



<https://doi.org/10.33077/uw.25448730.zbkh.2020.196>

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Jewish public libraries in interwar Poland

Abstract

This article presents the genesis and the organizational structure of the Jewish public libraries (also referred to as secular or modern in the literature) in interwar Poland (1918-1939). The origins of these institutions date back to the 19th century and are associated with the Haskalah movement. Due to the strong opposition of the Orthodox Jews and local authorities, the majority of the first libraries were established secretly and run illegally on private premises. Against what were then the odds, progress prevailed and the libraries flourished in the interwar period. In 1937 it was estimated that there were approximately 1,000 Jewish public libraries in Poland.

Key words: Jewish libraries – Poland – 20th century.

„Z Badań nad Książką i Księgozbiorami Historycznymi” – Udział zagranicznych recenzentów w ocenie publikacji; Stworzenie anglojęzycznej wersji wydawniczej publikacji; Digitalizacja tomów archiwalnych rocznika w celu zapewnienia otwartego dostępu do nich przez Internet oraz wdrożenie i utrzymanie cyfrowej platformy redakcyjnej – zadanie finansowane w ramach umowy nr 653/P-DUN/2019 ze środków Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego przeznaczonych na działalność upowszechniającą naukę.

The genesis

The movement aimed at the modernization of Jewish life called Haskalah (Hebrew: enlightenment, edification and education; so called Jewish Enlightenment) was established in the second half of the 18th century, as the result of the European enlightenment influence on the West European Jews. Changes affected multiple aspects of everyday life, starting with the social ones (outfit, appearance and behaviour, etc.), reforming education, culture, and language (with the introduction of secular sciences, the break with traditionalism, the replacement of the Yiddish language with other European languages, etc.), and ending with religion (prayers in national languages, introduction of choirs and mixed benches in synagogues, etc.)¹. Based on this idea, during the 19th century new institutions were established, including public (secular or modern) libraries, which aimed at collecting literature hitherto absent in traditional, religious book collections. It regarded mostly fiction, scientific works, critical editions, journals, and newspapers. These kinds of literature were not accepted by the Orthodox circles, perceiving the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, commentaries and rabbinic responsa, philosophical, ethical, and moral works, as well as prayer books, as the only readings approved for study. Traditional book collections, held in synagogues, bet ha-midrashim (eng. study houses) and religious schools, though available for the public, in fact they were used by men only.

The beginnings of Jewish public libraries and reading rooms on Polish lands – dating back to the mid-19th century – were very modest. Most of them were established illegally and run secretly due to the difficulties with obtaining permission from local authorities and the resistance of the Orthodox circles; hence, their locations were sometimes quite unusual, e.g. in Zgierz (near Łódź) the library was housed in the atelier of the painter Marek Szwarz². Most frequently, first libraries – or rather “bookshelves” – were located on the private premises of the people who established them. Such was the case of the first folk library in Luninets (guberniya of Minsk at the time), where “most of the books were hidden in the chest of drawers, while revolutionary pamphlets were in my mother’s bed, under a straw mattress. Each time a policeman emerged on our street, my mother turned pale in fear. Due to this fear, she once took all the brochures from under the bed and burnt them”³.

¹ R. Żebrowski, *Haskala*, [in:] *Polski słownik judaistyczny*, compiled by Z. Borzymińska, R. Żebrowski, Warszawa 2003, vol. 1, pp. 562-563.

² V. Fisher, *Yidishe bibliotek a. n. fun David Frishman*, [in:] *Sefer Zgerzsh*, ed. by D. Shtokfish, S. Kantz, Z. Fisher, Tel Aviv 1975-1986, p. 282.

³ D. Kutnik, *Di ershte yidishe bibliotek*, [in:] *Yizkor kehilot Luninets/Kozanhorodok*, ed. by Y. Zeevi [et al.], Tel Aviv 1952, p. 147.

In small localities, libraries and reading rooms were usually established by young people yearning for modern literature and interested in current affairs. One such example comes from Konin, where a group of school fellows was the driving force behind the founding of the first library in town (illegal at that time): “We started with going from one house to another, taking each available book, and in a couple of days we collected quite a lot of various volumes. We enlarged this collection with the books bought second hand in Warsaw. This nucleus of a library was painstakingly catalogued and placed in my parents’ room”⁴. The books were lent twice a week – on Tuesday and Friday afternoons (as for the latter, before the beginning of Sabbath). There were three sisters, who worked as librarians. Their duties involved registering new readers, cataloguing incoming books and keeping a list of checked-out books. The numbers of readers and books grew quickly, therefore soon the library had to be relocated to a larger room, which was the basement of one of the members’ house. The library elicited interest as well as concern that the police would discover the illegal facility and close it. The value of this collection for the youth is best reflected in the memories of one of its founders: “We have come to a decision that such a valuable (!) collection should be guarded, therefore [...] we took it upon ourselves and moved into the library”⁵. Despite many difficulties, the library carried on and in 1907 it was legalized. In a short time, its collection grew, and it became one of the largest libraries in the neighbourhood, proudly remembered by Konin townspeople years later⁶.

The first public reading rooms and libraries comprised modest book collections and accommodations, but already had their own unique atmosphere and character. Each of them had its own rules and regulations concerning library services. Some of them were reference only, while others lent books to their members. This is how the organisation of one of the libraries in Vishkov (guberniya of Warsaw at the time) is remembered by one of the former locals:

Although the selection of books was not very large, people read eagerly. The most competent person in each organization was appointed as a librarian. No book could be taken out for more than fifteen days. Upon returning a book, a librarian could check whether a borrower indeed read the book and, if so, whether he had understood its content. Passionate discussions were frequently held about the hero of this or that book. The most popular were the works by Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Asch, Y. L. Peretz, Avrom Reyzen, Peretz Hirschbein, H. D. Nomberg. We, young readers, straight out of kheyder, loved reading the Yiddish writers. More advanced readers requested the books of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky,

⁴ T. Richmond, *Upoczywe echo: sztetl Konin: poszukiwanie*, Poznań 2001, p. 310.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 311.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 308.

and others. Of course, there were not enough copies to circulate, and we often had to wait a couple of weeks before receiving a book⁷.

Although the rush to modernity stood in opposition to the Orthodox views, secular literature secretly reached these communities as well. In the Tluste town (at Podolia), a librarian from the Zionist library smuggled books to a nearby kloyz (eng. Hasidic prayer house):

There was one more type of readers. I carried books from the library to the kloyz of the Hasids of Czortkiv. Those devout in their hearts and souls received them covertly, under the table, so that they could read them later in their houses. Among them there were: reb Barukh-Itche Vitashke, one of the richest people in our town, reb Isroel Glik, Bertsye Glik's father, one of the greatest scholars in our town, an educated man. I still remember how impressed they were with the book *Herzl's diary*, published at that time, or Stefan Zweig's *Jeremiah*. Discussions, which often erupted in the kloyz, derived from reading these books. From reading these books, one could feel the benefits of fostering the culture in our town⁸.

However, we often come upon descriptions of conflicts arising from newly established libraries. Occasionally, the controversies evolved from verbal disputes into physical altercations. In Klobutsk (guberniya of Piotrkow at the time), the Hasids set up an association which aimed at combating the progress. One of its members describes its activity as follows:

The students from bet ha-midrash, myself included, decided to fight against this "heresy" that had invaded our town. The Hasids and the rabbi were on our side. We tried to influence the parents to forbid their children from reading "treyf writings", as we called the books from the library. [...] Initially, we tried to persuade the founders of clubs and libraries to close their sinful facilities and return to the path of righteousness. When our appeals to morality turned futile, we began to use stronger measures. It went to blows. A fight took place in a small bet ha-midrash during the Simchat Torah, just after a procession. It started with a discussion between the religious young men and the progressives. A fistfight followed, and then things turned ugly. Bet ha-midrash became quite a "battlefield". We, the religious Jews, got support from Hasidic shtiebel and a scuffle broke out. Synagogal supervisors were unable to calm down the crowd and they called the police. Approximately 20 people were arrested, together with my father and myself. We did not spend much time in jail. The trial took place soon. [...] The parties made peace in court⁹.

Despite such fierce opposition, resulting sometimes in unfortunate incidents, the public libraries became an integral element of the Jewish towns landscape in pre-war Poland.

⁷ B. Yismakh, *Sport-klubn un zelvstshutz*, [in:] *Sefer Vishkov*, ed. by D. Shtokfish, [Tel Aviv 1964], p. 87.

⁸ A. Stup, *Le-dmuta shel Tluste ha-yehudit*, [in:] *Sefer Tluste*, ed. by G. Lindenberg, Tel Aviv 1965, p. 30.

⁹ B. Shymkovych, *Di "Khevre Bakhurim", vos hot bakemft dem "progres" in shtetl*, [in:] *Sefer Klobutsk*, ed. by V. Yasni, Tel Aviv 1960, p. 88-89.

Organizational structure

It is hard to tell precisely the number of Jewish public libraries active in Poland in the years 1918-1939, mostly due to the lack of data, as well as the ephemeral character of these institutions. In 1937, Herman Kruk estimated that “there are approximately 1,000 libraries in almost 400 big and small towns. Each political movement, each trade union possesses its own library of which it takes pride. We know of small towns with 200-300 inhabitants and two-three libraries”¹⁰.

The most complete statistics are given in the first (and only¹¹) nationwide register of public libraries, conducted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education in December 1929¹². Based on the questionnaires sent to the libraries all over Poland, it was determined that 748 out of 8,526 libraries were Jewish, the collections of which amounted to more than 860,000 books (they were only second to the Polish ones)¹³.

Among these 748 libraries, 734 were established by social, cultural, educational, professional, economic, and political organizations; nine libraries belonged to the Jewish Religious Communities, and five were private¹⁴. Regarding geographic distributions, the highest number of Jewish libraries were located in Warsaw voivodeship (amounting – together with the city of Warsaw – to approximately 14,3% of all libraries), which also grouped the largest Jewish community in Poland in the interwar period. Detailed data are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1. The number of the Jewish public libraries (as of January 1, 1930) in Poland, according to the voivodeships of that time

Voivodeship	No of libraries	%
Warszawa	97	13%
Lublin	89	12%
Kielce	85	11,3%
Łódź	70	9,3%
Tarnopol	60	8%
Lwów	59	7,9%

¹⁰ H. Kruk, *Język żydowski, żydowskie książki i żydowskie wydawnictwa*, “Chwila”, 05.03.1937, no 6451, p. 8.

¹¹ Another register was planned for 1939, but it did not take place due to the outbreak of the World War II.

¹² *Biblioteki oświatowe. Spis na dzień 1 stycznia 1930 roku oraz tablice statystyczne*, compiled by Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego, Warszawa-Lwów 1932.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. XXV.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. XXV.

Białystok	59	7,9%
Wilno	42	5,6%
Wołyń	38	5,1%
Polesie	37	5%
Kraków	34	4,5%
Nowogród	33	4,4%
Stanisławów	32	4,3%
City of Warszawa	10	1,3%
Poznań	3	0,4%
Śląsk	0	-
TOTAL	748	100%

Source: *Biblioteki oświatowe. Spis na dzień 1 stycznia 1930 roku oraz tablice statystyczne*, compiled by Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego [Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education], Warszawa-Lwów 1932.

The Main Judaic Library (also called the Central Judaic Library) in Warsaw was the most significant Jewish library in the interwar period. Since 1934, it had been receiving the legal deposits of Hebrew and Yiddish prints published in Poland. It was created in the mid-19th century as the Great Synagogue of Warsaw's library, therefore it is also one of the oldest and most remarkable Jewish libraries in Poland. Its collection was estimated at approximately 40,000 volumes in 1939¹⁵. The much newer, but richer library of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut in Vilnius (eng. Yiddish Scientific Institute; YIVO) was an institution of comparable rank. Its collections were estimated at 100,000 volumes in 1939¹⁶. Both of these institutions had a scientific character due to their rank and were mostly visited by the Jewish intelligentsia.

The Mathias Strashun Library at the Management Board of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, commonly known as the Strashun Library, enjoyed particular fame, going beyond the Polish borders. Its founder – Mathias Strashun (1817-1885) – collected a significant amount of Hebrew manuscripts and rare books, which he bequeathed to the Jewish community of Vilnius upon his death. In 1889, all the items in the collection were published in the catalogue *Likute shoshanim* (eng. A Bunch of Roses). The library was opened in 1893 and in 1939 its collection amounted to approximately 35,000 volumes¹⁷. Many renowned people visited it, including Sholem Aleichem, Mendele

¹⁵ H. Kroszczor, *Główna Biblioteka Judaistyczna w Warszawie*, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego w Polsce" 1971, no 2 (78), pp. 3-10.

¹⁶ *Biblioteka JIWO*, [in:] *Książka i prasa na Ziemi Wileńskiej. Drukarnie, wydawnictwa, księgarnie, biblioteki, czasopisma XVI w. – 1945 r.*, compiled by M. Jackiewicz, Bydgoszcz 2008, p. 31.

¹⁷ *Żydowska biblioteka im. Straszuna*, [in:] *Książka i prasa na Ziemi Wileńskiej...*, p. 337.

Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Asch, An-ski, Joseph Opatoshu, David Bergelson, Hayim Nachman Bialik, Nathan Birnbaum, Peretz Hirschbein, Zalman Reizen, Baruch Glozman, Simon Dubnow, Moses Schorr, Ignacy Schiper, Jacob Shatzky. The entries left in the guest book speak of delight and esteem for the Jewish written heritage and the library itself¹⁸.

Noteworthy is also the history of the Sholem Aleichem Municipal Public Library in Bialystok, as this was probably the only Jewish library that was taken over by the town, turning the small library established by the Union of Jewish Youth in 1915, into the main municipal library in 1919, regularly subsidized and open to all the townspeople. The members of the library board came from both the Jewish and Christian communities. Its successful development lasted until 1932. After that, the library lost its municipal subsidies to the benefits of another public library in the city. Despite financial difficulties, this institution existed until 1939, and played a significant role in the cultural life of the city and local Jewish community in particular¹⁹.

Tab. 2. The size of the book collections of the Jewish public libraries in Poland (as of January 1, 1930)

No of publications	No of libraries	%
Up to 100	51	6,8%
101-500	283	37,8%
501-1000	194	25,9%
1001-2000	131	17,5%
2001-3000	37	5%
3001-4000	21	2,8%
4001-5000	10	1,4%
5000-9999	15	2%
More than 10000	6	0,8%
TOTAL	748	100%

Source: *Biblioteki oświatowe. Spis na dzień 1 stycznia 1930 roku oraz tablice statystyczne*, compiled by Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego [Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education], Warszawa-Lwów 1932.

The richest libraries in the interwar period had over 20,000 volumes, e.g. the “Mefitse Haskole” Library in Vilnius (approx. 45,000 vols. in 1939),

¹⁸ Kh. Lunski, *Der “Sefer ha-Zahav” in der Strashun Bibliotek*, [in:] *Vilner Almanakh*, ed. by A.I. Grodzenski, Vilne 1939, pp. 37-46.

¹⁹ Z. Sokół, *Dzieje bibliotek w Białymstoku (od XVIII wieku do 1939 roku)*, Białystok 1999, pp. 66-75.

the Grosser Library in Warsaw (approx. 30,000 vols. in 1937), the Jewish Religious Community Library in Lviv (approx. 20,000 vols. in 1939), the “Sifriya Amamith” Jewish Folk Library in Tarnow (approx. 20,000 vols. in 1939). However, the collections did not exceed 1,000 books on average. According to the 1929 register, that number applied to approximately 70% of the libraries. Detailed data are presented in Table 2.

Besides institutions founded by individuals, there were also library networks, established by the Jewish educational organizations, such as Tarbut²⁰, Tsentrale Yidishe Shul-Organizatsye (eng. Central Yiddish School Organization)²¹, Kultur-Lige (eng. Culture League)²², and Ovnt Kursn far Arbeter (eng. Evening Courses for Workers)²³.

Apart from books in Hebrew and Yiddish, Jewish public libraries offered literature in Polish, German, Russian and several other languages. Proportions of these book collections varied. For instance, in 1922, the Jewish Library and Public Reading Room in Konin consisted of 67,7% books in Polish, 17,2% in Yiddish, 6,56% in Hebrew, 4,6% in Russian, and 4% in German²⁴. In 1928, the Library of the Jewish House in Drohobycz held 44,9% books in Polish, 39,7% in German, 9,5% in Yiddish, and 5,9% in Hebrew²⁵. In 1930, the “Sifriya Amamith” Jewish Folk Library in Tarnów owned 55,8% books in Polish, 20,2% in German, 14,7% in Hebrew, and 9,3% in Yiddish²⁶. In 1932, the “Gideon” Association Library in Ternopil offered 64,9% books in Polish, 11,6% in German, 16,7% in Yiddish, and 6,8% in Hebrew²⁷.

²⁰ Tarbut – a network of secular, Hebrew-language schools with Zionist orientation. The network operated kindergartens, elementary schools, high schools, teachers’ seminars, evening courses for adults, and libraries. It also published pedagogical journals, educational textbooks, and children’s journals.

²¹ Tsentrale Yidishe Shul-Organizatsye (eng. Central Jewish School Organisation; acronym: TsYSHO) – a network of secular Yiddish schools under socialist auspices, established in 1921 in Warsaw. It had links to the Bund and Poale Zion parties.

²² Kultur-Lige (eng. Culture League) – a cultural and educational organisation, which aimed at promoting Yiddish language. It run preschools, schools, evening courses for adults, publishing houses, libraries, music and theatre circles. It was established in 1918 in Kiev. First branches in Poland were opened up in 1921.

²³ Ovnt Kursn far Arbeter (eng. Evening Courses for Workers) – one of the leading Jewish cultural institutions for working class in interwar Poland, founded in 1916. It organized libraries, sports clubs, theatre groups etc. It put special emphasis on developing evening courses and “popular universities” aimed at workers.

²⁴ *Katalog Żydowskiej Biblioteki i Czytelni Społ. w Koninie*, Konin 1922.

²⁵ *Katalog Biblioteki Domu Żydowskiego w Drohobyczcu*, Drohobycz 1928.

²⁶ *Katalog Żydowskiej Biblioteki Ludowej “Sifrija Amamith” w Tarnowie*, Tarnów 1924; *Katalog Żydowskiej Biblioteki Ludowej “Sifrija Amamith” w Tarnowie. Dodatek I*, Tarnów 1926; *Katalog Żydowskiej Biblioteki Ludowej “Sifrija Amamith” w Tarnowie. Dodatek II*, Tarnów 1929; *Katalog Żydowskiej Biblioteki Ludowej “Sifrija Amamith” w Tarnowie. Dodatek III*, Tarnów 1930.

²⁷ *Katalog ogólny wydany z okazji 10-lecia istnienia Biblioteki: 1922-1932*, Tarnopol 1932.

Jewish public libraries were mostly meant for Jewish readers – both men and women. Libraries of various associations were primarily serving their members, however, most of them made their collections available to other users. On the one hand, it helped to raise more funds, on the other, it opened up the collection to a larger audience, attracting new members. In some places, among the registered readers, we can also find members of Christian communities, e. g. among the 245 readers of the Jewish Library and Public Reading Room in Konin, 21% declared themselves Christians²⁸, whereas at the Jewish Folk Library in Sambor, 25% of readers were of Christian origins²⁹.

Isaac Leib Peretz³⁰ – one of the greatest Yiddish writers – was the most popular name given to Jewish libraries. In the 1929 register, there are more than 90 libraries named after him. The libraries of political organizations often bore the names of their founders or main ideologists (e.g. many “Poale Zion” libraries were named after Ber Borochov³¹). The names of prominent local figures sometimes appeared in the library’s name in small localities (e.g. a library in Porazava was named after its most famous citizen – Esther Rachel Kamińska³², the David Frishman³³ library was located in Zgierz, whereas one of the libraries in Ternopil held the name of Yosef Perl³⁴).

As for funding, the Jewish libraries were predominantly self-sufficient. They were subsidized neither by local authorities nor by the Jewish communities (with some exceptions or occasional support). The founders were therefore their first sponsors and most generous donors. Not only did they offered their own book collections and private premises, but also devoted their free time to organize and run the library. In most cases, the core of the library budget consisted of membership and admission fees, private donations, or single payments. However, quite often these funds were not enough to cover all current expenses, especially to pay for regular subscription of journals and acquisition of new publications. Concerts, theatre plays, lotteries, dancing parties etc. were organized, providing income to support

²⁸ *Vi yidish-veltlekhe bibliotek darf zikh nisht firn: barikht fun der yid. gezeshaflekhe bibliotek un leze-zal in Konin*, “Literarische Bleter” 1925, no 45, p. 2.

²⁹ M. J. Ziomek, *Czytelnicтво powieści w Polsce w świetle cyfr*, Kraków 1933, p. 42.

³⁰ Isaac Leib Peretz (1851-1915; also written Yitskhok Leybush Peretz) – a Yiddish and Hebrew poet, novelist, dramatist, literary and theatre critic. Along with Mendele Moykher-Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, he is considered as one of the greatest classical Yiddish writers.

³¹ Ber Borochov (1881-1917) – an ideologist and leader of the Poale Zion party.

³² Ester Rachel Kamińska (1870-1925) – a Polish-Jewish actress, called “the mother of Yiddish theatre”.

³³ David Frishman (1859–1922) – a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, poet and editor, literary critic, and translator.

³⁴ Yosef Perl (1773-1839) – a writer, pedagogue, social activist, a critic of Hasidism, and the supporter of the Haskalah movement.

the library budget. Occasionally, the funds for the libraries were also raised through public collections.

Facilities of the libraries were in their infancy. Most of them were located in the offices of their founding associations or organizations. It applied to approximately 42% of the libraries according to the 1929 register, while approximately 39% of them had separate rooms. Almost 6% of the libraries were housed on private premises (or at other locations). As for the remaining 12%, information is missing. As to the reading rooms, only 33% of the libraries had a separate place for reading. The others either did not have a reading room or there is no data to confirm it. In regard to the libraries furnishing, existing descriptions of the libraries interiors indicate that it was customary to hang portraits of renowned Jewish writers and poets on the walls of reading rooms, I. L. Peretz and S. Aleichem among others. Moreover, issues with heating and ventilation, users' complaints about cramped conditions and lack of seats in reading rooms can also be found in the documents. In extreme cases, some libraries had to be closed down because of life threatening conditions, e.g. in 1933 the Jewish Religious Community Library in Lviv was temporarily closed because "a wall collapsed in the room where the main collection of books was stored [...]. The books were lying all around, and no one can imagine the loss this library suffers"³⁵.

As opposed to the traditional Jewish libraries, which were only to satisfy the religious needs of the community, the public libraries became the centres of culture and self-education. Birthday or death anniversaries of renowned writers and poets were celebrated, and so were jubilees of historical events. To boost the cultural life in towns, the libraries were also the venue for literary events, author's meetings, lectures, as well as exhibitions, plays, and concerts. In addition, drama circles, choirs, and even sports clubs were hosted at the libraries.

Organization of the library profession

The rapidly developing library movement required coordination and organization framework. To connect all these institutions, the Bibliotekn-Tsenter bay der "Kultur-Lige" (eng. Library Centre at the Kultur-Lige) was established in Warsaw in 1924. One of its main tasks was to provide methodical aid for people working in libraries, in particular to folk libraries in rural areas.

The survey carried out by the Bibliotekn-Tsenter in 1927 revealed the lack of standardized regulations and unified cataloguing rules³⁶. To fill this gap, catalogues and professional journals began to be published, whose aim was

³⁵ *Farvos iz kehile-bibliotek geshlosen?*, "Der Nayer Morgen" 26.09.1933, no 222, p. 3.

³⁶ H. Kruk, *Zydowskie bibliotekarstwo w Polsce...*, p. 3.

to support the selection of literature adequate for the Jewish libraries, in particular those located in rural areas.

In 1929 two first reference catalogues were released – one in Yiddish *Dos yidishe bukh: muster katalog far folksbibliotekn: hantbukh far bibliotekarn un lezer* (eng. The Jewish Book. A Reference Catalogue for Folk Libraries. Handbook for Libraries and Readers)³⁷, and the other in Polish *Książka polska w bibliotece żydowskiej* (eng. A Polish Book in a Jewish Library)³⁸. These two publications were followed-up in 1930 by a monthly journal in Yiddish *Bukh un lezer* (eng. A Book and a Reader), including reviews of books in Yiddish (section edited by Khayim Shloyme Kazdan) and Polish (section edited by Sophie Dubnov-Erlich), but only three issues came out³⁹. In 1932, Herman Kruk compiled a publication in Yiddish – *Heft far notitsn iber geleyente bikher* (eng. A Notebook for Notes about Read Books)⁴⁰ – that could serve both as a support for librarians in their work with readers, or as self-instruction for readers themselves. The last reference catalogue (edited by H. Kruk) – *Rekomendir reshimes: fun lektur oyf di temes: 1. prof. fareynen; 2. antisemitism* (eng. The List of Recommended Titles Concerning: 1. Trade Unions, 2. Anti-Semitism) appeared in 1937⁴¹.

Moreover, in the years 1931-1935, in the Yiddish magazine “Vokhnshrift far Literatur, Kunst un Kultur” there was the supplement “Bibliotek, Lezer un Bibliotekar” (eng. A Library, a Reader and a Librarian), edited by H. Kruk, with different articles concerning libraries, reading, and modern literature. An individual section describing the activities of Bibliotekn-Tsenter bay der “Kultur-Lige” was published within “Literarische Bleter”⁴².

The same survey of the year 1927 also revealed that 18 out of 107 Jewish libraries (taking part in the survey) had paid employees⁴³. The librarians were employed full-time only in larger and more significant institutions, such as the Grosser Library in Warsaw, the Strashun Library in Vilnius, or the Jewish Religious Community Library in Lviv. In the majority of the

³⁷ *Dos yidishe bukh: muster katalog far folksbibliotekn: hantbukh far bibliotekarn un lezer*, ed. by S. Abramsohn, Varshe 1929.

³⁸ *Książka polska w bibliotece żydowskiej: katalog wzorowy*, Warszawa 1929.

³⁹ *Bukh un lezer*, ed. S. Dubnov-Erlich, Kh.S. Kazdan, Varshe 1930.

⁴⁰ *Heft far notitsn iber geleyente bikher: tsuhilf dem leyener un zelbstbilder*, ed. H. Kruk, Varshe 1932.

⁴¹ *Rekomendir reshimes: fun lektur oyf di temes: 1. prof. fareynen; 2. antisemitism*, ed. H. Kruk, Varshe [1938?].

⁴² See e.g. *Bibliotekn-Tsenter bay der “Kultur-Lige”*, “Literarische Bleter” 1924, no 20, p. 7; *Bibliotekn-Tsentr bay der “Kultur-Lige”*, “Literarische Bleter” 1924, no 21, p. 7; *Bibliotekn-Tsenter bay der “Kultur-Lige”*, “Literarische Bleter” 1924, no 30, p. 7.

⁴³ H. Kruk, *Żydowskie bibliotekarstwo w Polsce (szkie do charakterystyki)*, “Przegląd Biblioteczny” 1934, no 1, p. 4.

libraries, all the work was done by the volunteers. They recruited from different circles. Quite often, they were either the members of managing organisations, or simply young people with time and enthusiasm to spare. Their duties included cataloguing and shelving books, selecting titles for purchase, helping readers with choosing appropriate readings, as well as lending collection items. Since many of them didn't have professional background in running libraries, the standard of the services depended solely on the volunteers' knowledge and skills. Opening times were also constrained and depended on their availability. Usually, the libraries were open only on selected weekdays, for a few hours, mostly on Friday afternoons, when people were seeking entertainment before the approaching Sabbath.

Herman Kruk (1897-1944), mentioned above as an author and editor, was a leading figure at Bibliotekn-Tsenter bay der "Kultur-Lige" and its long-time manager. His legacy included many articles written mostly in Yiddish⁴⁴, although occasionally he published also in Polish periodicals⁴⁵. In the years 1930-1939, he was the director of the Grosser Library in Warsaw, which under his management became the largest Jewish library in the interwar period for the working-class. Although in the literature he is mostly known from his library activity during wartime (in the years 1940-1942 he was the director of the Vilnius ghetto library), he was one of the central figure in the development of the Jewish librarianship in interwar Poland⁴⁶.

Conclusions

Despite financial difficulties and opposition of the Orthodox circles, Jewish public libraries in the interwar period experienced their greatest growth in the history of Polish Jews. Complementing the large and significant

⁴⁴ See e.g. H. Kruk, *A vinkl fun yidishn bukh: Grosser-Bibliotek, Varshe*, "Vokhnshrift far Literatur, Kunst un Kultur" 1931, no 2 (13), p. 8; idem, *Vegn bibliotek-tekhnik*, "Vokhnshrift far Literatur, Kunst un Kultur" 1933, no 45 (145), p. 6; idem, *Bibliotek, lezer un bibliotekar*, "Vokhnshrift far Literatur, Kunst un Kultur" 1933, no 48 (148), p. 6.

⁴⁵ See e.g. H. Kruk, *Żydowskie bibliotekarstwo w Polsce: (szkic do charakterystyki)*, "Przegląd Biblioteczny" 1934, no 1, pp. 1-9; idem, *Żydowskie biblioteki w Polsce*, "Bibliotekarz" 1934-35, vol. 6, no 6-8, pp. 82-83; idem, *Akcja rozbudowy biblioteki im. Bronisława Grossera*, "Bibliotekarz" 1935-36, vol. 7, no 4-6, pp. 78-79; idem, *Metody pracy biblioteki im. Bronisława Grossera w Warszawie*, "Bibliotekarz" 1937-38, vol. 9, no 3-4, pp. 54-61.

⁴⁶ See e.g.: *Hermann Kruk: Bibliothekar und Chronist im Ghetto Wilna*, ed. by M. Kühn-Ludewig, Hannover [1988]; D. Shavit, *Hunger for the printed word: books and libraries in the Jewish ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe*, London 1997; Z. Gruszka, *Herman Kruk (1897-1944) jako organizator i dyrektor biblioteki getta wileńskiego. Szkic do obrazu bibliotekarstwa żydowskiego w Polsce*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Librorum" 2010, no 16, pp. 171-182; D. E. Fishman, *The book smugglers: partisans, poets, and the race to save Jewish treasures from the Nazis*, Lebanon, NH [2017].

research institutions, like the Main Judaic Library in Warsaw and the YIVO Library in Vilnius, public reading rooms and libraries (whose collections amounted to several dozen or several hundred volumes) were in almost every town inhabited by Jews. The establishment of these institutions was a combined effort of different circles, mainly progressive ones, supported by the enthusiastic young generation, for which religious literature was not enough. Large commitment of political, social, cultural and educational associations and organizations in developing these institutions is evident, as is the involvement of women, who up to that time were not present in strictly religious libraries. Multilingualism in these book collections is also quite remarkable, as well as genre diversification; besides fiction, there were sections of scholarly books, journals, and newspapers, which proved that these institutions served not only for entertainment but also for self-education and the broadening of horizons. If we add to this a wide range of cultural activities organized by the members of the libraries, these institutions could be seen as a hub of social and cultural life for local Jewish communities.

Translated by Małgorzata Kisilowska

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