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## ZBĄSZYŃ, 1933

In collective memory, the exiles who crossed the German-Polish border to the small town of Zbąszyń are usually associated with the year 1938, in October of which year some 18,000 Jews of Polish origin were expelled from Germany to Poland. Research and textbooks alike give special importance to this event.<sup>1</sup> A retrospective view sees this migration as an integral part of the succession of events, whose dramatic meaning is associated with Kristallnacht and the Second World War. In collective memory it is easier to connect the years 1938 and 1939 than to look for an earlier connection with the year 1933.

The archive of the B'nai B'rith District XIII of Poland, which is now in the State Archive in Krakow, shows that the 1938 story of Zbąszyń had its own pre-history in the year 1933. In the spring of that year, many Jews of Polish origin crossed (or were expelled) via the German-Polish border and arrived in Zbąszyń. These archival materials reveal information to us about this first expulsion, almost unknown in the research. There are, in addition, important questionnaires that could help to identify the anonymous Jewish refugees of April 1933

In this article I will concentrate exclusively on Zbąszyń, examining, firstly, how this small town suddenly came to be known as early as year 1933, and how its Jewish community obtained the necessary experience to deal with refugees and establish contact with large Jewish organizations: skills that, ironically, turned out to be extremely helpful in October 1938. Secondly, I will try to sketch the character of those first refugees, whose existence until now was virtually unknown.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I will examine the attitude of the Polish authorities in Zbąszyń to them. How might this attitude in the year 1933 be characterized?

The town of Zbąszyń (Ger. Bentschen) is situated in the area of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland), approximately 70 kilometers from the regional capital Poznań. First mentioned in written sources in 1231, it resulted from the Second Partition of Poland in

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<sup>1</sup> A list of all the research literature that studies and mentions the expulsion to Zbąszyń in 1938 could itself be the length of an article. I will mention, therefore, only several important examples: Gelband 1964: 35–45; Arad 1981: 121–124; Tomaszewski 1988: 289–315; Gutman 1990: 1726–1729; Margalioth 1990: 103–104; Tomaszewski 1998; Brenner 1996/1998: 220–224; Rozett/Spector 2000: 491–492.

<sup>2</sup> Yifat Weiss is one of the few scholars dealing with the background of Jews of Polish origin who fled from Germany back to Poland. In her book she provides a portrait of Jewish exiles of Polish origin. Weiss mentions the reports of the *Reichsstelle für das Auswanderungswesen* (Reich office for migration matters) about the background of the refugees. However, my article deals with materials belonging to the Polish side of the border, with those refugees who had already experienced the exile and only with those who arrived in Zbąszyń. However, in the interviews recorded by “Amiticia,” the refugees themselves told of their life in Germany and the circumstances of their leaving that country. Their personal narratives were not part of an official report and therefore seem more convincing than the German official reports: Weiss 2000: 140–142.

the year 1793 and became part of the Kingdom of Prussia. After the Napoleonic Wars, Zbąszyń was within the Grand Duchy of Posen and later the Province of Posen. In the year 1920, after the Greater Poland Uprisings, Zbąszyń was included in the territory of the Second Polish Republic and became one of its border towns. In 1931 its inhabitants numbered about 5,432, including 52 Jews.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of a few days in 1933, what had until then been a tiny unknown Jewish community came to be known through the whole of Europe. During the first few months of the year, the Jewish community of Zbąszyń had to mobilize its resources and deal with the new dramatic reality: a wave of Jewish refugees from Germany. The Jewish expulsion from Germany on 28 October 1938 served as a vivid reminder to the Jewish population of Zbąszyń of those first days of forced migration, in 1933. Then, for the first time, the inhabitants of the town had been witnesses to the beggarly state of the refugees – victims of the cruelty of the new regime in its first months.

The memories of the Jews who were expelled from Germany in October 1938 give the impression that the various Jewish organizations reacted rapidly to their plight and soon made available to them the necessary material help and organization. One may therefore presume that such a quick reaction and expertise as to what to do in Zbąszyń in 1938 were, at least to some degree, the result of experience gained during the smaller wave of expulsion in 1933, at which time Zbąszyń was changed from an unknown border town to one of the famous points of emigration and expulsion: a kind of a “prelude” to its transformation that became symbolic after 1938.

Almost immediately after Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of Germany on 27 January 1933, even before the burning of the Reichstag and the 9th German Reichstag election of 5 March, a part of the *Ostjuden* Jews were forced to return to Poland. As early as 10 February 1933, the Jewish community of Zbąszyń sent a letter to the renowned Jewish historian Prof. Moses Schorr in Warsaw, to the Board of the Jewish community in Warsaw and to the Jewish Deputies in the Sejm, urging the establishment of a fund for the Jewish refugees crossing the border into Poland from Germany.<sup>4</sup> When not a single one of these addressees reacted, the community of Zbąszyń dispatched a delegate, who attempted to establish personal contact with Mazur, the president of the Jewish community in Warsaw. Nevertheless, this contact likewise did not bear fruit. In the words of Mazur, the Warsaw community “did not currently have time for such matters, because of their involvement in affairs of greater importance.”<sup>5</sup>

In the course of February and the first two weeks of March, the Jewish community of Zbąszyń continued to be the destination of an “essential and constant flow of refugees, which constantly increases.”<sup>6</sup> It seems that during this period the community had to house the indigent newcomers and care for their needs from its own resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonas 1909; Gutman 1990: 1726; Olejniczak-Zaworonko 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Moses Schorr was a professor of oriental studies at Warsaw University, the first historian who systematically studied the history of Polish Jewry. He was one of the creators of the Institute for Judaic Studies, and, later, of the Judaic Library, and was a vice-president of the B’nai B’rith Order of the Polish District. In 1935 Schorr was chosen to be a member of the Senate of the Second Polish Republic.

<sup>5</sup> APKr, BB 235, 25.

<sup>6</sup> APKr, BB 235, 25.

Since the arrival of the refugees continued unabated and all funds were exhausted, on 21 March the Jews of Zbąszyń again appealed to Moses Schorr. This time they were more concrete in their pleas, asking for the organization of a committee for the refugees “returning through the border of Zbąszyń.”<sup>7</sup>

As vice-president of the B’nai B’rith Order in the Polish District, Schorr decided to contact in this matter the President of the Order, Leon Ader.<sup>8</sup> On 2 April he wrote concerning the matter of the Zbąszyń Jews:

I completely understand that this small community cannot drag on such a burden its own barges and that larger communities in Poland have to come with help... and assist the border community in the fulfillment of its heavy duty.<sup>9</sup>

Schorr proposed to provide a certain sum from the “Emergency Fund” to be distributed in Zbąszyń. The *Amiticia* lodge of Poznań was to assume responsibility for this distribution and for the care of the migrants.<sup>10</sup>

The central administration of the Order in Krakow reacted rapidly to his letter. Two days later the *Amiticia* lodge, the one closest to Zbąszyń, was asked to investigate the situation there. A representative had to find out certain facts so as to shed light on the whole situation in the small border town. Among other things, he was asked to estimate the size of the Jewish community in Zbąszyń, its head, whether it had a rabbi and, if so, his name. In addition the representative had to ascertain when the return of the Polish Jews had started, how many refugees had crossed the border, whether they had any possessions and how much the community of Zbąszyń had spent on the support of the refugees.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time the Grand Lodge sent letters to Poland’s three largest lodges, in Krakow, Warsaw and Lwow, asking them to create special foundations for the refugees.<sup>12</sup> A week later, on 13 April 1933, the Grand Lodge transferred 300 zloty to the bank account of the Poznań lodge. This sum was taken from the Emergence Fund of the Polish B’nai B’rith District and was intended to meet the needs of the refugees in Zbąszyń.<sup>13</sup>

In the first week of May the delegates of the *Amiticia* lodge completed a set of brief interviews with the refugees who had arrived in Zbąszyń between the dates of 5 April and 1 May 1933 and were still residing there. The information included the name and age of the person, his or her occupation, the date of remigration to Germany and the

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<sup>7</sup> APKr, BB 235, 25, 26.

<sup>8</sup> The B’nai B’rith organization was founded in the US in 1843 by twelve Jewish immigrants from Germany. Its aim was to fight anti-Semitism and to promote Jewish rights and education. The B’nai B’rith thirteenth District of Poland, with its Grand Lodge in Krakow, was founded in 1924: Czajeczka 1994: 12–13; Kargol 2004: 69–70.

<sup>9</sup> APKr, BB 82, 77.

<sup>10</sup> The official name of the foundation, organized by the Polish B’nai B’rith District, was *Fundusz na wypadek katastrof* (Emergency Fund). It was created in January 1926 by the General Committee of the Polish Order. It aimed to aid the victims of catastrophic events, and every member was obliged to pay an annual contribution of 50 cents: Czajeczka 1994: 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> APKr, BB 235: 5–6.

<sup>12</sup> APKr, BB 235: 9–10.

<sup>13</sup> APKr, BB 235: 13.

circumstances of remigration to Poland, the refugee's desired destination in Poland and whether he or she had any possessions or material resources.

In the case of the refugees who had been exiled to Zbąszyń in 1938 and had survived the war, detailed testimonies were recorded and catalogued, and most of them are now in the archives of the Yad Vashem museum. To the best of my knowledge, there is no information about the Jewish refugees of Polish origin who had migrated to the same place five years earlier, other than the interviews done by the *Amiticia* lodge. They are, therefore, a rich source of scarce and significant information.

Doron Niederland and Yifat Weiss mention the sources from the *Reichsstelle für das Auswanderungswesen*, a governmental office that had been in existence since the period of the First German Republic but had been through certain changes since early 1933. At that time it started to deal in a significant way with Jewish migration. According to the office reports, the Eastern Jews left Germany in the year 1933 because of destitution and lack of means.<sup>14</sup> However, the facts known to us from the B'nai B'rith sources call this statement into question.

At the beginning of May 1933, the representatives of *Amiticia* questioned 35 refugees in Zbąszyń: seven female and 28 male. Most of them (31 of the 35) were (or seemed to be) between 18 and 60 years old, and all of them (except two youngsters who were under the age of 18) had an occupation and had been regularly employed in Germany.<sup>15</sup> The refugees were quite varied in their professions: two blacksmiths, four tailors and seamstresses, three shoemakers, three commercial apprentices, two commercial travelers, one furniture store owner, one candy store owner, one restaurateur, five merchants, two hairdressers, one baker, one furrier, one laborer and four people with their own businesses, whose nature is unclear.<sup>16</sup> The picture, therefore, was very different from the one drawn by the migration office in Germany. Even though the refugees did not belong to the highest stratum of the German-Jewish population, they were certainly not at its poorest levels, being regularly employed: at least until the year 1933. Szmul Josef Bude, for example, the owner of a restaurant in Charlottenburg in Berlin, reported to the interviewers that he had left a three-room furnished house with a kitchen in Germany, together with his business. Elimelech Laske, who was born in Oświęcim and had lived in Gelsenkirchen in Westphalia for 12 years, had to leave his furniture store there with an estimated value of 10,000 marks.<sup>17</sup>

Another refugee was a boxer named Aron Szmulewicz. After losing his livelihood in London he had moved to Berlin, worked for a year in the fruit trade in the Kaiser-Wilhelmstrasse and "earned well" before his arrest and expulsion to Poland.<sup>18</sup>

The example of Szmulewicz, as a short-term settler in Germany, was an exception among the interviewed refugees; 21 of the 35 had lived in Germany for more than 10

<sup>14</sup> Niederland 1988: 29–30; Weiss 2000: 140–142.

<sup>15</sup> Among these were two young men aged 18 and 20, hairdressers by profession, who tried to cross the Polish German border in mid-April and were caught by the Polish police. After losing all of their possessions and business in Warsaw they had decided to seek a job in Germany, in spite of the new National Socialist regime: APKr, BB 248: 41.

<sup>16</sup> APKr, BB 248: 37–46.

<sup>17</sup> APKr, BB 248: 37.

<sup>18</sup> APKr, BB 248: 41.

years, while seven had been born there. Two of the refugees could speak only German. Most of those interviewed (25 persons) had lived in Berlin; others came from Jena, Hamburg, Gelsenkirchen, Kehl, Karlsruhe, Leipzig and Duisburg.

What forced these relatively prosperous and settled people, mostly middle-aged, to escape to Poland? One reason was common to all of them – the pressure exerted on them by the National Socialist regime to leave; the differentiation among them lay in the circumstances of their moving. Seven of them had left Germany after losing their jobs on account of their Jewish origins. Artur Gleisner, for example, was born in Oświęcim, lived in Germany for 14 years and worked as a merchant; his manager was forced to discharge him together with all the other Jewish personnel.<sup>19</sup>

Another 14 refugees migrated because of the persecution and pressure from the National Socialist activists. Some left immediately after being threatened – in the street, at their workplaces or at home. Others left after having been beaten up during their arrest, on the streets or in their own homes.

The most eloquent cases could be perhaps those of David Wajnsztok and Anszel Rochberger. Wajnsztok was a tailor who had lived in Berlin for 11 years. In late March and early April of 1933, the National Socialists broke into his shop three times with the excuse of looking for a hidden weapon. They called him a “Polish Jew,” robbed him, beat him severely and locked him in the bathroom. Following the threats that he would be beaten again, Wajnsztok, who had just been released from hospital, left Germany.<sup>20</sup>

Rochberger was a tailor who had lived in Germany for 17 years. One day after the boycott of 1 April 1933 (see below), he “was arrested without any reason and sent to jail, where he was tortured day after day for 14 days. In front of his eyes other Jews were shot without any reason or judgment, and [he] saw and experienced there even more terrible cruelties.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, his house was robbed by the National Socialists, and his wife was brutally beaten. After his release from jail, in spite of his damaged health, Rochberger quickly left Germany.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, there was the last group of Jewish migrants who were expelled under duress and forced to cross the German-Polish border. Of these nine people, six crossed the border on 5 April, and the other three in the course of the month (7, 19, 27 April). Three of them had come from Berlin, the others from Hamburg, Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Duisburg and Gelsenkirchen. The process of expulsion was usually a brutal one. Henschel Kelmanowicz, a smith who had lived in Berlin since 1906, was beaten on the street by National Socialists, who broke his left leg. He was then “transported to the Polish border in bandages.”<sup>23</sup> Aron Szmulewicz, the boxer who had worked in Berlin for a year, was arrested on the street without cause and severely beaten. In jail the former boxer “could only lie... and is so weak now that [he] can hardly walk.” Immediately after his release from jail he was transported to the border without the

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<sup>19</sup> APKr, BB 248: 44.

<sup>20</sup> I APKr, BB 248: 39, 46.

<sup>21</sup> These interviews, based on oral personal narratives, should perhaps be approached with a measure of caution.

<sup>22</sup> APKr, BB 248: 42.

<sup>23</sup> It is unclear where and by whom Kelmanowicz was bandaged, since it seems unlikely that the National Socialist who escorted him at least as far as the train to the border would do so.

possibility of taking any of his own belongings with him. According to Szmulewicz's testimony, his whole body was covered with wounds and bruises, and he arrived in Poland "sick, exhausted and hungry."<sup>24</sup>

The question that arises here is whether these acts of brutality and expulsions had any connection with the general wave of violence that swept Germany in April 1933. From the interviews it is evident that most of the violent events or expulsions were concentrated either in late March and early April or on 19 April and the days that followed (with the exception of one that occurred on 14 March). The continuity of the April anti-Jewish events should be seen as a background for the violence and expulsions described in the interviews, and points to a connection between the events. The sources, cited by Jerzy Tomaszewski, help to complete the picture shedding light on the reasons for this wave of anti-*Ostjuden* aggression. Already on 15 March the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent out a circular letter to various *Länder*. Among other items was an announcement calling on them to get rid of the local *Ostjuden*. On 16 March some Polish diplomats in Germany sent a report about the anti-Jewish (especially anti-*Ostjuden*) actions and about the National Socialist threats against the Jewish merchants.<sup>25</sup> Thus on 28 March the National Socialist government declared a boycott of Jewish stores, physicians and lawyers, and starting 1 April caused a mass wave of anti-Jewish violence in the days that followed. The second period of brutality against the refugees and their expulsion occurred in the last third of that month. A further law, of 21 April, against kosher slaughter, was clearly anti-Jewish in character. It seems likely that this measure further inflamed the National Socialist activists to act against the Jews, especially the *Ostjuden*.

The Jews who were expelled to Poland in the year 1933 can be seen as the predecessors of those who were expelled in October 1938. It seems that the National Socialist regime began forcibly expelling the foreign citizens from the first months of its existence, albeit at first in a limited way. Moreover, one can assume that in October 1938 the German authorities did not invent a new practice, sending Jews to Zbąszyń, but reverted to the one that had previously proved successful, even though on a much smaller scale. In 1933 the Polish authorities had immediately received these refugees and offered them free tickets to any destination inside the country; tickets were distributed at the train station of Zbąszyń by the railway police station or the emigration office active in the border town.<sup>26</sup> Thirty people among the refugees received such tickets. It seems that the criterion for this governmental aid was forced departure from Germany. As a result, two Polish citizens who were caught trying to cross the border towards Germany and one refugee who could not explain the reason for his leaving Germany were not eligible for these tickets and received them only from Jewish charity sources.<sup>27</sup>

However, the charity sources at their disposal were rather limited. All the migrants arrived in Poland "without a penny in their pocket", leaving behind in Germany all

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<sup>24</sup> APKr, BB 248: 41.

<sup>25</sup> Tomaszewski 1998: 27–29.

<sup>26</sup> Tomaszewski 1998: 37–46.

<sup>27</sup> Tomaszewski 1998: 41–42.

their possessions and savings.<sup>28</sup> The B'nai B'rith lodge *Amiticia* used funds that were sent from Krakow to provide the first essential material aid. Every individual or sometimes a whole family received an amount of up to 15 Polish zloty – 3–4 zloty on average – which was sufficient for only one or two meals. In total, 35 people received from *Amiticia* 112.5 zloty for their immediate needs.

Thus, as these testimonies show, the expulsion of the Jews to Zbąszyń in 1938 was not a unique event, but had a precedent in the events that had taken place five years earlier. What still remains to be examined are the differences between the events of 1933 and 1938. Given that the stage, the actors and the producers of the two performances of the play were virtually the same, the question that arises is: what changes did the script undergo?

## ABBREVIATIONS

APKr = Archiwum Państwowe, Kraków

BB = B'nai B'rith Collection

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<sup>28</sup> Variations of this phrase were used by many refugees in their interviews.