase of titles in the sector of the foreign-language press. It presents, among other things, the status of publications in Yiddish and languages of the countries of origins of Jews and their reception by various political formations. An important question, so far not addressed in such detail, is the presentation of a system of linguistic adaptation in the first years of existence of the Israeli state. The chapter also presents a discourse on foreign-language publications, press policy of the Israeli parties and dynamics of changes in the sector of Polish-language press between 1948 and 1970.

The next chapters, presented in a chronological order, deal with the Progressive Party and General Zionists, Mapai (Workers' Party of the Land of Israel), Mapam (United Workers' Party), Maki (Israeli Communist Party), and the Bund. Each of the chapters describes the specificity of the process of organizing Jews from Poland around these parties, but also the parties' instruments and possibilities to draw the newly arrived Jews. The fact that the research was limited to the party press – in the situation when all main titles were directly associated with Israeli parties, which had all used their own systems of adaptation of newcomers – seems to be the most proper and effective method of examination both of the essence of the foreign-language press, in this case the Polish-language one, and the course of acclimatization of new arrivals.

Chapter two presents the papers published by the Progressive Party (*Opinia – Opinion*), and in cooperation with the General Zionists (*Nowiny – News*). The history of the press published by the Progressive Party and General Zionists in Israel was related to the activity and fate of the activists who were recruited from the movement of the General Zionists in Poland – the organization of the Zionist-Democrat Party Ichud. The arrival of people belonging to the movement of General Zionists, in which were rooted both the Progressive Party and the General Zionists of Israel, triggered a rivalry between the two parties for the souls and votes of Jews coming from Poland. Attempts undertaken by both parties to present itself as the only heir of the movement are evident in references to the two press titles, very popular before the war: the General Zionists established *Chwila (The While)*, and the Progressive Party – *Opinia (Opinion)*. As time went on and the number of readers in Polish was shrinking, and as bonds between Jews originating from the same country, and in the case of the General Zionists and the Progressive Party also from the same political community, began to breach party divisions – they commenced to cooperate, also in the field of the press. After the closure of *Opinia* by the Progressive Party and of *Chwila* by the General Zionists there began a stage of cooperation associated with the paper titled *Nowiny*.

The third chapter deals with the press published by Mapai. The pace of changes in the Israeli society, influenced by cyclic Aliyahs, created a very labile political situation, which forced the party to adjust its political instruments to the identity, professional structure and expectations of each national group individually. In a demographically dynamic society the press policy had to quickly react to rapidly changing needs of the readers – to lead them

to a right direction from the party's point of view, establish contacts with newly arrived Jews, which meant the establishment of the own press. For this reason Mapai decided to take advantage of the weakness of *Nowiny* belonging to the Progressive Party and found its own *Kurier*.

Mapai's *Kurier* initiated the period rich in the Polish-language publications in Israel, caused by the large size of the Gomułka Aliyah and its specific character. It brought to Israel politically active, Polonized people, among which some of them consciously rejected Zionism, opposing it with another ideological alternative – communism, which was offering better chance for the assimilation they desired. And what is important, with Gomułka Aliyah there came to Israel a large group of intellectuals and civil servants, writers, journalists – professional people with a higher education, which formed service personnel for political and publishing tasks. In the ranks of the former activists of the Polish United Workers' Party, who, after arriving in Israel, immediately clung to the governing party, a hope was entertained for a quick adaptation on the party path, analogically to the advancement in postwar communist Poland. The opening up of people who came with Gomułka Aliyah to political activity made it possible for the parties to respond to their needs, to transform unused political spaces into their electorate; it was made easier by the fact that expectations of many of newcomers corresponded to interests of the party – both sides wanted to activate political life.

The Aliyah brought also a large number of elderly people, who experienced the Holocaust and were both suffering from the feeling of impotence and were unable to take up work or learn the Hebrew language. This type of immigrants needed taken care of, needed a suitable cultural offer, but above all needed information, in order 'not to remain a desert generation forever'.

In the case of new *olim* from Poland, gathered around the governing party, an important issue was to present the phenomena characteristic of the contemporary Israeli society; clientelism and protectionism. The community of Gomułka Aliyah clung to the dominant party – Mapai. Among various reasons of such a choice there could have also been, at least during the first years after their arrival, conformism. There was also an array of behaviors characteristic of clientelism known from the communist system, which were functioning well – although in a different form – in Israel. A dense network of economic and political bonds was created between the governing party and new *olim* in the period of their settling in a new place, and former party functionaries tried to subordinate themselves – albeit in a different way than in Poland – to the governing party in Israel. The situation of Jews from Poland, who were offered many forms of support by their fellow countrymen, was much better than that of Jews from other countries – they could strengthen clientelism or replace it with protectionism. The first type of behaviors could induce the second one, supplement it or the two could function independently.

Chapter four describes the fusion of publishing houses of the two coalition parties: Mapai and the Progressive Party. A successful linguistic assimilation, with a small inflow of new immigrants from Poland, made the space of Polish-language publications shrunk, and made it also mobile – fusions of publishers of Polish-language publications and individuals with the right to publish with the parties went hand in hand with political coalitions, economic compromises or simply cooperation. Due to a limited number of readers,

the coalition members in the government of the Progressive Party and Mapai decided to merge the paper under the title of *Nowiny i Kurier*. The fusion was another proof for instrumental usage of the foreign-language press by Israeli parties and their functioning with the rhythm of events, including the most important one – elections. Yet another example was the so-called Lavon Affair which divided the coalition members and caused changes in the contract for publishing *Nowiny-Kurier*. The chapter devotes a separate place to the adaptation of the last large wave of immigrants from Poland who came to Israel after the events of March 1968.

Chapter five presents the *Od Nowa* published by Mapam. The journalists of the paper shared a youth spent in Poland where they were involved in communism and conspirational work, and then their disappointment with it in the Polish People's Republic and their growing interest in Zionism. The chapter also includes biographies of some Polish Jews engaged in the international communist movement. Some of them had experiences with working for Zionist leftist organizations and a special attitude towards the USSR, tinted with sympathy for it not only because of their leftist political leanings but also the fact that they survived the Holocaust on the Soviet territory. Surely, the key to construct a community of *Od Nowa* was intellectualism combined with activity of people experienced in political and social life, crystallized views and political maturity. The editors of *Od Nowa* wanted to create a paper for intellectuals, which would not cut itself off from the Diaspora, but would include a reflection upon the past and debates on the state. Plenty of space was occupied by discussions about the problem of identity, which were especially acute for the readers of *Od Nowa*, particularly those who in Poland backed communism and thus assimilation. The transition from the double – Polish and Jewish – identity to the feeling of community with own – Israeli – nation was a long and complicated process, dependent on many personal and subjective factors. Even when close to its end, the editors of *Od Nowa* stayed away from the orthodox world, clearly rejecting a religious state and emphasizing its secular character.

The group gathered around *Od Nowa* was involved into a controversy between the internationalism of communism and Zionism. It was difficult for them to replace 'worn out' communism with Zionism which was unable to fill this void: 'The discovery that the king is naked does not dress others' – as was said in *Od Nowa*.¹

Chapter six, devoted to communist Maki, presents the position occupied by this party in the Israeli political scene and its possibilities to gather Polish Jews, as well as tensions between communists from Poland and their discussion led in the Polish-language *Walka* (*The Fight*).

For Israeli communists the arrival of Gomulka Aliyah to Israel was a rare chance to strengthen a communist electorate, and for this reason a mobilization of this party in the fight for people was much stronger than of other parties. The first step was to establish contacts with new *olim* – which caused an urgent need to create a newspaper in the Polish language. Thus, *Walka* was established. It should be remembered that with a closing Arab electorate, the possibility to attract communists from among new *olim* was a great chance for Maki. Those communists, despite their disappointments and tough experiences, were

¹ Quoted after: A. Ben Asher, 'Do Pana N', *Od Nowa*, no. 2, p. 1.

still faithful to the leftist thought, and were often laboriously and meticulously separating their disappointed hopes associated with the Polish United Workers' Party from the communist ideology. Maki activists counted that the unadjustedness of new *olim* and their longing for Polish culture, despite the risk of their being pushed in Israel to the margin because of their communist leanings, would in time shift them towards the communist party. What was important in the case of Polish Jews was the memory of the Holocaust with anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist movements.² For those people who survived the war in the territory of the Soviet Union, the involvement in communism was synonymous with the antithesis of Nazism. During the first years after the war Moscow was regarded as an alternative way to realize Jewish political plans. In the face of the recent Holocaust, this way seemed to be a manifestation of political realism, or at least was securing Jewish interests in other political centre than the West. The victory of the USSR seemed to guarantee peace in the future. Anti-Fascist views were shared by numerous Israeli communities, and they were accentuated by communists who in this way won numerous adherents, especially among European Jews.

This chapter also shows the difference between Israeli communists and the attitude of former members of the Polish United Workers Party who came from Poland after 1968 towards the two separated fractions of 'Jewish' Maki and 'Arab' Rakach. A small group of communists from Poland who came to Israel after 1969, established an Association of Longtime Activists of the Revolutionary Workers Movement. Maki, during the whole period of its existence, was marginalized, but before the elections of 1969 was disappearing. The only motivations for people to associate with it were ideological matters which had not been wiped out by the events of 1968. The Association, as one of its activists wrote, did not perform any special political activity, except for a formal registration. Its main activity was reduced to the publication in 1969 of a bulletin with an identical title to that of the name of the Association. Its purpose was to gather the newly arrived around Maki and to keep them for the period of elections to the Histadrut and then to the Knesset.

It was not easy to be a communist, or even a Marxist, in Israel. Zionism included some religious elements (Zion, Jerusalem, Eretz Yisrael). For a long time it was associated with the philanthropy of rich (it was in symbiosis with capitalism). Zionism caused conflicts with Arabs – until the 1950s. Arabs could not join the Israeli Zionist parties. For this reason Mapam could not be a communist party, but Maki could be both anti-Zionist and Arab-Jewish. An agitation of communists was often reduced to a boycott of the Jewish state – contrary to Zionists parties that by their aggressive criticism of the government and other state institutions mobilized the movement of Jewish emigration in the opposite direction: from Israel, Yerida. On the other hand, however, communism became for many Jews a new religion in which they were able to find a minimal humanism (the fight against social disadvantage) or an element of Jewish religion (Messianism without God), or simply an utopia that realized itself in being sent out.

The last, seventh chapter, deals with the Israeli *Po Prostu* (*Simply Speaking*). The paper was financially associated with the Israeli Bund. Its political program was related to liberal society of those who arrived after 1956 looking for the sense of community in socialism

² 'Słowo do olim z Polski', *Walka*, 1965, no. 10, p. 6.

and thus the title *Po Prostu*. The title referred to the symbol of the Polish newspaper *Po Prostu*, being a strong impulse of political changes of the Polish October 1956, in which participated a part of Jews from Poland. *Po Prostu* was aimed at those who immediately after arriving in Israel were ready to go back to Poland.

The character of Israeli *Po Prostu* was almost entirely symbolic. The paper did not bring any special political gains to the Bund. The party was anti-establishment and too marginalized to attract people. But the editorial staff of *Po Prostu* provoked for two main reasons: because of its party patronage (the Bund), but first of all because of its title and for this reason its resonance in the Israeli political scene was much more serious than its actual value.

The Polish-language press had usually a center-left orientation. Not considering a mutation of *Nowiny* published by the General Zionists together with the Progressive Party, there were no titles on the right. Polonized groups, which placed emphasis on the assimilation in the country of origin, associated usually with leftist parties; from the second half of the 1950s on, there were coming from Poland to Israel groups of liberal views for which, for example, the rightist Cherut could not be an alternative and it did not have a political offer, apart from the fact that it sought its electorate among Eastern Jews. Another obstacle was ideology, emphasis put on the role of Hebraization and statism, a critical attitude towards speaking foreign languages. Another reason for a weakly developed segment of the foreign-language press of Cherut was the fact that until 1977 it was the opposition party, and those parties usually were not rich.

The importance of the Polish-language press

Polish-language mass media in Israel were an instrument of communication of Jews from Poland in the process of their integration with the Hebrew-speaking part of the society. A multitude of Polish-language publications should not be regarded as a propagation of Polish culture or some issues from the history of Polish-Jewish relations. The language of those publications was Polish, but the content pertained almost exclusively to Israeli matters. A mission of foreign-language newspapers was to re-direct the attention of new *olim* from problems of the Diaspora to internal matters of Israel. For this reason neither reminiscences of nor relations with the hometown societies were featured in those papers. They avoided focusing on the culture of the country of origin in order not to create clusters or groups organized like the so-called *landmanshaftn* divided into various groups and factions, culturally and politically different.

Those papers which stayed on the market directed the readers' attention to internal affairs of Israel; they tried to liberate new *olim* from their 'problem of the Lot's wife' – 'the head turned back' – a mental return to the Diaspora. Social political conditions, a reception of the Polish-speaking minority by the Hebrew-speaking part of the society, negation of the Polish language, associated with anti-Semitism, all those factors made children unwilling to speak with their parents in Polish. As time went on, with each assimilation success of newly arrived, the audience of the Hebrew-language press increased. On the other hand, a political provenance of the foreign-language press meant that when the costs of publishing the paper much exceeded political gains, the parties lost their motivation to finance it. Thus, the life of Polish-language dailies and papers was depending on political interests

and the existence of a group of journalists from Poland for whom the Polish language was an integral part of their professional usefulness, and also of people less active professionally who were not forced to learn Hebrew very quickly.

Despite the weakness of the Polish-language press in Israel, it could not be replaced by the Polish press published abroad. Choices made by Polish Jews in Israel depended not only on whom they felt, but also on the cultural and national direction they were heading in. Regardless of the state they were going to, they did not want to stay on the peripheries of the society. In Israel, they did not want to identify themselves with a foreign-language paper, with low standards, but they did not want to identify themselves with the community with no influence on their future, for instance the Polish emigration. Both *Gomulka Aliyaha* and *March Aliyaha* were sufficiently dynamic to quickly adapt to the situation of the state they had chosen to make their own, to join the audience of the national press – in Israel – in the Hebrew language.

The year of 1967 brought about breaking off the diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel, thus ending a political usefulness of the Polish-language press in the field of Israeli foreign policy. In addition, a political scene in Israel was revamped. Fragmented parties formed blocks, Mapam merged with *Ahud HaAvoda*, then with *Mapai* (thus creating the Labor Party), the communist party got divided, but the rightist parties consolidated: the General Zionists, Progressive Party and *Cherut*. The Left soon gave up power, and owing to the support of ethnic groups gaining increasing majority in the society, it was taken up by the Left. All this undoubtedly had a large impact on the foreign-language press. From a demographic point of view, it seemed to be useless and politically without importance, so it was futile for parties to publish it. The attention of political leaders was captured by a new electorate – a generation of readers born already in Israel.

The reception of the foreign-language press in Israel was very different, depending on the community. For *vatik*, it meant yet another element of propaganda, the possibility to propagate the party messages and ideas, another forum for enunciations and articles of the party's activists – a tool to address new *olim* and attract them to the party. For those journalists who were new *olim* it meant the possibility to write. For the intellectuals who were new *olim* it meant temporary or second employment. For less active and alienated people – it was a source of basic information or entertainment. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, those papers were fulfilling information functions, sending off signals to foreign embassies and governments. Yiddishists regarded those papers as a chronic disease of 'assimilation', an unnecessarily brought in to the Jewish State culture of goys.

Translated by Grażyna Waluga