

West European Jews' fascination and ambivalence toward Oriental Jews is said to be a widespread phenomenon in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western Europe. West European discourses on the Orient and the desire to become a part of the emancipated and modern world undoubtedly influenced Polish Jewry's perceptions of Jews of Oriental descent. Yet the question remains: to what extent? The project aims primarily to explore and understand how Polish Jews in the interwar period represented and evaluated Jews from the Middle East. The project aims to fill the lacuna of knowledge concerning the Polish-Jewish perception of Jews from the Middle East in the interwar period. It intends to critically examine how Polish Jews regarded Jews from the Middle East, to track the evolution of Polish Jewish public discourses concerning Africa and Asia, and to identify the mechanisms and strategies that diverse Polish-Jewish social actors adopted when discussing the topic by locating the topic in its broader political and social contexts. Looking at historic encounters of Polish Jews with Jews from the Middle East, the project will develop a body of knowledge that may help to understand contemporary Jewish and Israeli identities and their attitudes towards the Other. The work will focus primarily on the post-imperial moment in Poland and in the Middle East, namely the interwar period, but also refer to earlier times (from the 1890s).

To achieve the goals of the project, I will answer three questions: 1) how did encounters between Polish Jews and Jews from the Middle East occur in the interwar period, 2) who met whom, and finally 3) what reactions did it cause? In response to the first question, I will analyze three spaces where the encounters could have happened: Poland, the Middle East, France (where both Polish and Middle Eastern Jews migrated in the interwar period). I will determine how Polish Jews perceived the Other in these various spaces with different power structures and acceptance of immigrants. I will also compare the conditions under which the encounters took place. In addressing the second question, I will identify who wrote or spoke publicly about Jews from the Middle East, paying special attention to their social belonging, their political leanings, religiosity etc. and explore how and to what end these people influenced Polish-Jewish politics, science, culture, and institutions. In doing so, I will analyze their personal narratives and argue for the importance of tracing microhistories of Polish Jews, who had to figure out for themselves the thorny issues of modernization, tradition, assimilation, and secularization. By showing individual perspectives, I will illuminate how in the early twentieth century, Polish Jews established discursive constructions of Middle Eastern Jewry. I will explore status-related multi-perspectivity and endeavor to find the factors which determined their attitudes. Finally, the third question probes how Jews from Middle Eastern countries responded to this Orientalism and discourses about themselves. This will require my analysis of public discussions on the issues of race, ethnicity, identity, modernity, and Jewishness. I want to know two things: first, what Polish Jews could have thought about Jews from the Middle East and the inverse, and also how both groups imagined themselves in this context. This will help me to determine the dynamic of this othering, and to establish its specific features and practices.

The project has an interdisciplinary character, bringing together methods principally from the fields of history and cultural studies. Due to the basic nature of existing research and the scant literature on the subject, the project will require archival research to enable an analysis of Polish-Jewish perceptions.

The final objective of the project is to disseminate, publish, and publicize the results of the research through a series of academic research outputs, including conference presentations, articles, and a book manuscript.