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CAN FASCISM BE GOOD FOR THE JEWS?
THE RESPONSE OF THE YIDDISH PRESS IN POLAND
TO ITALIAN FASCISM (1922–39): A RESEARCH
RECONNAISSANCE

Abstract

The article sets out to profile the results of preliminary research into the stances taken by two Warsaw Yiddish daily newspapers, *Haynt* and *Der Moment*, on the phenomenon of Italian fascism. These ranged from guarded and benevolent interest, and even a certain fascination, to categorical rejection, depending on the official stance of the fascist movement towards the Jews. The article discusses the initial *ad hoc* judgments on fascism made in the 1920s, opinions on Polish and Jewish emulators of Mussolini, with particular attention to Vladimir Jabotinsky and the Revisionist movement, and the opinions of Jewish political journalists on Mussolini's volte-face regarding the Jews in the 1930s. A separate section is devoted to a series of 1938 reportage features showcasing the life of the Italian Jews in Fascist Italy.

Keywords: Polish Jews, Italian Jews, Yiddish press, Italian fascism, Benito Mussolini

I
INTRODUCTION

Hitler's rise to power, the birth and evolution of Nazism, and the Third Reich's policy on the 'Jewish question' – all these issues were addressed in the multilingual Jewish press in the 1930s and have since been the subject of at least preliminary studies.¹ A matter that has attracted

¹ See, *i.a.*, Ingo Loose, "Das war einmal... die jüdische Glanzepoche in Deutschland". Reaktionen auf den Novemberpogrom in der jüdischen Presse in Polen 1938/39', in Andreas Nachama, Uwe Neumärker, and Hermann Simon (eds), "Es brennt!" *Antijüdischer Terror im November 1938* (Berlin, 2008), 128–35; Daniel

less interest among scholars has been the reactions in the Jewish press (outside Italy) to Italian fascism, except in the context of the biography of Vladimir Jabotinsky and the history of the Revisionist Zionists.² Daniel Kupfert Heller has shown recently that the Revisionist press carried discussions on the movement's stance on fascism and the issue of the Revisionists' self-definition as fascists.³ The question arises also in studies on the Jewish socialist and communist press,⁴ but no research has yet been carried out into how the mainstream Yiddish press viewed Italian fascism and Mussolini himself. However, while in the case of Hitler, there was from the outset no doubt as to his opinions on the Jews and what awaited them should he come to power (and the events of the 1930s merely confirmed that view), the situation with Italian fascism was more complicated. Until around the mid-1930s the international Jewish community could sustain the misconception that anti-Semitism was not and never would be an integral element of fascism and that fascism as such did not constitute a threat to the Jews. The situation of the Italian Jews and the words of the Duce himself gave them grounds for this belief.⁵ While historians

Grinberg, 'Polskojęzyczna prasa żydowska wobec wydarzeń w III Rzeszy 1933–1939', in Krzysztof Pilarczyk (ed.), *Żydzi i judaizm we współczesnych badaniach polskich* (Kraków, 1997), 293–305; Adam Kopciowski, *Wos hert zich in der prowinc? Prasa żydowska na Lubelszczyźnie i jej największy dziennik "Lubliner Tugblat"* (Lublin, 2015), 515–24; Anna Landau-Czajka, *Wielki "Mały Przegląd". Społeczeństwo i życie codzienne w II Rzeczypospolitej w oczach korespondentów "Małego Przeglądu"* (Warszawa, 2018), 450–68.

² On Vladimir Jabotinsky see e.g. Hillel Halkin, *Jabotinsky. A Life* (New Haven, 2014); and Yaacov Shavit, *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement, 1925–1948* (London, 1988).

³ For more see Daniel Kupfert Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton–Oxford, 2017).

⁴ See e.g. Gertrud Pickhan, "Gegen den Strom". *Der Allgemeine Jüdische Arbeiterbund "Bund" in Polen 1918–1939* (München, 2001).

⁵ One of the pioneers of Polish research into Fascism was Jerzy W. Borejsza, but none of his now classic works on the subject (*Mussolini był pierwszy...* [Warszawa, 1979]; *Rzym a wspólnota faszystowska. O penetracji faszystowskiego w Europie Środkowej, Południowej i Wschodniej* [Warszawa, 1981]; *Schulen des Hasses. Faschistische Systeme in Europa*, transl. from Polish Beate Kosmala [Frankfurt am Main, 1999]) devoted any significant attention to the Jewish question in Italy under Mussolini. For more, see Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, transl. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison, 2006); Joshua D. Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922–1945* (New

are not entirely concordant on whether and to what degree Mussolini was infected by anti-Semitism,⁶ the fact is that in the 1920s, the Italian Jews considered themselves relatively safe. As the expert on twentieth-century Italy, Robert S.C. Gordon writes: “Mussolini declared himself a friend to the Jews, telling Emil Ludwig in a famous 1932 interview that ‘anti-Semitism does not exist in Italy’; but, as Michele Sarfatti has pointed out, this indulgence was invariably accompanied by a sort of unspoken condition, that the Jews keep out of trouble”.⁷

This being the case, it is worth looking at what the two leading Yiddish dailies in Poland, *Haynt* and *Der Moment*, wrote about Italian fascism between the wars. Though they were published in Warsaw, both were also widely read in the provinces, particularly in the lands of the former Russian partition and Pale of Settlement, i.e. in the regions where the Jewish community was the least acculturated and the most attached to the Yiddish language and culture. A reading of these papers will help reveal what image of Italian fascism was purveyed to Jewish readers in Poland. Their political affiliations were also of crucial significance: *Haynt* was the formal Yiddish-language press organ of the Zionist Organisation in Poland and regularly gave column space to leading Polish Zionist activists such as Yitzhak Grünbaum and Ozjasz Thon. *Der Moment*, formally linked to the Jewish People’s Party [Folkspartay] and edited by the Zionist Tsvi Pryłucki and his son Noyekh (Noah),⁸ evolved into a Revisionist tribune in the mid-1930s and began receiving subventions from the Italian embassy (I will address this issue in greater detail further on in the article). Nothing is known of any similar support extended to *Haynt*, so it is justifiable

York, 2005); Stanisław Sierpowski, *Rasizm faszystowskich Włoch* (Poznań, 2011); Piotr Podemski, ‘Prawna i faktyczna sytuacja włoskich Żydów w dobie prześladowań faszystowskich 1938–1943’, *Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem*, xxxv, 3 (2013), 7–30; *id.*, ‘Faszizm włoski wobec kwestii żydowskiej 1919–1938’, *Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem*, xxxiv, 1 (2012), 81–109.

⁶ Robert S.C. Gordon, ‘Race’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, ed. by Richard J.B. Bosworth (Oxford, 2009), 300–1; cf. Giorgio Fabre, ‘Mussolini and the Jews on the Eve of the March on Rome’, in Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy*, 55–68.

⁷ Gordon, ‘Race’, 302.

⁸ For more see Kalman Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Pryłucki and the Folkists in Poland* (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 2011); Cwi Pryłucki, *Wspomnienia 1905–1939*, ed. by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, transl. from Yiddish by Agata Kondrat (Warszawa, 2015) (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy, 28).

to ask whether the two papers displayed any visible differences in their stances on fascism and Mussolini himself.

Information on the situation in Italy reached Poland via various channels. The first was news agencies; these tended to supply front- or second-page news items or reprints from the foreign press. These were not included in my content analysis because they tended not to include an editorial comment. Opinions of Jewish journalists themselves are usually found in editorials, the regular comments columns of members of the editorial boards, featured in the Friday issues of both papers, and in feature articles, regular correspondence from Italy, and reportage pieces. The *Haynt* correspondents in Italy were S. Izakson and Shloyme Itzhaki;⁹ the latter also submitted correspondence to *Der Moment*. Owing to the lack of extant editorial archives, the internal policies of the editorial boards can only be deduced indirectly through an analysis of the published content.

II

FASCISM: FIRST ASSESSMENTS

The Yiddish press first appears to have paid closer attention to Mussolini and his supporters after the march on Rome. A few days later, Natan Szwalbe, chief international political correspondent for *Haynt*, wrote in his regular column, ‘Politishe lage’ [The political situation], of “civil war in Italy”.¹⁰ He described fascism as “the most widespread nationalist movement” [*folks-bevegung*], whose emergence was fostered by the “hot southern temperament” and was the Italians’ reaction to the attempt by the communists and syndicalists to stage a social revolution there modelled on the Russian fashion. As long as fascism was fighting Bolshevism, it had the support of “solid bourgeois circles”, but it soon came to represent a threat to them. “The leader of the Fascists, the former socialist Mussolini”, demanded that the king relinquish his

⁹ I was unable to find any more detailed information on these individuals; these were probably pen-names, which may both have belonged to the same person. At the present stage of research we cannot rule out that this was Jacob David Kleinlerer (1899–1961), also known as Edward D. Kleinlerer or Edward Klerr, a lawyer, journalist, and long-term correspondent of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in Rome, and from 1939, a resident in the USA.

¹⁰ N.Sz. [Natan Szwalbe], ‘Politishe lage. Di birger-krig in Italien’, *Haynt* (31 Oct. 1922), 2; subsequent quotations by Szwalbe are also taken from this article.

power to govern into the hands of the Fascists; warnings were also issued of belligerence against Yugoslavia over access to the Adriatic. “The Fascist uprising thus threatens to unleash the worst conflicts in the whole Balkan region”,¹¹ Szwalbe predicted. Significantly, the article was somewhat inconsistent in its use of the words ‘fascism’ and ‘fascists’ – sometimes in inverted commas, other times not, suggesting that it was not yet in widespread use among *Haynt’s* Jewish readers¹² (in the same period, Tsvi Pryłucki wrote about “so-called fascists”¹³).

Less than two years later, Szwalbe was to write: “A nationalist military dictatorship as the opposite of a democratic parliamentary regime – this is the creed of international fascism, which has taken Italy as the first country for its ‘experiments’, just as international communism sees in Russia the ‘fatherland of the proletarian revolution’”.¹⁴ Pryłucki called fascism “a grim reactionary force that is the product of red Russian Bolshevism”.¹⁵ Comparisons of fascism to communism were ubiquitous; both systems were seen as suspicious political experiments as to which there was no way of knowing how they would end. After the murder of Giacomo Matteotti,¹⁶ Szwalbe expressed his belief that Italian fascism had compromised itself and was ideologically bankrupt.¹⁷ However, this lack of enthusiasm for the movement did not necessarily go hand in hand with a lack of admiration for the achievements of Mussolini himself: “Looking objectively at the incumbent regime in Italy, meanwhile, one has to conclude that if the Fascist party itself is less than pleasant, Mussolini as a statesman is entirely what contemporary Italy needs; the war left it in total disarray, and so it needs a firmer, but loyal hand”, wrote Josef Heftman, a commentator for *Der Moment*, in 1924.¹⁸

As late as in 1928, the Zionist parliamentary deputy Fiszel Rotenstreich was still predicting that fascism had no future: he believed

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ [Tsvi Pryłucki], ‘Der moment. Arum der iberkerenish in Italien’, *Der Moment* (3 Nov. 1922), 4.

¹⁴ Natan Szwalbe, ‘Di politishe lage. Der krizis fun fashizm in Italien’, *Haynt* (20 June 1924), 3.

¹⁵ [Tsvi Pryłucki], ‘Der moment’, 4.

¹⁶ For more see Borejsza, *Mussolini*, 73–9.

¹⁷ Szwalbe, ‘Di politishe lage’, 3.

¹⁸ Emanuel [Josef Heftman], ‘Unter der diktatur’, *Der Moment* (13 Nov. 1924), 2.

that, like dictatorships in other countries, it had no coherent programme, was reliant on intuition, and had won because the masses are driven by sentiments rather than logic. Fascism had been unable to put together an economic programme, so it was feeding the nation with fantasies.¹⁹ By the 1930s, though there were no more voices calling fascism merely a failed experiment, it was still perceived to have much in common with communism. Tellingly, one *Der Moment* editorial used the phrase “a marriage of fascism and Bolshevism” to describe Italian-Soviet relations.²⁰ “Bolshevism, Hitlerism and fascism are brothers that hate each other, but do they not all spring from the same source, though their aims are different?”,²¹ asked rhetorically Aron Riklis, one of *Haynt*’s leading commentators, in 1935, going on to explain that all three systems were born out of the “adulation of collectivism”.²² The issue of the similarities between fascism and communism that were present in the discourse, and interpretations of early fascism, is one that still requires further research.

III

ITALIAN FASCISM AND ITS POLISH (AND JEWISH) IMITATORS

The early fascination of the Polish Right with fascism²³ did not go unnoticed by the Yiddish press. Indeed, Polish advocates of fascism continued to attract greater attention than their Italian counterparts until the early 1930s. There was palpable relief, not without a shade of satisfaction, in the comments that they were less well organised than their Italian role models. After one review of the Polish press (such reviews were also regular features of the Yiddish-language press), Szwalbe concluded:

Polish fascism is a stillborn child. It lacks the [Italian] tradition of struggle. The national revolutionary energy of the Polish nation found its outlet in POW [Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, the Polish Military Organisation] and

¹⁹ Fiszel Rotenstreich, ‘A fashistisher muster’, *Haynt* (3 Aug. 1928), 6.

²⁰ ‘Der moment. Der shidekh tsvishn fashizm un bolshevizm’, *Der Moment* (5 Dec. 1930), 3.

²¹ Aron S. Lirik, ‘Di velt-krankhayt’, *Haynt* (1 Nov. 1935), 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For more see the article by Grzegorz Krzywiec in this issue of *APH*, 143–85; also Borejsza, *Mussolini*, 171 f.

in the early units of Piłsudski's Legions, which had their roots in the 'hit squads' of the PPS [Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, the Polish Socialist Party]. *Endecja* [ND – Narodowa Demokracja, National Democracy] has brought up its youth in the spirit of loyalty to the tsarist regime. It is capable of inciting student unrest and perhaps of attacking Jewish passers-by on 'goy' streets. But of [waging] a Polish civil war it is absolutely incapable and organisationally unprepared.²⁴

Yehezkel Moyshe Nayman, a regular contributor to *Haynt*, remarked that admirers of fascism outside Italy were more ardent than the Italian Fascists themselves:

Inside Italy, as far as I have been able to establish on the ground, fascism is entirely devoid of the fiendish face it has assumed in Poland by those who identify with it ... Fascism – so my close friend in Rome tells me – must absolutely not be taken seriously. The Italians are a nation of opera. They love parades, gestures, solemn and moving emotion. Mussolini understands the psychology of the Italian nation. It is true that in the initial period ordinary citizens felt greater convenience due to the lack of strikes, but prices rises are increasing... That's why we have so many parades. One after the other. With shouts. Fireworks. It's not to be taken seriously.²⁵

In the commentaries of this period, the use of the word 'fascism' was a reference not so much to a particular political system as to a violent, anti-democratic method of taking power: "Interestingly, the Endeks [members of ND] are threatening not only liability but also financial boycotts and a campaign to break up the Sejm [the lower house of the Polish parliament]. This latter reeks of fascism".²⁶ Yehezkel M. Nayman described an argument he had witnessed on Gęsia Street in Warsaw between a Hasid and a labourer over the sale of a copy of the Friday issue of the Bundist newspaper *Folkstsaytung*, during which the labourer at one point shouted: "You home-grown fascist!" [*Heymisher fashist du*], which caused the writer to reflect on the vast gulf of meaning that lay between the original term '*fascies*' and its contemporary embodiment in the person of a Warsaw Hasid.²⁷

Another popular reporter, Bernard Singer, noted that the right-wing Polish press saw in fascism a chance to eradicate the Left and

²⁴ Natan Szwalbe, 'Tsvishn tsvey fayern', *Haynt* (27 Nov. 1922), 2.

²⁵ Yehezkel M. Nayman, 'Fashisten', *Haynt* (18 Jan. 1924), 6.

²⁶ 'Fun der poylisher prese', *Haynt* (3 Dec. 1922), 5.

²⁷ Nayman, *ibid.*

national minorities: “Rome has become a mecca for Polish fantasists [dreaming] of fascism”,²⁸ among whose number he counted individuals such as the well-known journalist Władysław Rabski, “a coffeehouse politician and protector of pretty female artists”.²⁹ However, he also noted that “the Left has also worked up an appetite for fascism, for a red Mussolini. They dream of someone coming along who will put a stop to the Right. The Right has mobilised the cities and the administration, the Left the rural population and the army. Both sides dream of interim power without a parliament”.³⁰ After dismissively dubbing Polish fascism *fuszysz* (a portmanteau based on Pol. *fuszerka* – a botched job), he rounded off his comment with the rhetorical statement: “Fascism has become a caricature ... Is this how it will end? Who knows? In Poland, there is no lack of unemployed generals and capable actors”.³¹

Another who wrote ironically about the Polish Right cosyng up to fascism was Abraham (Avrom) Goldberg, editorial secretary and acting editor-in-chief of *Haynt*. In his comment on a proposed Italian loan for Poland,³² Goldberg made malicious reference to the Polish Right’s problems with Jews: “Great was the joy, then, when ... that well-known, true Polish [*ekht-poylisher*] parliamentarian from the Lewental family, Władysław Rabski,³³ ... announced the great news to the Polish nation that we too have thousands of blackshirts who are standing at the ready, awaiting only their orders”.³⁴ Unfortunately, the Polish Right later fell out of love with Mussolini, because “it came to [their] notice that the chief initiator of the loan, whom the right-wing camp had so triumphantly courted, was a former Polish citizen and former Jew [i.e. a convert from Judaism to Christianity], or the son of a former Jew named Toeplitz”.³⁵ This ridiculing of the right-wing

²⁸ Bernard Singer, ‘Di nisht-getlikhe komedie. Fashizm bay der arbet’, *Haynt* (20 Jan. 1924), 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For more see Stanisław Sierpowski, *Stosunki polsko-włoskie w latach 1918–1940* (Warszawa, 1975), 301.

³³ Władysław Rabski’s wife, Zuzanna née Kraushar, was from a well-known assimilated Jewish family. On her mother’s side she was also related to the equally well-known and assimilated Lewental family.

³⁴ Abraham Goldberg, ‘Der get mit Mussolini’n’, *Haynt* (26 March 1924), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Polish press by bringing up the Jewish roots of its own authors or heroes was a tactic much used by the Jewish press.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that this fascination with fascism was not unique to the Polish Right. In fact, some circles in Jewish society also succumbed to it. The best-known case in point is, of course, Vladimir Jabotinsky and his acolytes, who, as Daniel Kupfert Heller has convincingly shown, “[were] continually reshaping the meaning of fascism, while simultaneously questioning its efficacy as a worldview and behavioral code”.³⁶ There is insufficient space here for a detailed discussion of the Revisionists’ complicated relationship with fascism, but one thing it is important to point out is that though from a present-day perspective calling Jabotinsky an “ordinary fascist” would be probably an oversimplification, that is how he was widely seen and depicted by the contemporary Jewish press. This did not prevent Jabotinsky from writing regularly for *Haynt* in the 1920s and early 1930s. The situation only became more complicated in 1935, when he officially crossed over to *Der Moment*; Yehoshua Gottlieb also left *Haynt* at that juncture. The then editorial secretary of *Haynt*, Chaim Finkelstein, wrote later: “Rumours have been circulating that [Jabotinsky] has contacts with the Italian Fascists and that Italy was to have taken over the mandate for Palestine. From an important collaborator, he has become a significant liability for *Haynt*”.³⁷ Tsvi Pryłucki recalled that poaching Jabotinsky for *Der Moment* had been the idea of the executive board of the cooperative that ran the paper, which had been counting on attracting big names helping it to overcome its financial crisis. “When Jabotinsky joined the editorial team”, Pryłucki recalled, “I had a protocol drawn up which provided that he had the right to promote the Revisionist point of view in his articles, but he was not entitled to denigrate other Zionist camps. Even so, there were frequent conflicts between us on that score because [Jabotinsky] did not respect the terms of the protocol. ... I also came into conflict with Gottlieb on more than one occasion over the opinions he voiced ...”.³⁸

Pryłucki makes no mention of the attitude of Jabotinsky and his editorial acolytes to fascism, but there is an interesting temporal

³⁶ Heller, 10.

³⁷ Chaim Finkelstein, *Haynt – a tsaytung bay yidn (1908–1939)* (Tel Aviv, 1978), 317.

³⁸ Pryłucki, *Wspomnienia*, 149.

convergence here. In 1936, *Der Moment* figured on the list of subventions awarded by the Italian embassy for publication of articles written in a tone stipulated by the embassy. According to Polish historian Stanisław Sierpowski, in the first quarter of 1936 the Italian embassy paid out subventions of this type to the editorial boards of the periodicals *Dziś i Jutro* (1,200 zloty), *Der Moment* (1,000 zloty), *ABC* (450 zloty), and *Kurier Codzienny* (300 zloty). In the second quarter of that year, *Der Moment* was top of the list regarding the numbers of articles inspired by the not specified *fascio di Varsavia*.³⁹ Jerzy W. Borejsza, citing Italian archive material, also averred that *Der Moment* offered the Italian embassy its services in running propaganda supporting the Abyssinian war for a sum of 2,500 zloty.⁴⁰ Ambassador Giuseppe Bastianini commented on this proposal as follows: “I believe that, as has already been done with *Kurier Polski*, in which such articles achieved their objective, given a financial outlay not exceeding 2,500 zloty it is possible to achieve valuable propaganda results among that most mistrustful and least accessible of communities: international Jewry”.⁴¹ The extent of the Italian influence on journalism in *Der Moment* requires further research beyond the scope of this article.⁴² It certainly does not necessarily mean that all the articles on Italy published in *Der Moment* in that period toed the Italian embassy’s line; suffice it to mention the somewhat subversive text by Shaul Stupnicki, who on the one hand enumerated the civilising benefits that subjugated Abyssinia would come to enjoy under Italian rule, but on the other contrasted Rome with Jerusalem, where the exiled Ethiopian emperor had taken asylum.⁴³ A brief surge in the editors’ interest in the war in Abyssinia is indeed discernible on the sole basis of a cursory review of the newspaper for the last quarter of 1935 and the first half of 1936; it ran a large number of pieces on the subject and devoted

³⁹ Stanisław Sierpowski, ‘Miejsce faszyzmu w polsko-włoskich stosunkach kulturalnych okresu międzywojennego’, in *Studia nad faszyzmem i zbrodniami hitlerowskimi*, vi (1980), 236.

⁴⁰ Borejsza, *Mussolini*, 217.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² No mention of this is made by Hani Bareket-Glanzer, the author of the only monograph on *Der Moment: Ha-yoman be-yidish ‘Der Moment’ (1910–1939)* (Jerusalem, 2018); for a discussion of the influence of the Revisionists on the paper, see *ibid.*, 43–7.

⁴³ Shaul Stupnicki, ‘Di naye roymishe imperye’, *Der Moment* (11 May 1936), 3.

considerable attention in them to the Jews living there, who were known as the Falashas.⁴⁴ Around the same time, Jabotinsky emerged as the author of the paper's political leader (published in almost every Friday issue and usually running to several columns),⁴⁵ completely overshadowing other journalists associated with *Der Moment*, such as Noyekh Pryłucki and Hillel Tseytlin.⁴⁶

Haynt's stance towards the Revisionists was one of reservation at best; it treated them as the *enfants terribles* of Zionism. In 1934 Moyshe Kleinbaum (later known as Moshe Sneh) did not conceal his own scepticism. He pointed out that broad swathes of Jewish society divided fascism into anti-Semitic and non-anti-Semitic, with the former (the German brand) being detested but the latter (the Italian) respected. He was of the opinion that such a division was naïve because anti-Semitism is only one aspect of fascism ("at the heart of fascism is the poison of anti-Semitism"⁴⁷), but fascism is dangerous to the Jews, in any case, owing to its glorification of the role of the state and the dominant nation. In a discussion of the contemporary situation of the Jews in several European states, he spoke of Poland with a telling reticence: "It is superfluous to waste words on Polish fascisms in a newspaper published in Warsaw. We are very familiar with them. In any case, Poland also supplies us with strong evidence that even the 'best' brand of fascism is not free of strongly anti-Semitic motifs".⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See e.g. 'Di shvartse yidn in fayer fun abisinisher milkhome', *Der Moment* (11 Oct. 1935), 3; Emanuel [Josef Heftman], 'Ven a land vert interesant', *Der Moment* (11 Oct. 1935), 5; A. Rayzender, 'Abisiniyen dos geheymnisfule land', *Der Moment* (18 Oct. 1935), 4; Pi, 'Ver zenen di entdeker fun di abininishe yidn?', *Der Moment* (25 Oct. 1935), 4, and many others.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Der felker-bund', *Der Moment* (20 March 1936), 4; *id.*, 'Der boki', *Der Moment* (24 April 1936), 4, and many others.

⁴⁶ It is important to remember that in the wake of the great financial crisis, the editorial board of *Der Moment* struggled with serious financial problems throughout the 1930s. Eventually, in 1938, these forced the appointment of an official receiver in the person of the Revisionist lawyer Mark Kahan (for more see Weiser, *Jewish People*, 243–4; Pryłucki, *Wspomnienia*, 157, 162, 167–73). Perhaps the subvention from the embassy helped cover the fees for Jabotinsky, Gottlieb, and Jabotinsky's 'adjutant' Józef Schechtman? Pryłucki intimates that they commanded high salaries (Pryłucki, *Wspomnienia*, 148–9).

⁴⁷ Moyshe Kleinbaum, 'Fashizm un yidn', *Haynt* (8 June 1934), 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, Kleinbaum continued, not only did some Jews support fascism, but an entirely Jewish strain of fascism had emerged: “No-one even dares to mention that Revisionism is a vehicle of fascist ideology within the Jewish nation, and that broad swathes of the Jewish bourgeoisie, including rabbis and professors, and many respected, wealthy Jews, are beginning to flock to Revisionism”.⁴⁹ Kleinbaum believed that the support for fascism was born out of a fear of communism and socialism: “For the Jews, too, fascism is a mortal enemy. But fear and hatred of socialism are shepherding whole camps of Jews, including national Jews [*natsionale yidn*], into the arms of fascism”;⁵⁰ as an example, he cited the support of the Zionists for the Dollfuss regime in Austria. He believed that only a small minority of the Jewish bourgeoisie and bourgeois Zionists were actively opposed to both fascism from without and Jewish fascism, and he warned prophetically: “All of them, the fascist Jews and the Jewish fascists, believe that fascism already rules humanity. They do not see that it is merely shaping up for the decisive battle for the shape of the world. They do not understand that a victory for fascism would mean the annihilation for the Jewish nation – their own”.⁵¹

But as an efficient organiser, Mussolini won grudging respect even in circles whose sympathies were far removed from Revisionism. One very characteristic example is the piece written by Aron Riklis on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Fascist movement. Riklis wrote:

What have ten years of fascism shown us? That dictatorship and anti-democracy are the best forms of government? That dictatorship keeps people’s bellies fuller and makes them happier? Even the theoreticians of fascism themselves are not convinced of that, and Mussolini, as we know, has said on many occasions that fascism is not an export article, and that even if it fits Italy, that does not mean it will be equally good for other nations. England and France are the best examples that it is possible to get on quite well without a dictatorship, as long as governments reside in a nation that is truly humanitarian and educated in a culture where there is a sense of duty and responsibility. In the best case, dictatorship is good for weak, sick, and disillusioned nations which have not yet matured to true democracy. But it would be party particularism [*partay-akshones*] and fanaticism to say that Mussolini has enslaved his nation and that fascism

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

is a catastrophe for the Italians. No, for the Italians, Mussolini is a blessing and a saviour. At the point when Mussolini took power, Italy was on the brink of disaster – lazy, disorganised, deeply disillusioned with the war it had ‘won’, and with the peace, and internally ripe for revolution and catastrophe. Mussolini restored the Italians’ faith in themselves, their moral pathos, and their enthusiasm for work and order.⁵²

He judged fascism to be a ‘natural product’ of Italy, which only later took on an anti-democratic and anti-socialist form. Nonetheless, he made no secret of his admiration for what it achieved:

After ten years’ productive work, fascism can say proudly: look what we have made of Italy! We have stabilised the lira, we have healthy finances and a strong balance of trade, we have built many splendid roads and highways, and we have implemented a crucial agrarian reform. Above all, we have taught the nation to be hardworking, energetic, and proactive. Our trains run punctually, and the whole thing operates at least no worse than in any other backward country in Europe.⁵³

Mussolini himself compared favourably with Hitler: “his character has little of the small-mindedness, pettiness, and crudeness of dictators after Hitler’s style (Mussolini himself had nothing to do with the dreadful murder of Matteotti)”.⁵⁴ Riklis explained the socialists’ antipathy towards Mussolini by the lack of strikes and lockouts in Italy, “and the Fascist regime has proved that the class struggle is also superfluous when the state holds all the authority and always functions as the go-between and regulator between labour and capital”.⁵⁵

IV

AN UNEXPECTED REALIGNMENT, OR: FROM A FASCISM WITHOUT ANTI-SEMITISM TO RACE LAWS IN ITALY

As I have shown above, a strong argument that spoke for fascism in the Jews’ eyes – at least in comparison with Nazism – was the lack of organic anti-Semitism. As Robert S.C. Gordon has noted: “throughout this period [i.e. the 1920s], there were sporadic episodes

⁵² Aron S. Lirik, ‘Tsen yor fashizm’, *Haynt* (4 Nov. 1932), 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

of anti-Semitic violence carried out by the more extreme fringes of the Fascist movement”,⁵⁶ but the Duce himself never sanctioned these. This situation began to change in the 1930s, with Hitler’s rise to power, the war for Abyssinia, Mussolini’s increasing suspicions regarding the Zionist movement, and his urge to compete with Great Britain. All these events were registered with unease and analysed by the Jewish press, which began to pay greater attention to the situation in Italy, and its repercussions for the Jewish community. Over this period, the dailies also published correspondence from Italy with increased frequency.

In early December 1932, *Haynt’s* Italian correspondent, Shloyme Itzhaki, reported on the first vicious attack by the Italian press in ten years on Jewish settlement in Palestine, the Zionist press, and the Italian Jews (it was the latter element that provoked the greatest consternation, given that over the previous half-century they had never had to prove their loyalty to Italy and the Italians to anyone). The attack was published in the daily *Il Regime Fascista*, and was thus interpreted as a reflection of the climate reigning in the top ranks of the Fascist party. Until that point, Itzhaki explained, the major Italian press titles had taken a hostile stance on anti-Semitism and had been neutral about the question of Palestine and philo-Semitic in the extreme: “If they had praised any of the Zionist parties, it had been the Revisionists, their *duce* Jabotinsky, and their programme, in which Italian and Jewish-Italian authors saw many points of convergence with fascism”.⁵⁷ On this occasion, *Il Regime Fascista* had called on Italy’s Jews to prove their loyalty to the state by propagating fascism among the Jewish settlers in Palestine, and giving financial support to the Tel Aviv fascist weekly *Ha-Shavua*.⁵⁸ A few months previously, Izakson had written in his report that although anti-Semitism was not popular in Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s racial theories were ridiculed, for several months, the major Roman daily *Il Tevere* had been running long pieces that were anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic in tone. For instance, in its report on the Zionist congress in Basle (1931), *Il Tevere* had asked rhetorically: “Are our Zionists more pleased with the progress

⁵⁶ Gordon, ‘Race’, 302.

⁵⁷ Shloyme Itzhaki, ‘Ershter fashistisher angrif gegen tsiyenizm in yidishen Eretz-Yisroel’, *Haynt* (5 Dec. 1932), 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

being made in Tel Aviv, or in Mussolini's Rome?"⁵⁹ It was assisted in its anti-Zionist campaign by Italy's assimilated Jews, who styled themselves: "Italians of the Mosaic faith, non-Zionists". Izakson's brief ended with the cautious words: "Italian Zionism is living in difficult times, though it remains to be hoped that the discussion does not escalate into a storm, which could cause great tragedy".⁶⁰

The motif of assimilators being harmful to the Zionist cause had been a constant theme in the Yiddish press even before the First World War, but took on particular significance in the 1930s: the Yiddish press portrayed the Italian assimilationists at best as useful idiots in the service of fascism. This was the slant given on the summary of the interview conducted by Henri de Kérillis, editor of the *Echo de Paris*, with the chief rabbi of Rome, Angelo Sacerdoti, who was described as "one of the most noteworthy representatives of world Jewry".⁶¹ Asked whether he was not concerned about the rise of anti-Semitism in Italy as a side effect of fascism, the rabbi answered that for the Jews, democracy was worse still, because assimilation and drift away from Judaism was inscribed into it.⁶²

In light of the rising tide of unease that, under Hitler's influence, Mussolini's views on the Jewish question would change, the Yiddish press made considerable efforts to convince its readers that there was nothing to fear from Mussolini. In fact, the authors of these texts appear to be attempting to convince themselves above all. In April 1933, *Der Moment* expressed the hope that "Rome would come to the aid" of the persecuted German Jews and noted with satisfaction that the post of Italian finance minister was still held, unchallenged, by the Jew Guido Jung.⁶³ In November 1934, Yehoshua Gottlieb assured his readers that Mussolini had taken the news that the Italian Jews were to be attending the forthcoming 19th Zionist Congress calmly,

⁵⁹ Sh. Izakson, 'Fashizm un asimilatsye in kamf gegen tsiyenizm', *Haynt* (4 March 1934), 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Aron Alperin, 'Der oyber-rabiner fun Roym – der fashist', *Haynt* (23 Nov. 1933), 3.

⁶² *Ibid.* In the Austrian context similar words were written about the "cunning Moritz" [*kluger Moritz*], see A. Shrayber, 'Di "yidishe kep" fun dem estraykhishen fashizm...', *Haynt* (22 April 1934), 5.

⁶³ Sh. Itzhaki, 'Der ofitsyeler fashizm redt vegen Hitler's redifes', *Der Moment* (19 April 1933), 5.

even though he did not usually like Italian citizens participating in international organisations: “He has probably not read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and does not share stupid Aryan pride”. Gottlieb expressed his hope that other states would follow in Mussolini’s footsteps and not prevent their Jewish citizens from taking part in the elections to the congress.⁶⁴ The derisive opinion of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* printed in *Affari Esteri*, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ monthly, was quoted and requoted with satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the unease smouldered. In March 1937, Izakson reported that a “fashion ... for talking about and mentioning Jews in the press” had emerged over the previous months,⁶⁵ which had produced pieces including Ercole Patti’s reportages about the life of Jews in Poland. On the one hand, this fashion had its positive aspects; as Izakson noted, there had been favourable reviews of operas on Jewish themes and of performances by Jewish artists, including Bronisław Huberman and Yehudi Menuhin. On the other, as fascism drew closer and closer to Hitlerism, the Fascists somehow had to take a stance on the Jewish question, and this gave rise to the founding of a new paper, *La Vita Italiana*, which was modelled on *Der Stürmer*, and edited by ‘the Italian Streicher’, Giovanni Preziosi. The degree of Mussolini’s support for these initiatives remained unclear to the Yiddish press: “What was the *Duce* talking to the Italian Streicher about? ... Does Mussolini, who is a fierce opponent of untrammelled racism, agree with Preziosi’s pornographic attacks on world Jewry in general and on Italian Jews in particular?”.⁶⁶

Two names came up again and again in these discussions on the signs of Italian anti-Semitism: that of Roberto Farinacci, who was presented as “the second person after Mussolini”⁶⁷ and the *enfant terrible* of Italian fascism, attempting to make anti-Semitism “a programmatic element of the prevailing fascism”,⁶⁸ and Preziosi, the Italian publisher of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Reassurances were constantly voiced that this was not necessarily tantamount to acceptance of such views by Mussolini; the same arguments usually

⁶⁴ Yehoshua Gottlieb, ‘Fun tog tsu tog. Dos geshprekh mit Mussolini’n’, *Haynt* (21 Nov. 1934), 3.

⁶⁵ Izakson, “‘Yidishkayt’- di nayeste mode in Italien’, *Haynt* (1 March 1937), 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Izakson, ‘Far un gegen antisemitizm in Italien’, *Haynt* (24 March 1937), 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

backed these up: Mussolini's criticism of the racial theory, which he had expounded in contexts including an interview he had given to the writer Emil Ludwig, the fact that there were Jews in his cabinet, and finally that "Mussolini is most proud of his consistency and the fact that he does not change his views ... he will not bow to these Farinaccis and Preziosis any time soon".⁶⁹

Another permanent contributor to *Haynt*, Azriel Carlebach, commented ironically that Italian provincial papers were hosting open debates on exclusionary laws for Italian Jews:

But he [Mussolini] is not against all Semites.
Against Arabs, for instance...
He isn't against Arabs. And how he isn't.⁷⁰

This comment of Carlebach's was a reference to the gestures made by Mussolini to the Muslim world, such as donations of funds for the renovation of mosques in Tripoli, grants for Muslims to study in Italy, etc. It was this desire to win over the Arab world that turned the Duce into an anti-Semite: "It is important to love the entire Semitic race, except for the 400,000 Jewish settlers in Eretz Israel".⁷¹

Furthermore, it was the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine that tipped the scales for the Zionist press. In February 1938, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) released the sensational news that *Informazione Diplomatica*, the official press organ of the Italian government, had taken a stance on the Jewish question and anti-Semitism in Italy. In a statement attributed to Mussolini himself, it announced that Italian fascism would not be adopting an anti-Semitic line, but that the global Jewish question could only be resolved with the creation of a Jewish state, though not in Palestine.⁷² The publication of this information in the press provoked a veritable storm of comments. Aron Alperin, editor-in-chief of the daily *Parizer Haynt*, commented for the Warsaw *Haynt* that Mussolini was thinking to found a Jewish state in Abyssinia, which was extensive but sparsely populated.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Azriel Carlebach, 'Mussolini iz gegen yidn un far – Semiten', *Haynt* (29 March 1937), 4 (all emphases original).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² 'Mussolini leg't for tsu grinden a yidishe melukhe mekchutz Eretz-Yisroel', *Haynt* (17 Feb. 1938), 2.

This was an idea that could theoretically have satisfied all parties: it would have the support of both the Vatican and the Third Reich, the Jews would have a state of their own, the Palestinian Arabs would not be threatened with the division of their territory, and it would serve a blow to the British, who wielded the mandate for Palestine. Alperin was firmly of the opinion, however, that the Jewish camp would not agree to it.⁷³ Aron Einhorn, one of the leading commentators for *Haynt*, agreed and remarked that such ‘gifts’ to the Jews should first be consulted with the potential recipients themselves. He also posed the rhetorical question: if Jews settling in Palestine was unfair to the Arabs, would it not be unfair to the Abyssinians if they settled in Abyssinia?⁷⁴ The idea of the Jewish colonisation of Abyssinia had in fact already been ridiculed two years previously in *Der Moment* by Stupnicki, who had compared the attractiveness of the offer from the Jews’ point of view to the equally undesirable Birobidzhan (though he had ended his piece with an expression of gratitude to the Italians).⁷⁵

Mussolini’s idea was explicated from the Italian perspective by Izakson. In his opinion, treachery had been a standard element of Italian politics since 1914, and in this light, the declaration in *Informazione Diplomatica* had been a betrayal of Mussolini’s principles on the matter of the Jewish state in Palestine:

But this new Italian declaration also has an interesting side effect: it is a slap in the face for the dozens and hundreds of *mayufes* Jews [those who toadied up to the authorities] in Italy (and of course in other countries!) who every day send in long letters to Fascist newspapers declaring that they are one hundred per cent anti-Zionist, that they will fight Zionism, that Zionism is... a communist invention, and that ‘we are total patriots, devoted children of Italy, we live here and have nothing in common with international communist-masonic Jewry’...⁷⁶

At this point, Izakson quoted a letter published in *Popolo d’Italia*, but it was probably certain circles of Jewish society in Poland that he had in mind.

⁷³ Alperin, ‘Di “yidishe melukhe” in Abisinien...’, *Haynt* (24 Feb. 1938), 3.

⁷⁴ Aron Einhorn, ‘Fun tog tsu tog. Di nayeste “yeshue” – Abisinien’, *Haynt* (2 March 1938), 3.

⁷⁵ Stupnicki, ‘Italien legt for yidn tsu kumen keyn Abisinien’, *Der Moment* (22 June 1936), 3.

⁷⁶ Izakson, ‘Mussolini’s Eretz-Yisroel deklaratsye’, *Haynt* (24 Feb. 1938), 3.

A second reason why the Yiddish press began to view Fascist rule with increasing mistrust was the progressive rapprochement of Italy and the Third Reich, which became ubiquitously clear to everyone at the latest with the signing of the Pact of Friendship and Alliance in 1936. Journalists' views on the matter varied. Aron Einhorn at first opined that the agreement between Italy and Germany on racism should please not only Hitler but... the Bund, which had for so long held Hitlerism and fascism to be the same. Einhorn saw no particular danger to be feared from fascism: "racism in Italy ... at worst will take the form of a few more or less stupid articles by Fascist journalists".⁷⁷ He explained that it was merely a concession to Hitler on Mussolini's part, a gesture without significance, intended simply to show the unity of the two states on the Rome-Berlin axis symbolically:

Fascism is, above all, a political and social doctrine that teaches how to resolve class conflicts without class struggle and how to shift the centre of interest from the individual and the class to the state. What connection – theoretically speaking – is there between racism and anti-Semitism here? Yes, of course, there can be a strong connection here, but only when one says what Hitler says – that all Jews are Bolsheviks, that Jews invented socialism and communism as a way of enslaving the Aryan nations. Then it is clear that in fighting socialism, fascism is also fighting the Jews. ... But Mussolini, who has been advocating fascism for over twenty years now, has never said that up to now, and the Italian Jews who take part in the Fascist movement certainly do not say that, and all certainty our own "fascists", the Revisionists, do not say that...⁷⁸

Later on, however, Einhorn revised his views somewhat. When it was made clear that Mussolini's change of heart in respect of the Jews was due to the fact that for years 'world Jewry' had been attempting to damage the Fascist movement, and Italy had to take care of its prestige, which in those times was a function of race issues, Einhorn promised a reward to

anyone who can explain why the prestige of the 'Italian race' among the residents of Abyssinia would suddenly increase when they learn that such-and-such a professor has been removed from Rome university because he is

⁷⁷ Einhorn, 'Fun vokh tsu vokh. Fashizm un rasizm', *Haynt* (22 July 1938), 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

a Jew ... Things must be bad, really bad, with Italian fascism's superiority complex if this is the way they want to manifest it. Such steps are never an indication of true might and belief in one's own strength, and we are more than confident that in this case, too, they will have a mental impact entirely at odds with what the Duce is hoping for.⁷⁹

One man who had absolutely no doubt as to where the Jews should stand on these declarations was Yitzhak Grünbaum, a leading Zionist activist, who saw a link between the outbreak of racism in Italy and the war for Abyssinia: since the Jews on the international stage had spoken out against the war and the Italian aggression, the conclusion had been reached that the Italian Jews connected with them were bound to be disloyal to their country. Grünbaum took the opportunity to lay the blame for this development with the Revisionists, whom he so disliked: "We have only ourselves to blame for the anti-Semitic development in Italy, say our home-grown adulators of fascism, our speculators at its mercy. Had we maintained neutrality in the struggle between democracy and fascism, Italy would have remained faithful to its previous policy of friendship toward the Jews and, who knows, might even have helped us in Eretz Israel".⁸⁰

On the matter of the Jews' declaration for or against fascism, Grünbaum had no doubts:

For Jews across the world, for Jews in all countries, the question [of whom to support] comes not only from the ordinary human perspective but from a purely Jewish one: they have to distinguish between friend and foe, between systems in which their human, civil, and national rights are trampled and those in which the individual and their rights are protected. For it is only under the latter's authority that Jews can live as people – that is now clear to every Jew since Italian fascism has sacrificed the Jews on the altar of its own interests. This is why there can be no doubt where we Jews belong. We belong with our friends, and we will not be neutral when our friends are in danger. Indeed, we cannot remain neutral, because our enemies are declaring a battle to the death [*fernikhtungskampf*] on us.⁸¹

A long-term ideological opponent of Grünbaum's, Noyekh Prylucki did not spare bitter reproaches at the governments of Europe and the

⁷⁹ Einhorn, 'Fun tog tsu tog. Nokh dem rede funem "duce"', *Haynt* (20 Sept. 1938), 3.

⁸⁰ Y. Grünbaum, 'Italien', *Haynt* (9 Sept. 1938), 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

European intelligentsia for allowing themselves to be convinced that fascism and Hitlerism “are not export goods”,⁸² and that as such it was not appropriate to criticise other countries’ internal affairs. But fascism did start to seep out of Italy, and it was only then that the realisation came that “fascism is cancer that must be tackled at once, in the first minute that signs of its emergence are noticed”.⁸³

The volte-face in Duce’s views on the Jewish question clearly fascinated Jewish journalists. Dr Józef Kruk devoted two extensive articles to it, in which he attempted to sketch a psychological portrait of Mussolini. In the first of them, he discussed the early days of the Fascist movement and the socialist youth of “the most flexible politician of the twentieth century”.⁸⁴ “Even the great master Machiavelli would have to confess that he could not have dreamed of a student so sapient [as Mussolini]”.⁸⁵ In the second, Kruk analysed Mussolini’s sudden anti-Semitic about-face. He held the Italian leader’s most paradoxical attribute to be the fact that he was capable of doing something entirely the opposite of what he had hitherto been saying publicly. A case in point was this change in his stance on the Jews and the race issue. Kruk posited that this had not come about under Hitler’s influence at all: “the psychology of a dictator is such that he cannot like another dictator”.⁸⁶ He perceived the root of Mussolini’s lurch towards anti-Semitism to lie in the broader situation in which Italy found itself: after the war with Abyssinia, the situation was not ideal, so he needed a smokescreen. “Mussolini himself is probably not an anti-Semite, but neither is he a Columbus, an Edison, or an Einstein! He had to find new opium for the streets at all costs. It is not his fault that fascism has no better resources. The Fascist arsenal is finally looking empty”.⁸⁷

The year 1938 put an end to any remaining illusions about fascism that anyone might still have harboured. The final word came from Aron

⁸² Noyekh Pryłucki, ‘Der seykhel iz a krikher...’, *Der Moment* (9 Sept. 1938), 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Józef Kruk, ‘Portret fun dem diktator. Vi hot oysgezehen der fashizm in zayn ershter onhoib?’, *Haynt* (23 Sept. 1938), 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Kruk, ‘Mussolini in der antisemitisher tage (portret fun dem diktator)’, *Haynt* (7 Oct. 1938), 6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* In a later reminiscence on these articles, Kruk wrote that “*Haynt* readers latched onto the analogy between Italy and Poland very well”. Kruk, ‘Mayn arbet in *Haynt*’, in Finkelstein, *Haynt – a tsaytung bay yidn*, 371.

Einhorn, in his reaction to the ‘Charter of race’ [*Carta della razza*]⁸⁸: “When you read the Nuremberg Laws, you feel uneasy, but when you read the Rome laws you feel... well, I would not say easy, but in any case, you are not gripped by fear”.⁸⁹ He ironically said that the Grand Council of Fascism justified its decisions by citing the struggle of ‘world Jewry’ against fascism. Had the council members read the Warsaw *Folkstsaytung* (the Bund’s press organ), however, they would know that the Bund considers all Jews to be fascists except for the Bundists.

Einhorn wrote graphically that Nuremberg gives one the impression of having been locked up in a hospital for the deranged, on the worst ward, but in Rome, there is a good deal of whip-cracking and shouting, and then they carry on doing business on the side anyway. He also pointed out that the new Italian laws incorporated numerous exceptions for Jews “of merit”, which was contradictory to racist ideology. The Nuremberg laws were better, he commented perversely because at least one knew what to expect.

But the black humour with which Einhorn peppered the start of his comment gradually gave way to gravity and the terse conclusion:

What Italian fascism is doing with the Italian Jews now is nothing other than a new edition of Mińsk Mazowiecki, Brześć, or Częstochowa on a larger scale⁹⁰ ... Irrespective of how dear to us the fate of our Italian brethren is, we will not bear this sacrifice, this sacrifice of spiritual besmirchment, for them. Moreover, for us, it is not simply a question of moral purity. It is not in the least a question of national security. Because if the Jews really do start to support fascism in the world, how do we know that the four million Jews in the Soviet Union would not pay a higher price still? In theory, that is not impossible.⁹¹

The final overtones of comments in the Yiddish press thus left no shadow of doubt: fascism, irrespective of Mussolini’s declarations, was a danger to the Jews, and all alliances with it were to be avoided.

⁸⁸ For more on the race laws in Italy see Michele Sarfatti, ‘Characteristics and Objectives of the Anti-Jewish Racial Laws in Fascist Italy, 1938–1943’, in Zimmerman (ed.), *Jews in Italy*, 71–80; Sierpowski, *Rasizm*, 55–6.

⁸⁹ Einhorn, ‘Fun vokh tsu vokh. Nirnberg un Roym’, *Haynt* (14 Oct. 1938), 4.

⁹⁰ An allusion to the pogroms that occurred in those cities in the years 1936–7.

⁹¹ Einhorn, ‘Fun vokh tsu vokh’.

V
 COLOURED BY FASCISM: POLISH JEWS' VIEWS
 ON THEIR ITALIAN CORELIGIONISTS

As the realisation of fascism's anti-Semitic stance grew, the Yiddish press paid increasing attention to the situation of the Italian Jews. In the spring of 1938, Chaim Abraham Hurvits (1893–1952), under the pen-name Chaim Vital, wrote a series of reportage pieces for *Haynt* on the life of the Italian Jews under Mussolini's government. Vital came from Smorgonie (once Lithuania, now Smarhon', Belarus), spoke several languages, and collaborated with a range of press titles, including the New York daily *Forverts*, as its Europe correspondent.⁹² He began his tour of Italy in Trieste, which he knew from previous visits to Palestine. From Trieste, he moved on to Rome, Florence, and Venice – all the cities of significance for the history of the Italian Jews.

In Vital's reports, there are several leitmotifs or strands that were of particular interest to him. Above all, he was interested in the Italians' attitudes towards the Jews (and perhaps even that of 'ordinary' Italians rather than of Fascists specifically). In Trieste, he registered tension in the atmosphere between the two communities: in the course of his time there, "Italian hooligans"⁹³ scrawled slogans such as "death to the Jews" on the wall of the local synagogue. Vital commented on this as follows:

Official Jewish circles passed over this fact in silence. They were too ashamed to tell me about it, in case it got out. And when I found out and asked about it, they tried to downplay it. Cases like this really don't happen in Italy often. You don't hear of Jews being attacked physically. Recently the Italian press does have an anti-Semitic whiff about it. But the [Italian] nation is not anti-Semiticly minded.⁹⁴

In writing about the Italian press, he did not hesitate to stress inspirations flowing from the Third Reich: "The anti-Semitic gentlemen from *Il Regime Fascista*, *Il Tevere*, and others, obtain financial support from Germany. The Germans ply them generously with money

⁹² <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2016/03/khayim-av-hurvits.html> [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

⁹³ Chaim Vital, 'Vos hob ich gezehen in fashistishen Italien', *Haynt* (10 April 1938), 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

so that they can conduct extensive anti-Semitic propaganda".⁹⁵ Yet, one glance was enough to make it clear that Italian anti-Semitism was superficial, motivated by an antipathy towards England, France, and the League of Nations, and by friendship with Germany. In reality, Jews could be active in the fascist party without having to prove Aryan lineage, and they also held a range of military and official functions. "Swastikas are a frequent sight on the streets of Italian cities ... Yet Jews hold responsible positions and continue to discharge their patriotic duties".⁹⁶

The attitude of the Italian authorities to the influx of Jews from abroad served as proof of the lack of real anti-Semitism there: "On this matter, Italy seems to be the most liberal country in Europe. There are several thousand Jews from Poland here, and recently the colony of Jews from Gdańsk (Danzig) has been growing in size. The Italian authorities let everybody in. It is quite easy for a foreign Jew to obtain a permit to trade here. If he is a labourer or a professional, he will obtain a work permit just as easily".⁹⁷

But not everything was rosy; Vital admitted that the Zionist movement did not have total freedom of operation in Mussolini's Italy: "Zionism in Italy is as *treyf* as pork to a devout Jew. ... Young Jews who were once Zionists are now afraid to go into the Zionists' building, are afraid to say a word about Zionism in the community building ... [But] Zionism is not banned in Italy, and the Italian Zionists have contact with the government, and the government permits money to be sent to Eretz Israel".⁹⁸ Mussolini's anti-Zionism, Vital explained, was not directed against Zionism as such, but against England. "If an agreement is ultimately signed with England, the City in London will give him [Mussolini] a loan, and then Mussolini will change tack on anti-Zionism".⁹⁹

What grabbed Vital's attention most of all was Jews who were members of the Fascist party. In Trieste, when he was talking to local Polish Jews in a coffee house, an elderly Jew ran up to them and started threatening to beat him up:

⁹⁵ Chaim Vital, 'Mussolini iz nisht keyn emeser anti-tsiyenist', *Haynt* (24 April 1938), 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Why on earth? This is why: the coffee house has the Warsaw *Haynt* delivered. And a few months previously, he had read in *Haynt* the news that Mussolini's son had apparently crashed his plane in Spain.

"What is all this?" he shouted. "What rubbish are they writing in this newspaper? It's impossible – Mussolini's son is too good an aviator to have a crash!"

I tried to calm him down. I said that this information had been in the press all over the world, so perhaps only the Italian press had kept it quiet. My Jew wouldn't be mollified. He was foaming at the mouth ... This was a Jew who had been infected with fascism and was an ardent supporter of Mussolini... I was told that there are many Jews like him...¹⁰⁰

Elsewhere, Vital wrote that he had met almost all the rabbis in Italy but that very few of them did not sport a Fascist party badge.¹⁰¹ As the party had helped most rabbis obtain their posts, their religious competencies were of no significance.¹⁰² They were some of the people who agreed to talk to him, however:

On my travels around Italy I encountered immense difficulties. Many Jews were unwilling to talk to me. They were afraid. A Jewish journalist from abroad – who knows, perhaps that would be frowned on by the Fascist leaders... Some rabbis were even afraid to let me in. But others were bolder and did talk to me. I'm sitting in the study of a 'famous' Italian rabbi. We're talking about fascism. And the rabbi presses his fist to his breast and declares with pride: "I am a Fascist!"¹⁰³

Vital also drew attention to what was to him the exotic mix of fascism and Jewish religious practices:

The Jews in Florence are exceptionally ardent Fascists; there are few such Fascist Italian patriots as them even among the Italians. ... When the chairman of the Florence community takes the bimah [the dais in the synagogue] for the Torah [reading], he is dressed in a black shirt, has a sabre at his side, and greets the Torah scroll with the Fascist salute, raising his arm... That is the custom [*nusekh*] in Florence today.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Chaim Vital, 'Vos hob ich gezehen in fashistischen Italien'.

¹⁰¹ *Id.*, 'A bezukh in der alter, berimter shtot Florents', *Haynt* (8 May 1938), 6.

¹⁰² *Id.*, 'In der berimter alter shtot Venedig', *Haynt* (15 May 1938), 4.

¹⁰³ *Id.*, 'A bezukh in der alter'.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, Vital was equally surprised by the signs of the decline of traditional Jewish life which he saw at every step, and which he associated with the high degree of assimilation and acculturation of the Italian Jews: “They have become as assimilated as it is possible to be. They could not have gone any further. They are the best Italian patriots, and have served their country in every way they possibly could”.¹⁰⁵ ‘Authentic’ Jewish life only persisted where there was poverty:

The ghetto in Venice still retains that modicum of Jewishness in the city. The ghetto is a constant reminder to the people who were born here and who live here by force of inertia that they are Jews. They live here and die as Jews. They know nothing of true Jewishness. There is a terrifying ignorance here. The older Jews still sometimes go to the synagogue, but almost no one can speak Hebrew. They have long since forgotten all they learned in Talmud Torah [religious primary school].¹⁰⁶

The degree of religious ignorance among the Italian Jews was clearly shocking to an outsider from Poland: “here they have no idea what devoutness [*frumkayt*] is. Jewish religiosity [*religiozitet*] here is an empty term”.¹⁰⁷ He noted what struck him above all: learned respect for the Jewish alphabet combined with an ignorance of and inability to read the letters, a universal belief in superstitions and amulets,¹⁰⁸ and at the same time the immense influence of Catholicism – since their Catholic neighbours went to their priests for confession, Jewish women went to confess to their rabbi.¹⁰⁹ He considered the Italian Jews to be very religious in their own way, but that they had no idea what Judaism forbids and what not: “On the street, adjacent to the synagogue, there is a small bar. They go from the bar to the synagogue and from the synagogue to the bar”.¹¹⁰

Naturally, his remedy for this situation was Zionism. “Zionism in Italy is more than a party, and being a Zionist is about more than belonging to a Zionist organisation. Zionism here is religion. There is no orthodox Zionist organisation like Mizrahi here. Zionism itself is the vehicle of religiosity. Perhaps because Zionism has awoken

¹⁰⁵ Chaim Vital, ‘Di yidn in Roym’, *Haynt* (4 May 1938), 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*, ‘In der berimter alter shtot Venedig’.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*, ‘Di yidn in Roym’.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Vital, ‘In der berimter alter shtot Venedig’.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

a nostalgia for real Jewishness, from which the Italian Jews had strayed so far".¹¹¹

Vital's series of reportages for *Haynt*¹¹² is particularly interesting in that in talking about the Italian Jews, it says much about the readers of *Haynt* themselves. It is fair to assume that the issues emphasised by their author are those that he felt would be of particular interest to its readers. These included the high degree of assimilation and immersion (not to say dissolution) of the Italian Jews in the Christian culture that surrounded them, the only remedy for which he saw in Zionism. The direct outcome of this degree of assimilation was these Jews' lack of knowledge about their own past and religion – treated not necessarily in an orthodox manner but as a particular marker of their Jewish identity and a vital community bond. Perhaps looking at Italy's assimilated Jews put Vital in mind of the increasingly assimilated Jewish youth in Poland, which could theoretically be threatened with the same fate: a departure from the religion and culture of their predecessors and dissolution in the majority Christian environment.

VI

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The reporting of Warsaw's two leading Yiddish dailies on Italian fascism shifted from cautious interest in this new political experiment, through covert admiration or even overt fascination, to profound disillusionment. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise, given that attitudes towards Jews were always the leading indicator of their editors' sympathy or antipathy in respect of particular centres of power. Although this was not their primary topic, it is nonetheless reasonably significant as a marker of the stance taken by the Jewish press on totalitarian regimes between the wars, and its own self-definition in respect of them. Moreover, the case of Italian fascism illustrates well the internal fissures within the Jewish community, which is inaccurately perceived as monolithic – though the matter of the Revisionists' influence on the mainstream Jewish press has been barely touched; this is

¹¹¹ Vital, 'Di yidn in Roym'.

¹¹² To date, my research has not brought to light any comparable reportage from Italy in *Der Moment* from the same period, perhaps due to its far worse financial situation.

an area that requires further study. More extensive archival research will help to identify the place of fascism in the broader context of the functioning of the Jewish press, which will undoubtedly further our knowledge on the intellectual and political life of the Jewish community in the Second Polish Republic.

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