



In-Between. Wrocław's Jewish Community and Claims of Modernity

Review: Agata Rybińska, *Granice integracji. Religijność Żydów wrocławskich w drugiej połowie XIX wieku (1854–1890)* (“The Limits of Integration. Religiousness of the Breslau Jews in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century (1854–1890)”), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2017, 264 pp.

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The Limits of Integration (Polish: *Granice integracji*)¹ by Agata Rybińska is another publication (volume 11) in the “Bibliotheca Judaica” series, which in the past few years has encompassed such major works as *Pomiędzy. Akulturacja Żydów Warszawy w drugiej połowie XIX wieku* [In Between. The Acculturation of the Warsaw Jews in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century] by Agnieszka Jagodzińska, a collection entitled *W poszukiwaniu religii doskonałej. Konwersja a Żydzi* [In Search of the Perfect Religion. Jews and Conversion] edited by the same scholar, and only recently – *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* [The Children of Modernism. Awareness, Culture and Political Socialisation of Jewish Youth in the Second Polish Republic] by Kamil Kijek. Rybińska, who is an assistant professor in the Department of Jewish Culture and History at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, was the first to contribute to the series with a book devoted entirely to the Jews of Breslau (today's Wrocław). “Bibliotheca Judaica” has not yet failed to appeal to the refined taste of its readership, offering insightful texts which – on the theoretical level as well – have proved inspiration to other scholars: does Rybińska's book measure up to expectations?

¹ Since the official English version of the book has not yet been published, the wording of the English title has been suggested by the translator of the present article; the same holds for the other titles and quotations appearing in the text.

The Limits of Integration is divided into three chapters (*Educational Premises of the Enlightenment: Between daat and Bildung, i.e., Between the Knowledge of Religion and the Necessity of Modern Education; The Cult as Seen Through the Texts of Prayers; and Facing Death* respectively), supplemented with an extensive appendix and bibliography. Written under the supervision of Marcin Wodziński, the work focuses on the religiousness of the Breslau Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the position of rabbi at the head of the Liberal fraction, hitherto occupied by the well-known religious reformer Abraham Geiger, was assumed by Manuel Joël. It was during Joël's rabbinate (a time of dissent within the Jewish community in Breslau) – lasting nearly half a century and still quite under-researched – that many of the turning points described in the study occurred. Nevertheless, it should be noted at this point that although the author describes religious life during Joël's rabbinate, she does not provide an exhaustive discussion concerning his work as a leader (an omission she refers to explicitly, but justifies rather vaguely).

The book is based on the writings of Breslau rabbis – their speeches, letters, textbooks, articles, and reports – and most of all, on prayer books. The analysis also encompasses records of the social life of the community, such as statutes, programs, yearbooks or the Jewish press – mostly newspapers devoted to religious studies and theology (including, for instance “*Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*,” and “*Jahresbericht des Jüdisch-Theologischen Seminars ‘Fraenckelscher Stiftung*,”” supplemented by way of contrast with the conservative “*Der Israelit*” published in Mainz), but also tombstone inscriptions from a cemetery at Ślężna street. All these constitute an interesting, extensive and varied selection of sources.

In the first chapter, the researcher analyses the sphere of education, and more precisely, its Haskalah model, which was based on two German concepts: *Bildung* – education, and *Wissenschaft* – science. They were adapted to the study of Judaism, which gave rise to the famous ideology and scientific movement called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (hereinafter WDJ). The movement, as one may recall, developed in Central and Eastern Europe thanks to members of the second Haskalah generation, who were active in Berlin. Rybińska focuses on exposing the problems of education, which was influenced at that time by the spirit of Enlightenment and the concept of *Bildung* – the latter having been adopted at the end of the eighteenth century by the father of Jewish Haskalah, Moses Mendelssohn – yet her remarks are fairly general. She merely mentions that for German Jews, the nineteenth century was a time of “struggle for a compromise between a religious imperative of passing on to the children the knowledge of Torah, and a common duty of educating them in secular sciences, so that they could become productive citizens.” Later she elaborates on this, suggesting that the ideas of Haskalah required Jews to receive secular education and to remain loyal to their homeland, simultaneously preserving their Jewish roots and cultivating “religiousness which combined the wisdom of *chochma, daat, bina* with the ideals of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*” (37) – in short, a complex identity of being both a Jew and a German at the same time.

The author successively describes the schools and education governed by the spirit of Haskalah ideology, as well as literature for Jewish children and youth (a religion

textbook titled *Confirmationsreden* by Heinrich Miro, and *Biblische Gedichte* by Jacob Freund). Analysing the work of rabbis and teachers, she manages to perceive and distinguish essentially two tendencies. The first, which prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, was “philological” in nature and focused on the study of languages, especially Hebrew, together with the translation of Biblical and Talmudic texts; the second dominated in the latter half of the (nineteenth) century, when emphasis was placed on knowledge of the Bible in the national language. Rybińska also points out (though only in passing) that increasing secularization was followed inevitably by neglect in terms of religious upbringing. And finally, she devotes a separate section to the system of educating girls – a patriarchal, traditional scheme, governed by the same rules within each denomination of Judaism.

The philosophy of the Jewish community in Breslau noted by the author in the analysed sources is described as “*Bildung for daat*” – it therefore implies modern education being subordinate to piety and loyalty towards God. Such a complex ideal was, in Rybińska’s view, most successfully achieved by the establishment and work of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS): an institution of higher education which was central to the WDJ movement, and which would later become an academy acclaimed both in Europe and America. The author devotes a major part of the chapter to this breeding ground for teachers and rabbis, which by the year 1939 had educated 722 graduates (in total), ready to assume the position of a rabbi or religion teacher. Although the program of the Seminary followed the Haskalah ideas and its aim was, in the words of its first president Zacharias Frankel, to combine religion and science into a vital unity, many participants as well as members of staff were still Orthodox.

In the book, there is also a small section devoted to the newspapers of the Seminary, namely to the “Jahresbericht des Jüdisch-Theologischen Seminars *Fraenckelscher Stiftung*” and “*Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*” (MGWJ), a paper which published scientific articles submitted by people associated with the Breslau community. On the pages of the MGWJ, Rybińska perceives the tension arising from the clash between tradition and modernity, as well as between the highly regarded Sephardic ideas and the despised Ashkenazi culture of the *Ostjuden*; but she does not analyse these issues any further (regrettably, the last is almost entirely omitted).

And lastly, Rybińska writes about Joël and his sermons, defining him as a more conservative rabbi than Geiger (accused by his fierce opponents of an alleged attempt to uproot tradition, since he insisted on delivering sermons in German, shortening the time of religious gatherings and eradicating certain customs), but – in the light of his (Joël’s) liturgical and journalistic texts – clearly open to the ideas of the Enlightenment and full of appreciation for a universal culture. The author analyses his speeches in an attempt to show the ideas they were conveying, such as the methods of shaping the identity of Jews, together with their religious practice. Her insightful analysis leads to the conclusion that the rabbi, in the same way as Frankel or Graetz, held “a vision of the double identity of German Jews and accordingly, of the double nature of their duties: as Israelites and as citizens of the German State” (81). His work was also driven by a search for agreement with Orthodoxy, a call for respect towards

tradition, understood as Jewish cultural legacy. Following Rybińska's interpretation of municipal documents and the statements of Joël himself, one might say that "the municipality of Breslau was indeed an *Einheitsgemeinde*, in which the members of both fractions, despite the differences between them, could act together and create a unity" (82), which, as the author rightly observes, can be deemed unprecedented.

The second chapter constitutes perhaps the most interesting and substantively enriching part of the work. It is devoted to prayer books used in nineteenth century Breslau by the Liberal fraction. These are the *siddurs* of Abraham Geiger and Manuel Joël, together with the volumes compiled for women, such as *Beit Jaakow* by Heinrich Miro or *Hanna* by Jacob Freund. A more detailed description of the changes involved in Joël's rabbinate is preceded by an (overly) general account of how the cult was transforming in the German synagogues. The reader is taken back to the times of Geiger's rabbinate (1840–1863), when, while still in Wiesbaden, he was already advocating for reform, and after he assumed the position in Breslau he became the first rabbi of the Liberal fraction as well as a proponent of modification in liturgy. However, Rybińska does not present his work against a wider background, failing to trace the factors which influenced him. What would also be worth at least a brief remark was the period preceding Geiger's rabbinate, together with the location of Breslau on the larger map of reforms which Judaism was undergoing back then (I will return to this issue in subsequent paragraphs). Unfortunately, all this is missing from the book by the Polish scholar.

What appears interesting, however, is an insight into two volumes of Joël's prayer book, the publication of which coincided with the opening of the New Synagogue. The juxtaposition of various prayer texts allows Rybińska to observe such phenomena as the evolution of religious language, the changes in public manifestations of the cult, and more broadly, the challenges and endeavours of the entire community. In Joël's texts we encounter, for instance, the application (although not very frequent) of words borrowed from religious terminology which belonged to Christianity, and at the same time examples of borrowings from the prayer books of more conservative rabbis, which, in Rybińska's view, shows "hesitation between the pursuit of reform and a propensity for an Orthodox Judaism" (96). The texts of prayers together with the linguistic worldview which they contained testify to an attempt at reconciling both fractions (the conservative and the liberal one), instead of fuelling the argument and widening the gap which separated them. Careful analysis allows the scholar to show how in the German version of the book, Joël avoided certain phrases or entire texts, which could potentially characterise the community as exclusivist. The rabbi abandons certain expressions which are standard in Judaism which might present it as a national religion; such a strategy was typical for the universalist tendencies of German Judaism at that time. Even if there are certain biblical fragments pointing to the exceptionality of Israel, they are merely supplementary, and the strength of their message becomes – one might say – neutralised by references to the contemporary homeland (for example, in Joël's siddur we find a prayer for the imperial couple). Controversies usually arose with regard to passages referring to Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the temple and the sacrificial cult. Such fragments are present in the Hebrew,

but occasionally absent from the German text. An example could be passages relating to the figure of the Messiah, or the idea of the return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They are deleted in the German version, while in the Hebrew one they are printed in smaller font. The author explains such discrepancies precisely by referring to the notion of integration, the aim of which was to avoid the effect of estrangement, since the German texts were read not only by more liberal Jews, but also by Christians (102). The preservation of such fragments in the Hebrew version, as Rybińska says, met the expectations of the Orthodox members, reflecting their beliefs. The author interprets this phenomenon as evidence for the pursuit of integration within the community. In the German texts she spots the rabbi's clear tendency to avoid Hebrew terms and include German translations instead, which shows that "contemporary use of language consisted in applying those German terms by the Breslau Jews" (103). Finally, in Joël's prayer book, mainly as a result of its bilingualism, the author discovers a sign of acculturation, and simultaneously an attempt to preserve a sense of individuality (supposedly confirmed by maintaining Hebrew, and in the German version – the presence of Hebraisms). Yet here it is worth noting that occasionally Rybińska contradicts herself; for instance, on the one hand, she writes about allegedly Christian readers or about gestures made towards integration with the environment, but on the other, she says: "the strategies [...] employed in the German version [...] to expose certain similarities appear to be marginal, and largely unrecognizable to Christian citizens" (104).

What should not escape the reader's attention either is her analysis of prayer books for women, which – as Rybińska shows – apparently testify to the acculturation of German Jews in the dimension of language (the volumes written for women are far more rooted in the German language). The presented texts are *Beit Jaakow* (1835) and *Hanna* (1867), which were not edited by widely recognised rabbis, but by teachers from Jewish schools – Heinrich Miro and Jacob Freund. In comparison with those for men, they are shorter, which stems from the fact that the former were bilingual, as well as from the difference in the intensity of religious engagement between the two gender groups. The juxtaposition of both types of prayer books shows the progress of acculturation argued by the author. She manages to establish, for instance, that in Miro's volume there are twice as many Hebraisms as in Freund's. The borrowings in the former serve as evidence for certain religious practices which date back to the first half of the nineteenth century (e.g. *nida*, or *taszlich*), but which were already absent in Freund's book, published in 1867. The scholar also notices the gradual Christianisation of language – Miro's remarks about the "religious dogma" or the act of naming Maimonides as one of the "Church Fathers." As she mentions earlier, "quite often nineteenth century German teachers and rabbis expressed their reflections with a type of diction which belonged to the universal field of religious studies, by using words such as 'tenet,' 'cult,' 'cantor,' 'church year,' 'catechism,' 'confirmation' or 'confirmation'" (88). In Rybińska's view, the recurrent presence of certain terms and structures in the religious language may testify to partial acculturation, and to the levelling of differences in the linguistic, not the religious dimension. A similar practice would later be adopted by the author of *Hanna*. His prayer book, used by the Jewish women

of Breslau until the outbreak of World War II, would contain even less Hebraisms. In the case of a prayer for newborn boys, circumcision is not referred to as *brit mila*, but replaced with a German descriptive phrase. The author shows that some of the Hebrew terms are not used, and others are replaced with German equivalents (which more and more often have Christian connotations) or entirely omitted from the text, which, according to her, means not so much the abandonment of practice as linguistic acculturation: the implementation of new language habits with respect to Hebraisms (which again contradicts her earlier claims). Further evidence of removing specifically Jewish terminology could be, for example, use of the word *Sundenbekenntnis* by Miro and Freud – the confession of sins – instead of the Hebrew *widuj*. As previously stated, the author identifies the cause of such changes with the advancement of acculturation and mutual consolidation of both cultures, but also with their sharing common linguistic roots in the Bible as well as their “attempt not to underscore their own individuality.”

However, the study yields an interesting portrayal of women that emerges upon reading the texts of prayer books. Although the male authors work towards shaping a positive female image, their attempts do not translate into the social dimension, where, as Rybińska writes, “the roles of women were indisputably clear-cut and restricted by the norms which governed the community of middle-class German Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century” (129). In prayer books, women perform their traditional functions and are invariably confined within the space of the household and the synagogue, utterly dependent on the dictates of the family circle (129). Regardless of the fraction to which they belonged (the model of femininity did not differ from the patterns established by the old Yiddish *tchines*), men “could” – tentatively speaking – wish to preserve the traditional, patriarchal world order (130). As Rybińska accurately observes, it also remained in agreement with German pedagogical values. The contemporary religious texts – irrespective of the fraction or faith (the Christian models were largely similar) invariably performed the same function: “they allowed one to express and practice one’s religiousness, shaped and maintained both the religious and the national identity, and at the same time consolidated traditional, social roles prescribed for women” (131). In the Liberal prayer books, there are no references to work for the benefit of the country, to education, employment or any activities other than those within the household (except for Miro’s one passage which describes certain trading operations), which stands in sharp contrast to women’s actual contribution to charity work, as well as their vocational and educational activities. Both Miro and Freund neglect these issues, deliberately ignoring other existing ideals of femininity (such as the modern Jew or the new woman). Rybińska therefore concludes – slightly revealing her own standpoint – that “the authors managed to keep the spirit of innovation only on the level of language, since in the religious dimension, despite the ongoing reform, their prayer books perpetuated traditional ideals” (132).

The third and last part of *The Limits* provides a compelling analysis of tombstone inscriptions from the cemetery at Ślężna street, opened in 1856. Although not as pioneering as the study on prayer books, the research undoubtedly constitutes

an important element of the entire work, adding to its merit. The author perceives the cemetery as a cultural text, which helps her to describe the religiousness of the Breslau community together with the limits of its integration with the environment indicated in the title. She successively describes the form and symbolism of the tombstones, together with the language and formula of inscriptions from sections one to four. As in the case of prayer texts, epitaphs tend to be at least bilingual. German becomes increasingly commonly used on sepulchral inscriptions, replacing or supplementing Hebrew, which had been the dominant language of inscriptions for centuries before. This shows that the sacred language was becoming less and less often understood, while the national one was not only vernacular, but also carried an emotional value. Rybińska subsequently examines the names, surnames and titles, showing how the German designations of badges reflected the contemporary process of widening the scope of Jewish professional activity, which in turn entailed a partial decline in religious practice. The epitaphs rarely included traditional titles situating men within a social and religious hierarchy; instead, there were secular titles, which usually did not appear in the traditional epitaphs, since only work linked to the religious life of the community was considered valuable. Once again, therefore, in Rybińska's book, the space of the Jewish cemetery turns out to be an excellent addition to the rest of her sources, still inviting further research. Following other scholars, she emphasizes that the analysis of tombstones, and especially the evolving formula of inscriptions, allows you to grasp the phenomenon of acculturation – clearly external linguistic influences and similarities with the Christian environment. At the same time, suggesting a departure from Orthodoxy in the sphere of custom merely on the basis of less traditional inscriptions would be, according to the author, a far-fetched interpretation. Although, naturally, we cannot speak of any straightforward correlation here, it cannot be denied – in my opinion – that abandoning the traditional form of a tombstone or inscription formula, using an exclusively national language for epitaphs and/or including elements belonging clearly to Christian conventions could indicate less rigid Orthodoxy or lukewarm religiousness (such a conclusion may be drawn, for example, upon analyzing inscriptions discovered in the cemetery of the Jewish community in Cracow, which was, after all, far more conservative).

In her study of sepulchral texts, as in the case of her interpretation of other sources, the author fails to give the reader a broader view. The picture which emerges from an otherwise careful analysis of the tombstones in Breslau is not even cursorily compared with texts from other German cemeteries. We do not learn what the Breslau kingdom of *Thanatos* looked like when compared to other centres of German Judaism (or in lands further to the East). A comparative analysis would have allowed her to draw additional conclusions and to provide a more nuanced answer to the question lying at the heart of the entire study – how far could the limits of integration in fact be pushed back? A similar objection can be raised against the interpretation of the rest of the sources. The author does not actually situate Breslau on the map of German reform. Little do we learn about what actually determined these reforms, apart from a few very general references to external factors and Haskalah. The scholar does not seek the source of influences or inspirations (unlike, for instance, Alicja

Maślak-Maciejewska). She does not compare the opinions of the Breslau leaders with religious beliefs expressed in other communities. In conclusion, she merely writes: “The division into Orthodox and Liberal Jews in the middle of the nineteenth century does not correspond to their later classification, which was complex and unequivocal, due to the emergence of a different, strongly conservative movement, which shared certain features of both Orthodox and Liberal Judaism, and in a way consciously rejected such a dichotomy.” Among conservative thinkers, Zacharias Frankel and (in particular) Heinrich Graetz were influential figures. Of the latter, Lohard Rothschild wrote that “he had chosen a path which lay in between. And the Seminary together with the Breslau community followed in his footsteps” (191).

What the reader could also expect to find in Rybińska’s book is a juxtaposition of the Liberal and the Orthodox fraction in terms of their activity and literature. Although the author emphasises that there were quite a few texts proclaiming the agenda of the latter group, she does not unfortunately enrich her analysis with other common forms of expression (above all, the press), since she deems them – perhaps too hastily – as being of “little epistemic value” (93). From one of the footnotes (!) we find out merely that the press (e.g. “Der Israelit” published in Mainz) criticised “the reform, the content of prayer books, and the ceremony of confirmation, as well as Geiger and Joël’s words and behaviour” (93). Other minor flaws could also have been avoided in the study, such as the contradictions mentioned above or a narration which occasionally becomes vague (as if not sufficiently thought through). Moreover, the book would certainly benefit from more careful editing (for instance, correcting unfinished sentences, such as: „According to the Jewish tradition, the deceased, regardless of their merit, age, circumstances of death, family situation” [177]).

In conclusion though, despite the aforementioned remarks, the work definitely deserves attention, especially from persons who are interested in the reform of Judaism or study the subject professionally – and therefore Western readers too. Its undeniable strengths are: a wide variety of sources (such as prayer books and the cemetery), the incorporation of unknown German texts into the body of materials, as well as an effective and fruitful application of tools from the field of socio-cultural gender studies. Taking all this into account, *The Limits of Integration* – even if at times it leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction – may become a point of reference for future works devoted to Judaism and the religiousness of Jews in the nineteenth century.