

World War I drastically changed the situation of the entire Eastern European population, but it had particular and specific effects on Jews. The war hindered the mass migration that had been taking place for several decades, forcing the poverty-stricken Jewish masses to compete for few economic opportunities to survive within the region. The war not only denied Jews the chance to alleviate their financial situations by going abroad, but the economic downturn, army recruitment and deportations accompanying the conflict led to worsening the poverty of Jewish society. The post-war year, characterized by immigration restrictions, among others in the US, Argentina, and Palestine, as well as the economic downturn, turned the situation of the Jewish population even more unbearable.

The proposed project is a social history of Polish-Jewish women between 1914 and 1939, analyzing how did these women experience the described above challenges. This project aims to verify and expand the hypothesis that for some women, the absence of men and, for others, men's inability to support the family financially during the war and the interwar period led to the creation of a bigger space for independence for Jewish women, changes in social mores, gender roles, and intra-family relations. Individual histories of women from the Jewish lower classes will be situated in a broader context of macrostructures that determined the Jewish women's opportunities and choices. Some of these delineating structures were, e.g., the local economy and Jewish place within it; the legal position of women in the Polish Republic and how their emancipation worked in practice; migratory laws that exposed protectionist attitude towards women, especially in the interwar period. Individual women's decisions will also be situated in the microstructures in which they functioned – the Jewish community and family (and their attitudes toward women's gainful employment, emigration, and the independence of women in general). Analyzing how Jewish women responded to the economic and financial challenges they and, their families and Jewish communities faced will allow a better understanding of the transformations in social mores within the Jewish community in the period under study.

The proposed research is innovative because it is the first study of women from the Jewish lower classes. Until now, at the center of scholarly interest stood exceptional figures, like writers and poets, acculturated journalists or philanthropists, politically conscious Bundists or Zionists. This project's innovativeness also lies in its chronological framework that bridges World War One with the following interwar period. This project will emphasize the continuity in Jewish history in the Polish land from the partitioned period until 1939 and that looking at these earlier times can help illuminate the Jewish situation and behaviors on the eve of World War II.

As the aim of this project is to explore the social history of Jewish women from the lower classes, which made the majority of Polish Jewry, it will rely on a wide range of sources. This group of historical actors did not produce many direct sources for the historian. Still, the voices of women and their collective situation can be reconstructed from reports and correspondence of Jewish organizations functioning in Poland and internationally, such as JOINT or Sopromitis (Argentina), Polish state organs, Jewish communal organs, and widely-conceived Polish and Jewish journalism appearing in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Spanish and English.

The results of the project will deepen our knowledge about the experiences of Polish Jewish women between 1914 and 1939, and they will advance our understanding of this group of Jewish women who had to face another set of challenges in the face of the Holocaust. The results of this project will have significance beyond the history of women – utilized gender methodology and used sources will allow for drawing broader conclusions about the transformations experienced by Polish Jewry and the transnational character of this community.