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Gender, Violence, and Anti-Semitism in Interwar Poland

The most recent ‘Łucja Charewiczowa’ Seminar meeting, another one in the series, was held on 30 May 2019 at the Warsaw headquarters of the Polish Academy of Sciences.¹ The discussion was initiated by the speeches delivered by the historians Natalia Aleksiu of the Touro College, Graduate School of Jewish Studies, N.Y.C., and Iza Mrzygłód of the Institute of History, University of Warsaw.

Natalia Aleksiu addressed the problem of women’s violence against Jewish female students in the 1930s. As she remarked at the beginning, the research in this respect is a strenuous exercise, often yielding results other than expected. On the one hand, the language of official records on anti-Semitic behaviours, not differentiating between male and female victims, referring to ‘students’ instead, frequently poses an obstacle. Such incidents were probably much more poignant to those who partook in them and fell victims, rather than to the university’s administration or press editors. On the other hand, most of the potential female authors who might have described such disturbances in their memories or reminiscences were killed during the Holocaust just a few years later. As Aleksiu remarked, however, even if violent acts affecting Jewish female students were officially reported, they would have been commented upon in sex/gender terms (men physically attacking women being an illustration of decay of morals or public decency) rather than in a racial or ethnic/national(ist) context. While the position of Jewish women at universities was doubly poor – as they were discriminated due to their sex as well as ethnic background – the official communications seem to suggest that they experienced chicaneries mainly because, being women, they did their best to penetrate into what was a typically male-dominated environment: and this is what the university was at the time. This issue is interesting as the proportion of Jewish females grew much faster compared to the share of non-Jewish women. While in the 1920s Jewish female students accounted for approx. 33 per cent of all the Jews in Polish universities, the proportion grew to 40 per cent – or even to as high as 60 to 70 per cent, at some faculties – by the thirties.

¹ For more on the idea of the Seminar, cf. Iwona Dadej, Natalia Jarska, Anna Nowakowska-Wierzchoś, and Katarzyna Sierakowska, ‘“Łucja Charewiczowa’ Seminar in History of Women and Gender, Affiliated to Warsaw Scientific Society and Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences’, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 117 (2018), 383–6.

Aleksiun referred to certain specific cases where Jewish women students were targeted by non-Jewish students, focusing particularly on the case of a certain Goldman, a Jewish student who in November 1931 was reported by Polish press to have attacked some non-Jewish students. The researcher has set the incident in a broader context, the flashpoint having been some non-Jewish students using abusive language against their two Jewish female mates. In response, Goldman berated the aggressors and attacked them physically once one of them slapped him in the face. In Aleksiun's opinion, this was a typical response from a Jew to the violence they came across at universities. A Jew would typically not initiate a conflict, but once the conflict was on, they would respond using the same measures as had been used against them: verbal abuse was countered with insults, physical violence with getting in a fight. This apparently corresponded with the conviction, dominant among some non-Jewish students, that Jews would always yield to the violence, never provoking a riot themselves and (which was not wholly true) never defending themselves against attacks. This was expected particularly with regard to Jewish female students who were perceived as tending to passively retreat in response to attacks or ever making any comments on them.

However, Aleksiun argued, not all the Jewish women withstood the attacks passively. Some were known for their incisive retorts against the attackers but the addressees tended to misrepresent these comments (whether purposefully or accidentally), thus making those women 'guilty'. Such was the lot of, for instance, Cywia Asterblum who was detained for two months for her alleged insult of the Polish nation. Being a witness to student riots, Cywia reportedly named the brawlers 'Polish rout' – though what she actually said (according to Aleksiun) was 'What a rout!'

No known report on an attack on Jewish women students by non-Jewish male students ever described, or even literally suggested, a sexual attack whatsoever. Instead, records dating to the first months of academic-year term, i.e. March or November – the moment the resentments against Jewish mates were the strongest, as Aleksiun pointed out – frequently dealt with Jewish women being expelled from universities after having their heads soaked with cold water from a pump, all wet and dripping, their clothes torn. Such a behaviour of Polish male students towards their Jewish female mates might be recognised as a manifestation of sexual violence, though.

This issue has to do with the last problem touched upon by Aleksiun – namely, the level of aggressiveness among Polish students of both sexes against Jewish people. The violence seems to have been moderated on an ongoing basis by the attackers who selected the array of potential behaviours with respect to the sex of those they dealt with. Male violence against women was accordingly (physically) more delicate, being a sort of process during which remarks were voiced among the aggressors, even in the heat of the attack, that women should never get beaten. More definitely aggressive types of behaviour

against Jewish women seem to have been practiced by their Polish female mates who in the scarce surviving memoirs reported by Jewish authors always appear to have been more rancorous and brutal than Polish male students.

Natalia Aleksiuń's paper was complementary with the one presented by Iza Mrzygłód, entitled 'A strong type of Polish woman. Women in the national radical movement in the 1930s', examining the role of women in what the author called "Polish interwar fascist movement". Like Aleksiuń, Mrzygłód stressed that the topic in question was quite challenging to tackle for researchers: for one thing, fascism being generally perceived as a 'male' phenomenon; for another, feminist scholars approach the question of fascism in a specific manner. Female historians of women try to create a vision of the fascist movement as sheerly driven by violence against women, which is not entirely true. Mrzygłód demonstrated that the interwar generation of fascism-oriented national activists approached women's issues in a very open, if not emancipative, way. One example is the female section of the Academic Department of the Camp of Great Poland [Obóz Wielkiej Polski, OWP] – a unit, though initially run by males, out of which an autonomous section of women's movement evolved in the thirties. The section was chaired (since 1933) by Maria Rzętkowska who in 1934 was elected chairperson of the Female Section of the National Radical Camp [Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR]. After the split of ONR, she joined the circle of the *Falanga* magazine (basically targeted at younger readers) whose female activists, according to Mrzygłód, formed the most radical group within the entire ONR organisation as well as in terms of their own emancipative strivings.

An important element in the ONR's female section's ideology was the ideal of a 'new Polish woman' which had an enormous role in mobilising women to commit violent acts – an ideal of combat that was fast adopted among ONR activists as a means of integration (they aspired to be ONR's 'female soldiers') and as a way of ensuring to women independence and an appropriate place in the new social and national hierarchy that was to establish itself after the revolution carried out by young nationalists. The formation of the 'fighting woman' ideal reflected the emancipatory needs of the girls enrolled at the Warsaw University. The ideal advocated by ONR was, at its other end, a curse of Jewish female students. Anti-Semitic violence promoted by ONR in view of creating a new ideal of man and renewing the national spirit was targeted by the organisation's female activists against Jewish women students – the group male students could not practice violence on.

Functioning in the interwar-period realities, the female nationalist activists – with all their ideals and strivings – were extremely critical toward the earlier generation of suffragettes. They criticised the feminists for their confined aspirations and weak radicalism of the movement, and contested some of their postulates, accusing them of opposing the natural role of women in the family and society. This criticism softened with years, giving way to propositions

of vocational and political autonomy for women. The latter privileges would only be vested in the movement's elite: women of the lower classes were expected to deliver and bring up new generations of Poles.

In response to the questions and comments from the floor as part of the discussion that followed, both scholars addressed (among other things) the problem of women's defence strategy – including self-defence and having men defend them against aggressors. Natalia Aleksiuń pointed that such aspects are observable but they were strictly determined by the expectations with respect to the gender. As we can read in the reports, the men could remember their chivalric deeds as they stood up in defence of the attacked Jewish women students; yet, none of the women would report on a situation where they would have witnessed another female student defending herself against the attack; there is a visible aspect of demonstration of one's dignity to it. The visibility of Jewish women students in the university's space is certainly a phenomenon of importance: seen against the Jewish students in their generality, these females were, clearly, appreciable as a specific group, but in terms of daily realities this perception was rather symbolical. Yet another problem pointed to by Aleksiuń was 'racial visibility': at this point, she resolutely opposed Dobrochna Kałwa's interpretation that the case of a Jewish female student (recorded in a source Kałwa had found) who used powder in order to make herself resemble a Polish woman should be categorised in terms of 'beautiful vs. ugly' (Kałwa suggested that the Jewish women might have used the powder in order to look nicer as "pretty women tend to be tolerated more generously"): rather than that, the 'Jewish vs non-Jewish' category is at work there. Aleksiuń did admit, however, that in the context of the period's culture bright powder evoked a number of diverse meanings and in a different case might indeed have pointed to the category of beauty/ugliness, or (un)attractiveness, rather than a racial issue.

Iza Mrzygłód, on her part, admitted that Polish fascist movements did contribute to the empowerment of women; however, she had used the word 'emancipation' on purpose – to oppose the dominant narrative whereby the female ideologists associated with the organisations ONR and OWP denied the emancipation of women that took place a few years earlier. The fact that male members of these movements basically did not oppose or protest against tertiary coeducation – a model that was introduced just a decade earlier, with the regained independence of Poland – is quite of importance. As Mrzygłód remarked, it attests that, like ONR's female ideologists opposed certain postulates put forth by the generation of their mothers, the organisation's male ideologists functioned in a social world that was somewhat different than the one of their fathers. She moreover emphasised that militarization of a part of the women's movement is perceptible, though it had nothing to do with military aspirations of the women: rather than that, the militarization

stemmed from the general development of militarism in the Second Republic of Poland, along with the growing cult of the army and the military leader.

The seminar on ‘Gender, violence, and anti-Semitism in interwar Poland’ provided an opportunity for exchange of views on the topic rarely dealt with by scholars – and that is, the role of women in the violence system present in Polish universities in the years between the two World Wars. The panelists and expert attendees, gathered in a large number, debated on the issues so challenging that some of them have not yet been addressed in the Western history of women, where – for instance – the problem of fascism tends to be viewed one-sidedly, as an ideology hostile to women. The multithread discussion that evolved and the numerous interpretive propositions put forward in its course offer hope for continued research on the problems in question, with (hopefully) new findings that would allow us to view these issues from an entirely new perspective.

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