

**Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2021). xii + 388 pp. ISBN 9780674245105.**

This unsettling and important book documents the increasingly dolorous mood of Polish Jewry from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. Based on a wide range of sources in multiple languages, many of them previously untapped, it transports readers to a time and place when the modernisms that offered Jews control over their destiny—liberalism, territorialism, socialism, communism and, to a lesser extent, Zionism—were called into question. The deeply devout may have wavered little in their certainty that *der oybershte firt di velt* (the One above directs the world). Many secularists may have persisted in the belief that their favoured idol would rescue them. However, the ascent of what Moss evocatively calls extrusionary nationalism caused some independent Jewish thinkers and a growing number of ordinary Jews to reassess whether the glorious futures they had been promised still made sense. They began examining the facts and pondering which courses of action, if any, were still open to their people. Moss shows that only one newism emerged from this painful exercise: a growing realism. Realism did not produce a new mobilizing program for collective liberation. It was simply an attempt to look reality squarely in the face and recognize the limitations of old answers to the Jewish question.

It was still possible in 1931 for some leading Jewish intellectuals to hold out hope that Jews might have a future in Poland.<sup>1</sup> However, the mood shifted within just a few years as boycotts of Jewish businesses spread; Jews were totally excluded from government employment; violent acts against Jews became more numerous; antisemitic political parties gained in popularity; immigration restrictions abroad became more widespread; the realization grew that, making up just 10 percent of the country's population, Jews lacked political influence let alone clout; and, decisively, the Nazis took power in Germany, then Austria. Some Polish Jews concluded that there was no future for Polish Jewry in Poland, that no Polish-centred Jewish political ideology could change that state of affairs, and that the appalling conditions in which Polish Jews found themselves were the result not only of economic circumstances such as the Great Depression and misguided economic policy but of emergent political and cultural realities that were bound to endure.

True, between the world wars several hundred thousand Polish Jews did escape to the United States, Palestine, Argentina, Canada, and a few other countries. By 1931, when Order-in-Council PC 1931-695 made immigration to Canada nearly impossible, 16 percent of Canada's 157,000 Jews had been born in Poland, making them the second largest category of Jews born outside the country.<sup>2</sup> Moss's book adds much to our understanding of their state of mind. However, we must remember that, be-

tween the wars, the number of Jewish migrants from Poland to all countries numbered at most one-half the community's natural increase over those years, so escape could hardly be a solution to Poland's Jewish question. Moreover, it was questionable whether those who migrated to the liberal assimilative West would be able to reconstitute the conditions that made Polish Jewry the world's most socially cohesive and culturally creative Jewish community. A considerable number of Polish Jews turned to Zionism but, as Moss documents, a growing number of those who left for Palestine did so on pragmatic grounds, viewing their decision more as an opportunistic escape for themselves and their family members than a reliable collective solution to the Jewish question.

The poignancy of this carefully researched and thoughtful volume lies not only in the story it recounts but in the way it surreptitiously causes the reader to reflect on the fragility of democracy and the rise of extrusionary nationalism in our day, especially in the two countries where 85 percent of the world's Jews reside. How do we answer *our* Jewish question when the 2024 US presidential election looms menacingly and settler violence on the West Bank reaches unprecedented heights? For implicitly raising that question alone, the book is a must read.

### **Robert Brym**

SD Clark Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto

#### **1**

Yakov Leshchinsky, *The Economic Situation of the Jewish in Interwar Poland*, Robert Brym, trans. (Kindle Books, 2021 [1931]), <https://amzn.to/3Kjc1eu>.

#### **2**

Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic Study of the Jews in Canada* (Montreal: Bureau of Social and Economic Research, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1939), pp. 78, 146. About 14,000 Polish Jews arrived in Canada before fiscal year 1926-27, 12,000 between fiscal years 1926-27 and 1930-31, and 2,000 between fiscal years 1931-32 and 1937-38, after which there was practically no immigration of Polish Jews until 1947. On the post-World War II immigrants, see Adara Goldberg, *Holocaust Survivors in Canada: Exclusion, Inclusion, Transformation, 1947-1955* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015).