

Zuzanna Kołodziejska, “*Izraelita*” 1866–1915. Znaczenie kulturowe i literackie czasopisma (Studia polsko-żydowskie), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2014, pp. 352; ISBN 978-83-233-3829-1

Zuzanna Kołodziejska’s study of *Izraelita* magazine appears in the book series “Studia polsko-żydowskie” (“Polish-Jewish Studies”), which was opened by an inspiring work by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie* (“Polish-Jewish Borderlands”). When trying to envision the future research on Polish-Jewish literature, Prokop-Janiec recognized that it was necessary to go beyond its “horizon” in terms of sources, conceptualizations and descriptions. In order to do this, we must broaden the base of sources (i.e. texts), examine a greater variety of literary genres (not limiting ourselves to high literature) and include more distant history (i.e. the pre-1918 era).¹ The last suggestion involves study of the press, since the first texts of Polish-Jewish literature appeared in newspapers published in Polish. Unfortunately, to date the Polish-Jewish press of the second half of the 19th century has not been systematically researched. In particular, there has been no monograph devoted to the most important title, Warsaw’s *Izraelita*. Kołodziejska’s work, by providing an analysis of the newspaper (its history, journalism, ideology and milieu), responds to this need. For this reason, if not for any other, it deserves attention.

The study is divided into three parts: “Overall description,” “Journalism,” and “Literature.” The construction of individual chapters and the cause-effect relations formulated there are beyond reproach. Once the ideological background of *Izraelita* and the community surrounding it is described, it is easier to read about and understand the literature it produced. The first and second part can easily be read separately: they provide a detailed picture of modern Jewish culture, evolution of Jewish identity and the rise and fall of the ideology of integration and the central role of *Izraelita*. The author considers her study to be part of research on borderlands (symbolic and cultural, not territorial), which, as she suggests, would not be complete and reliable without the study of the press that played a key role in the Polish-Jewish culture. The press of the “borderlands,” due to its links to both the Polish and the Jewish side, built a bridge of communication between them, a kind of “third space.” Unfortunately, the author does not fully explain this metaphor which is borrowed from postcolonial criticism.² *Izraelita* first came out in 1866, an heir to the first, ephemeral Polish-language Jewish newspapers – *Dostrzegacz Nadwiślański* (“Vistulan Observer”) and *Jutrzenka* (“The Dawn”). The weekly was founded by a community of integrationists, who were a dominant faction of the group of “modernizers” of the mid-19th century. For this generation, the most important experience was the period of the so-called “Polish-Jewish unity” (1861-1863). The newspaper was therefore

¹ E. Prokop-Janiec, *Literatura polsko-żydowska: nowe perspektywy badawcze*, in: *eadem, Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie. Topografie i teksty*, Kraków 2013, pp. 287-302.

² For further details on “third space,” see e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 35-37.

a *signum temporis* – the first “address” of the Poles of the Mosaic faith. On the other hand, it aimed at reaching the masses, shaking them out of orthodoxy and turning Jews into citizens. The weekly advocated secular education and Polonization, which were supposed to turn Jews into productive citizens and Polish patriots. This was done, as the author explains, by a positivist “work at the grass roots.” Besides that, the newspaper fought against superstition and prejudice by aiming at non-Jewish readers as well – at least theoretically. Closing the gap between the two groups was limited to language, lifestyle and appearance, and did not include religion. Here we must stress that Kołodziejska does not use the term “assimilation” the way other scholars did – she finds it inadequate and controversial. Similarly to Jagodzińska, she consistently use the terms “acculturation” and “integration,” as she considers them to be more useful and appropriate in the particular case of *Izraelita*.³

In the first part of her book, Kołodziejska corrects some popular opinions and historical facts (e.g. *Izraelita* was in fact published between 1866 and 1915) and provides a basic description of the newspaper: its origins, program, editorial team and collaborators, visual side, circulation and finances. According to her, if we take into account the local and wider contexts, *Izraelita* should be placed right alongside *Jutrzenka* on the one hand, and the Jewish-European press on the other. By looking at the long timescale and including all stages of its history, Kołodziejska’s work provides a good account of the newspaper’s dynamics and all the interesting and relevant processes it involved. This approach leads to a large number of conclusions. What needs to be mentioned, however, is the occasional lack of consistency. For instance, the author quotes Marcin Wodziński’s opinion that “the newspaper, despite its universalist aspirations, was in fact very much set in a particular milieu and did not reach outside a specific class of Warsaw’s acculturated Jewish intelligentsia” (p. 102). Later on, she concludes that it was also read outside of Congress Poland, “which marks a partial success of S. Peltyn (chief editor), who was interested in reaching all Polish Jews, not only Jews from Warsaw” (p. 107).

From integration to separation

The second part of the book (“Journalism”) opens with an analysis of the concept of progress and its evolution. The program of modernization included secular education, abandoning the strict attachment to tradition and getting rid of almost all signs of separation: in language, lifestyle and appearance. According to Kołodziejska, this program evolved in no particular direction and had no clear shape – and that made it weak. Many customs were rejected not out of a need for reform, but rather out of the alienation and hostility they produced. The program of progress and integration had changed over time. At first, it focused almost exclusively on “amending” the Jewish side (p. 113). The optimism and enthusiasm of the early days made *Izraelita* exaggerate the positive reaction of the Polish part of society and cover up the hostility. After the 1881-1883 period (the Warsaw pogrom and the establishment of the anti-Semitic *Rola*), the euphoria slowly started to disappear. The resistance of Jews, a major problem until then, became secondary, and the

³ A. Jagodzińska, *Akulturacyja Żydów Warszawy w drugiej połowie XIX wieku*, Wrocław 2008, pp. 10-11.

newspaper took on a defensive rather than offensive stance (p. 116). Particularly interesting are the corrections of the program at the turn of the century – all are adeptly captured by Kołodziejska. The approach to tradition changed most dramatically, as was marked by the approach to language (Yiddish, which had been criticized and ridiculed, now became a useful language of persuasion) and traditional culture (some of its elements were now put on display and there was a growing interest in Jewish folklore) (p. 179). The return to tradition was to some extent a defensive move and a symptom of reforms reaching their limits.

Besides tradition, journalists mainly focused on anti-Semitism and Zionism. The former was particularly damaging to integrationists. While tracking the evolution of Journalism over the whole long period, Kołodziejska identifies various defensive strategies of the integrationist group – from mild persuasion, reasonable arguments, and self-criticism to a change of tone and resignation – and shows the painful process of becoming aware of the program's failure. The four-decades-long fight against anti-Semitism proved that the integrationists found themselves in a situation in which they were not given a choice – they could not decide which group they belonged to, because someone decided for them. The solutions they had proposed, like Polish-Jewish culture or the patchwork identity of a Pole of the Mosaic faith, were not possible (p. 136).

The second barrier that reinforced separation was Zionism. In a separate chapter, Kołodziejska tracks *Izraelita's* approach to new ideology, noticing that it turned more radical after Nahum Sokołów had left the editorial team in 1904. The popularity of Zionism weakened the project of integration and widened the gap, despite all the attempts that were made to close it. The integrationists, who had never defined Jews as a nation, were helpless (p. 161). They lost on all fronts: against Zionism, orthodoxy and anti-Semitism.

Polish-Jewish integrationist literature

The topics raised by the newspaper (including education and emancipation of women) were also reflected in the literature discussed in Chapter 3. Against this backdrop, the origins of Polish-Jewish literature and its development become clear and easy to understand. This chapter can be read as an answer to the call for broader research on Polish-Jewish literature. Unlike other similar newspapers (*The Jewish Chronicle*, for example), *Izraelita* published a great deal of literature and played a key role in its development. Kołodziejska reconstructs the first debates on the definition and scope of literature, noticing that, despite varying opinions (on the issue of the author's descent, for instance), the main premise did not change – “Polish-Jewish Literature was understood as Polish-language literature written by Jews, for Jews and about Jews” (p. 236). The author compares it to other European-Jewish literatures, especially German- and Russian-Jewish. In this context, Polish-Jewish literature looks like an artificial transplant devoid of originality, based on Western models, but not without certain local elements (a clear influence of positivism). Its Haskalah origins determined the range of topics (emancipation, assimilation and its limits, preservation of Jewish identity) and its bias. Its main ambition, as Kołodziejska points out, was to show the point and meaning of integration on the one hand, and to present Jewish life to Polish readers on the other. It was a way to build a bridge between the two groups (p. 224).

Kołodziejska organizes the literature published in *Izraelita* into a number of categories. The first large group of texts comprises translations of European-Jewish novels, mainly love stories and historical fiction dealing with very modern issues (history was particularly important to German-Jewish writers). Against this backdrop, Polish-Jewish literature was surprisingly uninterested in historical themes (p. 251). The most interesting genre is the “reform” romance, a quite original form often used by Polish-Jewish writers. What made it different from traditional romance were the elements of Haskalah ideology and somewhat agitational character (p. 253). Again, Kołodziejska compares it to European-Jewish literature and tracks the similarities. Usually the plot revolved around the lives of young Jewish women who want to study and become independent from men. The most extolled value is a successful combination of tradition and modern education. Kołodziejska notices that what is common for Polish-Jewish and English-Jewish literature (as opposed to German- and Russian-Jewish) is the high number of female writers (p. 254). She manages to capture the evolution of the genre, which is parallel to the tone of journalism and the state of the reformist community. This evolution is quite clear: in the 1870s, novels encourage women to undertake secular education and learn Polish, in the 1880s and ’90s there was less and less enthusiasm and the tone changed (p. 259). Works published in the following years can be read as creative attempts to answer the failure of integration. Hostility and rejection (or, simply put, anti-Semitism) makes characters, alienated individuals, redefine themselves and their relationship to tradition they had rejected. Kołodziejska concludes that Jewish “reform” romance novels – most of which had never been officially published and had almost no artistic value – had all the traits of positivist moralist literature (p. 261).

Among other genres often published by *Izraelita* was a “scene,” a sketch or novella that, again, revealed the links between Polish-Jewish literature and positivism. A “scene” was a short story examining “private” culture from a first-person perspective. After Prokop-Janiec, the author calls this an auto-ethnographic novel.

When Kołodziejska analyzes the disillusionment with the program of integration she tracks the way in which literary texts reflected the ideological shifts of *Izraelita* and the community surrounding it. What changed was the type of character (from a man of progress to a man who makes peace with tradition), themes and number of novels.

Kołodziejska’s analysis – which also includes short “digests” published in the newspaper and less frequent pieces of drama and poetry – shows a full picture of *Izraelita*’s literary life or, in broader terms, a picture of “Polish-Jewish integrationist literature” that virtually ceased to exist after *Izraelita* was closed.

According to Kołodziejska, the eventual failure of the integrationist program was not only a result of anti-Semitism and the lack of support of Polish intelligentsia, but also a consequence of its elitism and anachronism. Unlike Zionists, Bundists and communists, integrationists were unable to attract mass readership (for they – among other things – rejected Yiddish as a means of communication). The disappearance of *Izraelita* was a symbolic end of a certain formation and the interwar period was to become its bitter epilogue. Kołodziejska’s book is a skillful reconstruction of its history. The conclusions she draws are important for studies on Polish-Jewish literature, as well as the history of Polish integrationist circles.

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