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Kenneth B. Moss's latest work offers readers a sobering and detailed account of the political choices available to Jews in interwar Poland. His work is a substantial contribution to interwar Polish Jewish history, a significant argument in the ongoing conversation about conditions for Jews in prewar Poland. Moss identifies 1926 to 1935, the period after Józef Piłsudski's coup and before Piłsudski's death, as the time when Jewish activists and young Jews recognized that they, both as individuals and as a community, had very few real options for better lives in Poland. Rather than reviewing the comparative strengths and weaknesses of Zionism, Bundism, socialism, or religious orthodoxy as political responses, Moss argues convincingly that Polish Jews were simply disillusioned.

Moss makes use of the autobiographies of Jewish youth housed at YIVO and the writings of Jewish political leaders, academics, writers, and activists in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. His scholarship is prodigious. Moss focuses squarely on how Jews described their lives in Poland and how they felt about the future. Among the better-known leaders whose work he addresses are the sociologist Max Weinreich and the general Zionist leader Yitzhak Grinboym. But the greatest contribution Moss makes is his reclamation of the work of lesser-known writers and community leaders. By highlighting and translating the views of such writers as the Yiddishist Mikhl Astour, the sociologist Yankev Lestschinsky, and the journalist Rachel (Rokhl) Faygenberg, Moss broadens the dialogue that scholars of the field have engaged in for decades. In addition, his use of Yiddish literary sources, such as the novels of Mikhoel Burshin and the work of Yankev Glatshetyn, showcases a talent for analysis and a willingness to consider evidence of all kinds. Moss's use of the YIVO autobiographies allows him to include the voices of those Jews who would be the future of the community, who had not yet achieved any position of
leadership. The autobiographies also permit a comparison of the views of Weinreich with the youth Weinreich studied. His use of the autobiography of Binyomen R. (Binyomen Rotberg), alongside a later text also written by Binyomen R. in response to Weinreich’s work on youth, yields a rich portrayal of the disillusionment felt by Polish Jews at this time.

Moss is not incorrect in his reading of the sources examined here. He writes, “One thing this book helps demonstrate is that already in the Piłsudski years, plenty of Jewish participant-observers coming from a wide variety of perspectives discerned powerful currents carrying Polish political society toward extrusionary nationalism” (pp. 312-13). Few scholars would disagree. The living conditions of Jews in Poland in the late 1920s and early 1930s were indeed quite poor, due to both persistent antisemitism and economic collapse.

These conditions led Binyomen R. to conclude that “we stand in a fascist era” (p. 219). Such a conclusion among many Jews necessitated an emphasis on practical solutions rather than a faith in socialist revolution. Moss makes that clear by stressing the increased desire for certificates permitting immigration to British Mandate Palestine. He draws our attention to more macro analysis as well, as in his critique of the writings of Lestschinsky, Grinboym, and Isaac (Yitshok) Giterman, the Joint Distribution Committee officer. Moss shows how these leaders began to conclude that officials of the Sanacja government, in which Jews had placed such high hopes after 1926, may simply have been reflecting the antisemitic views of a significant part of the majority population, thereby increasing Jews’ disillusion with possible political solutions.

Moss does not, however, offer a complete picture of the community. While he employs Polish-language Jewish sources, he does not adequately grapple with Polonized Jews as a part of the community under discussion. Similarly, Jewish women deserve more attention here. The antisemitism and economic challenges Moss describes certainly applied to women as well, but the reader is left thinking that the perspective of an acculturated, Polish-speaking woman might differ markedly from the views of the others included here. Moss’s cultural history of political views offers a reading of the community that differs from social histories more typically focused on the number of Jewish students in Polish schools or the growth of political parties and mutual aid associations. Specialists in the field are likely to find his work of greatest value, but An Unchosen People will also encourage others to engage further in conversations about the political engagement of Jews and Poles in the 1930s.
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