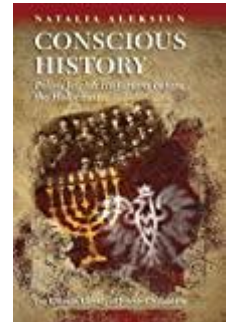


Natalia Aleksium. *Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust.* London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021. xii + 329 pp. \$65.45, cloth, ISBN 978-1-906764-89-0.



Reviewed by Joanna Sliwa (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference))

Published on H-Poland (March, 2022)

Commissioned by Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

Historian Natalia Aleksium weaves a powerful narrative about public intellectuals, historical scholarship, and Polish-Jewish relations in her book, *Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust*. In this collective biography of members of a generation who were both educated in and professionally active in interwar Poland, Aleksium places Polish Jewish historians at the front and center of her study. For them, she explains, history served as a tool to affirm Jews' place in Poland's history, shape Jewish identity, address antisemitism, and correct distortions about Jews. This richly researched and engrossing story probes the efforts of Polish Jewish professional and public historians to raise the consciousness about the place of Jews in Polish history. This also is a compelling account about Poland's emergence from over a century under partitions and about a search for a tapestry of identities that would define the nascent state. More broadly, this book serves as a remarkable commentary on the role of interpreting and popularizing a people's and a

country's past and on the significance of the historian's craft.

In five chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, *Conscious History* explores how Jewish history became a form of political engagement in interwar Poland and a source of Jewish-Jewish dialogue. The book traces the evolution of the Polish Jewish historiographical school and pays particular attention to the turning point of Poland's regaining of independence in 1918. On the one hand, Poland's new status elicited debates about belonging to the nation, the direction toward which the country should be steered, and the future of minorities. On the other hand, the country's independence propelled Jewish historians to educate non-Jews and Jews in Poland about Jews' rootedness in Polish lands and about their contributions to Polish history and society. Aleksium follows the individuals involved in the project and discusses the ways they used to reach a range of audiences through scholarship, and, most importantly, through public-facing endeavors.

Conscious History can be read as an engagement with how Jews imagined the Second Polish Republic and with how they envisioned a legacy for future generations. To do that, a number of Polish Jewish historians mobilized to ensure proper training of scholars in Jewish history and to ensconce Jewish historians into the historians' guild. A focus on researching and publishing about local history would pave the way, the scholars believed, to building consciousness within the Jewish communities of Poland, strengthening Jewish identity, leading discussions about Polish Jewish distinctiveness, and garnering financial support from among Jews. Legitimizing Jewish history involved creating extensive networks: from using rabbis who could speak to their congregants to engaging teachers in Jewish schools, and from creating journals to publish Jewish topics and institutes and programs to train public intellectuals and academics, to holding conferences to exchange ideas, establishing archives to facilitate research, and displaying Jews' achievements in Polish lands in museums. According to the historians' vision, Jewish history would offer a model for the present and future of Polish Jews and ground their rights to coexistence in Poland. Aleksion explains the various modes of channeling history, illuminating the extent of the vision for and reach of historical information.

Majer Bałaban, Marcelli Handelsman, Filip Friedman, Raphael Mahler, Bela Mandelsberg, Emanuel Ringelblum, Ignacy Schiper, Mojżesz Schorr, and Dawid Wurm are among the cast of characters in this multifaceted book. This is largely a men-centered narrative determined by sources and status. Aleksion follows the historians' personal and professional trajectories, highlighting the role of place and geography in forming their professional paths. Aleksion explains how Galicia, the former eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with its Polonized environment, influenced the education of many Jewish historians, their outlook, and future activities. Once Poland had regained independence, the cen-

ter of political and scholarly gravity moved to Warsaw, which further affected the ideas and work of the Jewish historians.

The Jews' agency and the amount of initiative Jews took to shape public awareness about Jewish history and its relation to Polish history shine through in this book. Jewish historians did so against the tides of antisemitism, quotas for Jewish students at Polish universities, ghetto benches, lack of positions and opportunities, and violence against Jewish students on university campuses. The Polish Jewish historians saw Jewish history as imbued with positive references to counter the increased hostility toward Jews and to demonstrate how intertwined Jews and non-Jews in Poland had been historically. In engaging so intensely in championing Polish Jewish history, the historians—as Aleksion so compellingly demonstrates in the book—were also charting a framework for understanding the exceptional character of Polish Jews in a transnational perspective.

If Jewish history served a larger goal for Polish Jews, it also was eyed for the benefits it could bring the Polish state. Aleksion found that the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs deliberated supporting the creation of a chair in Polish Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The plan, however, failed to gain traction from the university administration. The idea, Aleksion writes, fit into the acknowledgment that Jewish history was part of a larger project of Polish culture. While that may have been the case, this notion also provokes questions about the use of Jewish history by the Polish state as a propaganda tool to divert attention from antisemitism in Poland, especially as Poland pursued its grand project of Jews' emigration.

Conscious History evokes the excitement, tribulations, challenges, setbacks, and attainments that accompanied the efforts of Jewish historians to make Jewish history relevant to Jews and to the larger Polish society. This is a story about the hopes and impediments of asserting a minority

group's rights in interwar Poland. Although the Holocaust obviously looms large for the reader, Aleksion has ensured that the historians' activities remain in the realm of the times in which the scholars lived. Aleksion acknowledges the void caused by the Holocaust. Her entryway into the topic led through a process of rediscovering Jewish historians through their biographies and their engagement in Polish Jewish history. By zooming in on the past, Aleksion has revealed the continuity of the various threads pursued and foundations established by Polish Jewish historians before World War II, this time on the international arena. *Conscious History* is an innovative and exemplary contribution to scholarship about Polish Jews and interwar Poland that deepens our understanding of many of the questions that continue to animate historians today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Joanna Sliwa. Review of Aleksion, Natalia, *Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. March, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57118>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.