

SEEKING A RETURN TO POLAND. THE CASE OF THE “GOMULKA ALIYAH” IMMIGRANTS IN ISRAEL (1956–1960)

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Abstract: In my paper entitled *Seeking a return to Poland. The case of “Gomulka Aliyah” immigrants in Israel (1956–1960)* I describe the emigration of Polish citizens of Jewish origin to Israel in the second half of the 1950s. From October 1956, when Wladyslaw Gomulka came into power in Poland, it became possible for Polish Jews to relocate in to Israel. Leaving Poland was not obligatory for Jews in that period, but a rise in anti-Semitism and disappointment with the communist regime in Poland led a number of Polish citizens of Jewish origin to make the decision to emigrate. In the period of 1956 to 1960 approximately 50,000 Jews went to Israel. However, after few months of living in the New Homeland, some of the new immigrants from Poland were seeking to return. Difficult living conditions, an unfamiliar language, and unemployment led Polish Jews to request repatriation. That was in most of the cases impossible, as most of them had given up on Polish citizenship while immigrating to Israel.

In the histories of many countries, waves of emigration have been accompanied by significant social and political changes. One such situation occurred in 1956–1960, in the case of the emigration of Polish citizens of Jewish origin to Israel. In the second half of the 50s, Poland was facing the first significant wave of workers’ protests. Poles were demanding changes, as the time of Stalinist terror was coming to an end and a new era in the history of the Polish People’s Republic – the time of thaw – had begun. It was this new policy that opened a previously closed door for Polish Jews: from October 1956, under the name of “uniting families”, it was made possible for Polish Jews to go to Israel. Some of them still saw their future in the Polish People’s Republic; however, the vast majority decided to emigrate. Basically, it is estimated that between 1956–1960 approximately 50 thousand Jews left Poland for Israel. In the historiography this emigration wave is frequently called the “*aliyah*¹ of Gomulka.” The name is taken from Wladyslaw Gomulka, who at that time held the position of First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party.

¹ *Aliyah* (Heb.) – Immigration of Jewish people to Erec Israel or to the State of Israel.

Leaving Poland was not obligatory for Jews in that period, but a rise in anti-Semitism and disappointment with the communist regime in Poland led a number of Polish citizens of Jewish origin to make the decision to emigrate. Jews were disillusioned with socialism and they understood that equality among citizens was impossible. Other factors behind the decision were the difficult economic situation, and a general feeling of abandonment as the majority of the Jewish population were leaving Poland.

The Gomulka immigrants arrived in Israel, which at the time had well-developed state structures, a vibrant economy, and a well-functioning apparatus for the absorption of newcomers. However, for the majority of *olim*² from Poland the first stage of their new life in Israel was filled with difficulties and disillusionment. The greatest obstacles which they had to face were the radical change of climate, the mentality, and the language. This clash with a new life and culture, as well as their encounters with people of a different, Middle Eastern mentality, made the first months in the new homeland very difficult. Maria Lewińska, in an interview with the author in 2008 in Tel Aviv, described her first moments in Israel thusly: “Suddenly we were placed in a completely different world and climate, and even though we had been open to accepting the new reality, we could not discard the baggage of the old one. It was a period of intense efforts, determined work, of testing your endurance, assertiveness, ambition, and perseverance. A great many indeed could not find their place under the new circumstances. Left on the desert sands, they remained on the crossroads.”³

Maria Lewińska managed to “persist and endure” through the most difficult period and after some time put down roots in the Israeli society. Many Jewish people, however, had been entrenched in the Polish culture and were unable to find their place on “the desert sands” and adapt to the new life. Those who had not identified with the Jewish minority in Poland found it hard to accept the new customs, traditions, and language in Israel. It was the polonised group of the immigrant Jewish community that experienced the feeling of being lost in the Middle East reality most intensely, and it was they who began to long to return to Poland.

Reasons for wanting to return to Poland

When analysing the applications for authorisation to return submitted at the Legation of the Polish People’s Republic in Tel Aviv, a few problems emerge as being the most important among those mentioned above. First and foremost, many *olim* struggled with the challenges resulting from the lowered living standards.⁴ The immigrants were disappointed with the housing conditions, the lack of electricity, and the meagre furniture. It must be noted that the majority of them came to Israel from Lower Silesia, where they had lived in post-German houses with spacious rooms and bathrooms. The second problem was that the Jewish Agency for Israel did not allow for the resettlement of immigrants in the industrialised areas. Many newcomers were forced to settle in sandy

² *Olim* (Heb.) – new immigrant.

³ An interview with Maria Lewińska, Tel Aviv, July 14th 2008.

⁴ Samet 1957: 3.

areas, near the sea, or far from the urban agglomerations, making it more difficult to get to a city centre. One of the greatest problems faced by the Polish *olim* was unemployment.⁵ The lack of opportunities to work in the professions for which they had been educated, the need to retrain, and the difficulties in learning Hebrew discouraged the immigrants from staying in Israel. Acquiring a new, non-European language was an insurmountable obstacle to the middle-aged, and ignorance of the language made it harder to find a job. The applications for authorisation to return submitted at the Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Tel Aviv were also motivated by problems resulting from the process of acclimating in Israel and the psychological adversities ensuing from the difficulties in accepting the new cultural environment.⁶

A number of the requests for a permission to return were submitted only a few days after arriving in Israel, and hence the Legation of the Polish People's Republic could not consider them to be based on mature decisions. They probably served the aim of sounding out the possibility of coming back. Very often the applications were rejected when the applicants listed "difficulties in adapting to the Israel society" as their main motivation to return to Poland. The majority of the applicants were people in their forties and older who could not find employment, which made their assimilation more difficult.

Israeli and Polish governments facing the problem of re-emigration

The returns to Poland were more than a threat to the plan of putting an end to the Jewish diaspora in Poland, one of the dreams of the Israeli authorities. The Israeli government realised that if the absorption of the Polish immigrants had been successful, it would have encouraged Jewish people from other countries of the Eastern Bloc to emigrate. As put by Shmuel Elyashiv in his letter to Moshe Sharett, "If the integration of the Polish Jews with the Israeli society fails, it can inhibit the immigration from other countries. Special attention should be paid to the absorption of the Polish Jews."⁷ A successful adaptation of the Jewish community from Poland could therefore serve as a good example to the Jews in other countries in Eastern Europe (especially in Romania and Hungary) and influence their decision to move to Israel. In the opinion of the Israeli authorities, putting an end to the existence of the Jewish diaspora in the Eastern Bloc depended to a large extent on the success in the assimilation of the Polish Jews. On the other hand, a failure of this assimilation would mean the end of any hope that the Jewish communities in that part of Europe would cease to exist.

It was believed that the re-migration to Poland might threaten to halt the inflow of the Polish Jews to Israel. Numerous reports about the severe living conditions in Israel and the malfunctioning system of assimilation could entail a discontinuation of the immigration influx. The Israeli health minister Yisrael Barzilai warned the Foreign Affairs minister, Moshe Sharett, that "A few repatriates may stop the whole *Aliyah*,"⁸ and rec-

⁵ Gar 1957: 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Israel State Archives, 130.09/2306/4, a note from S. Elyashiv to M. Sharett, September 14th 1949.

⁸ Israel State Archives, 130.09/2306/4, Y. Barzilai's document directed to M. Sharett, September 20th 1949.

ommended to prepare the suitable “tools” facilitating the assimilation of the newcomers. The creation of a special department in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry with the purpose of accommodating the new immigrants is one example of the actions undertaken to this aim.⁹

To counteract any further returns, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered the field administration to conduct a survey among those who wanted to leave. It included a question whether the immigrant had informed anybody that he or she wished to retain Polish citizenship and if so, to whom the statement had been made. It was also inquired whether the newcomer had been aware what should have been done to retain Polish citizenship and whether he or she had intended to settle down in Israel upon arrival. The Israeli authorities were also interested in which towns the interviewees had stayed and whether they lived in public accommodation. The key questions asked whether a given *Oleh* had a full-time job and why he or she wanted to relinquish Israeli citizenship.¹⁰ The Israeli government hoped that the survey would cast some light on the reasons behind dissatisfaction among immigrants and help to prevent any intensification of the tendency to leave.

The Israeli authorities followed a policy of hindering emigration from Israel as well. Complex rules and intricate legal procedures were used to reduce the number of people willing to return to Poland. A prospective emigrant had to pay off their debts connected to the travel to Israel, as well as subsistence allowances and other liabilities. The total *Aliyah* debt of a family of four could amount to between two and four thousand Israeli pounds, and the return journey to Poland, about two thousand dollars.¹¹ The high costs of travelling back to Poland led many to apply to the Legation of the Polish People’s Republic for financial help. The representatives of the diplomatic post would obviously refuse. Men in military service who wanted to leave the country permanently had to be granted the permission of the military authorities. In the majority of cases they were refused, or were granted leave only after half a year. The military authorities did not present any motivations for refusal; moreover, the citizen was not allowed to renew the request. All of this contributed to a noticeable decrease of the number of people attempting to return.¹²

Neither did the Polish authorities support return migration. The Jewish emigration from Poland to Israel was seen as an occasion to get rid of an undesirable ethnic element, one harmful to the process of building a mono-ethnic nation state. Thus the Polish authorities decided that Polish citizenship would be a *sine qua non* condition under which one could apply for an authorisation to return to Poland. The Israeli authorities agreed to that and stated that emigration to Israel could not be treated as an “experiment.” Every migrant should be aware that leaving Poland entails losing Polish citizenship, and after he or she has made up their mind to settle in Israel, there is no way

⁹ Cf. Jacobsen 1988–1989: 52–62.

¹⁰ Shabtai: 2.

¹¹ For comparison, the average salary in Israel in 1955 was 4137 dollars; see the website listing the prices of a broad range of products in a given period, <http://www.fiftiesweb.com/pop/prices-1955.html> (accessed: 29 May 2012).

¹² Cf.: Zeldin 1995: 67–88.

back.¹³ Hence any Jewish person deciding to emigrate to Israel automatically became "foreign" in the eyes of the Polish authorities.

From 1957 on, only a passport was required of the Polish Jews to emigrate to Israel. In theory this meant that they could potentially come back, but in practice the relevant procedures were much more complicated. By accepting Israeli citizenship, which was granted automatically to every Jewish person crossing the Israeli border, the immigrants would simultaneously lose their Polish citizenship.¹⁴ According to Israeli legislation, every Jewish person arriving in the country would acquire citizenship immediately, unless they had formally objected to it upon the moment of landing in Israel.

To initiate the procedure of applying for the authorisation to return, the Legation of the Polish People's Republic required that the applicant present a special document issued by the Israeli authorities which would confirm that they were not Israeli citizens. Otherwise solicitations for return authorisation could not be continued. In a top secret cryptogram from Tel Aviv, sent on January 1st 1958,¹⁵ Antoni Bida notes that the question of re-migration to Poland raised great tensions in Israel: "Israeli authorities refuse to issue certificates confirming non-acquisition of Israeli citizenship to the persons applying to emigrate to Poland. Without such a certificate the headquarters can neither issue an authorisation to return nor initiate any procedure."¹⁶

Occasionally, the *olim* who could not obtain the proper certificate attempted to enter Poland with a tourist visa and stay permanently. That practice made the Polish authorities very suspicious of Israeli tourists coming to Poland, and they double-checked every person. Those applying for a tourist visa were subjected to a long procedure, which very often featured tedious and detailed questioning.

On the 15th of January 1958 the minutes from the Warsaw session of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party were drafted.¹⁷ According to this document, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was to appoint a commission including the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Polish United Workers' Party to tackle the problem of the great number of Polish-Jewish emigrants from Poland from 1956–1957 applying for the authorisation to return and to consider granting selected couples in mixed marriages permission to return. The handling of applications submitted by eminent specialists and scholars was to be agreed upon in each case by the Secretariat of the Central Committee. All travel costs were to be fully covered by the migrants themselves. The Party and the Jewish Social-Cultural Association were to use the returns from Israel to influence the political views of the Jews, and especially of the Jewish repatriates from the USSR. The party institutions were not allowed to accept the former members of the Polish United Workers' Party who had returned or were intending to return from Israel.¹⁸

¹³ Israel State Archives, 130/43/5556/9, Y. Barzilai's document directed to M. Sharett, August 9th 1949.

¹⁴ Cf. Silber 2008: 201–219.

¹⁵ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Poland, collection of despatches, w-60, t-857. A top secret cryptogram from the Legation of the Polish People's Republic sent by A. Bida, January 2nd 1958.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Archive of New Documents (Polish Archiwum Akt Nowych, AAN), Polish United Workers' Party, 237/XIV-137, c. 8, Ethnic Affairs Commission, Resolutions, Extracts, Notes, 1957–1959, Minutes of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party no. 145 from January 8th 1958.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Statistics

It is hard to estimate the exact number of those who wanted to return to Poland, as the data are incomplete and there is a discrepancy between the figures among the various Polish and Israeli sources. Between 1951 and 1956 migration between Poland and Israel was rather rare: according to the Central Bureau of Statistics in Jerusalem,¹⁹ 20 people left for Poland in 1952, and in 1954–1955 only two people. In 1956 it became possible to emigrate from Poland to Israel, but soon hundreds of people who had left decided that they wanted to come back. On the basis of the Polish sources it may be claimed that only five people were granted the authorisation to return, while the Israeli sources mention fifteen such cases.²⁰

An analysis of the numerical data demonstrates that about 350 families (about 1,200 people) applied for authorisation to return at the Legation of the Polish People's Republic between June and December 1957.²¹ The majority of them requested permission to return right after arriving in Israel, which allows calculating the percentage of those who attempted re-migration. Assuming that over 10,000 people migrated from Poland to Israel from June to December 1957, it can be inferred that about 12% wanted to return to their previous homeland immediately.²²

On January 24th 1959 Zdzisław Tomczyk²³ send a despatch to the Director of Department no. 5 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw concerning the people wishing to return to Poland.²⁴ He quoted a range of data to demonstrate which social groups had applied for authorisation to return to Poland and the arguments used by the applicants. According to the documents, among the 146 applications: 22 were submitted by tailors; 42 by unskilled workers, more often than not without secondary education; 38 by office workers; 3 by doctors; 5 by engineers and technicians; 2 by shoemakers; 2 by artists; 29 by lawyers and economists; and 5 by the former officers of the Polish Army and the Citizens' Militia. Almost 80 applicants listed a lack of financial stability and unemployment as the reasons behind their desire to return, 22 mentioned the climate, and the rest stated that their main motivation was to reunite with their families.²⁵

About 90% of the applicants were refused permission to return to Poland. Jan Słowikowski, the chargé d'affaires of the Legation of the Polish People's Republic stated that "the authorisations to return to Poland are granted only in duly justified cases."

¹⁹ Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem, ירחון סטטיסטי לישראל [*Jarhon Statisti Le-Israel, Israeli Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*], 10, 1, 1959: 87.

²⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, z-12, w-14, t-344, Notes from the conversation with J. Barmor, the 1st Secretary of the Legation of Israel in Warsaw which took place in the Ministry, July 31st 1957.

²¹ Archives of New Documents, Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, 28324/V-59: 73, minutes from the sessions of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, a note concerning the returns to Poland, January 21st 1958.

²² Central Zionist Archives, S6/6035, A. Leonov's letter to B. Duvdevani, December 20th 1957.

²³ Zdzisław Tomczyk – attaché in the Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Tel Aviv in 1956–1961. Silber, Rudnicki 2009: 517.

²⁴ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, z-12 w-38 t-925; Department no. 5 tackled the questions connected with Israel. Zygfryd Wolniak was the director of the Department in 1959–1961. *Ibid.*: 394.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Such "cases" mainly concerned people who were still considered important by the government or the Party, or who had the support of the high officials in Poland. People born in mixed marriages could also hope to be granted permission to return. Hence Christians constituted a large portion of those coming back to Poland. Of the 23,307 people who arrived in Israel in the first half of 1957, 674 were non-Jews (3%); among those 595 (88%) were women, almost all of them married to Jewish husbands.²⁶

The case of non-jewish Gomulka immigrants

The non-Jewish immigrants in Israel were in a different situation. Not all of them were able to integrate into the Israeli society, and the Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Israel did everything they could to help those who wanted to return to Poland, especially women in mixed marriages who had married Jewish men. This extremely helpful attitude resulted from the fact that Poland still considered the non-Jewish immigrants to be Polish citizens. Many women had emigrated to Israel only to keep the family together. On the one hand, those non-Jewish immigrants were received in Israel on equal terms with other newcomers and it was hoped that they would adapt to the Israeli society, but on the other, the society often perceived them as unwelcome strangers. They often were insulted and stigmatized with slurs such as *goyim* or *shikse*. Hence many decided to return.

A rather shocking situation took place in Pardes Hanna, where the local rabbi did not permit the burial of an uncircumcised child from a mixed marriage. The incident even sparked off a debate in the Knesset, but no solution was found. Similar issues were discussed in the press as well. The Israeli authorities were totally helpless, as religious parties were in a relatively strong position in the coalition government. Neither was the Legation of the Polish People's Republic able to help. The religious parties, which tipped the scales in the coalition governments, were too strong to allow for concessions in matters key to Judaism. The Legation could only see to it that no injustices were done to Polish citizens. According to the Polish reports, non-Jewish women even wrote letters to the party leaders and government representatives, relating their tragic stories and complaining about discrimination in Israel. The Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Tel Aviv addressed the victims with sympathy, simultaneously asking the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate their return to Poland.

On December 8th 1957 the minister of Internal Affairs, Israel Bar Jehuda, said during the session of Israeli government in Jerusalem that "for a few weeks there have been applications coming to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, submitted by persons wishing to return to Poland. There are more and more of them – already 150–160 families in total. Today there has been an attempt to start a riot at the Ministry. The problem is usually caused by the reactions of the wives who want to come back to Poland [...] However, to do so, they have to present a document confirming that they are not Israeli citizens. I was also informed that some people are organising a demonstration with a Polish flag;

²⁶ Central Zionist Archives, S6/6035, A. Leonov's letter to B. Duvdevani, December 20th 1957.

in this way Poles demand the possibility to return to their old homeland.²⁷ Generally speaking, Israel did not try to prevent the return of non-Jews wishing to go back to Poland. Emigration of non-Jews to Poland was not a threat to the immigration, nor was it proof of its failure. It was quite the contrary: the return of the non-Jewish Poles fostered the national consolidation of Israel and the construction of a mono-ethnic nation state.

The problem of mixed marriages lay in the fact that a Christian wife retained Polish citizenship,²⁸ while a Jewish husband acquired Jewish citizenship on the basis of his travel documents when arriving to Israel, thus losing his Polish citizenship. This made returning to Poland together rather difficult, and couples very often turned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, demanding documents confirming non-acquisition of Israeli citizenship. The whole matter became a quite talked-about subject in the press, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Israel issued a special circular letter recommending receiving special applications from the people in question, which were to be considered by the State Legal Counsel and the minister of Foreign Affairs.²⁹

Summary

Among the many immigrants who applied to return to Poland, very few were granted the authorisation to do so, as both the Polish People's Republic and the State of Israel were negatively disposed towards the idea of return migration. The migration of Polish Jews to Israel was considered to be a factor facilitating the consolidation of both countries as mono-ethnic nation states, based on the ideas of the Jewish homeland in Israel and the Polish "socialist nation." Both countries perceived return migration as an unnecessary process hindering the achievement of their aims. Israel did not want to admit defeat in the assimilation of the newcomers, and Poland did not consider readmitting the already "foreign element" to be in the best interests of the country and the goal of building a communist state.

In spite of the difficulties in the first few months in the new homeland, the majority of the "Gomulka immigrants" adapted well to Israeli society. In 1959 the inflow of new applications was already less intense than a year earlier and was no longer happening *en masse*. This was probably because those fully determined to come back had already submitted their applications.³⁰ The majority of the rest, however, adapted to the new reality after the hard initial period or became resigned to their fates. Factors such as accommodation, employment opportunities, and educational prospects for children influenced decisions to stay in Israel as well.

²⁷ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Poland, z-20, w71, t-923, Report of the Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Tel Aviv for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, 2nd and 3rd quarters of the year 1957.

²⁸ It must be noted that in accordance with Israeli law the non-Jews did not acquire Israeli citizenship automatically, unless they had converted to Judaism.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Poland, z-20, w-71, t-924, Report of the Legation of the Polish People's Republic in Tel Aviv for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, 1st and 2nd quarter of the year 1959.

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