

Before WWII, an estimated three million Jews lived in Poland. Their exodus was underway then, and about to continue for many years to come. In total, between 1918 and 1948, two hundred thousand Polish Jews settled in Palestine, forming the largest immigrant group among the Jewish population there. According to the 1926 survey, Jews from Poland constituted 37.6% of the total Palestine Jews. A decade later, this was 36.5%.

The first post war Jews were forced to leave Poland by a wave of anti-Semite repressions, with no idea what awaited them in Palestine. They were followed by those who were leaving in a hurry, forcibly removed, holding a travel document instead of a passport. This document entitled them to cross the Polish border one way without a possibility of returning. Accepting it was tantamount to giving up Polish citizenship. Not accepting it only prolonged their stay in Poland until the next anti-Semitic campaign by the communist government.

From November 1956, the Polish Jews would receive foreign passports, but the borders would be opened briefly and partially. In line with the so called 'resource regulations', many members of the ruling party disappointed by communism would leave. Former secret police functionaries would emigrate, fearing the consequences of their repressions against political prisoners between 1944 and 1955. Among these migrants were also ordinary people. Workers, intelligentsia, office staff and artisans, Jewish orphans from the Polish children's homes. Whoever the Polish People's Republic threw out, was adopted by Israel. Specialists educated in Poland were given out 'for free'. Outstanding scientists, engineers, technicians and doctors were leaving Poland.

Not all of them coped with the difficulties of their new existence. Particularly hard hit were the Jews who had assimilated in Poland, considered themselves to be Polish and who wished to be seen as Poles. Some of them wanted to return to Poland. Especially their catholic spouses in mixed marriages could not endure cultural differences and xenophobia.

Those who lived through the worst anti-Semitic repressions at the time of Gomulka government, grit their teeth and tried to adapt to the new circumstances. They had nothing to return to. They left not because they were forced to, but because in March 1968 Poland turned out to be the only country in which they could not be who they felt to be – Poles.

It was March 1968, when the First Secretary of the ruling party, Wladyslaw Gomulka, in a private rally in the Congress Hall tried to convince everyone that he was not against the Jews, but merely opposed to the 'Jewish nationalism' (the Soviet Union supported Palestine in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The shouts of approval from

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the party members who liked the prospect of cleansing the country of the Zionists, was a prelude to what was going to happen. Polish Jews gradually realised that they were not seen to be like the rest of the Poles and that they would be asked to pay a high price for this once again.

In the following days all media rolled out an anti-Zionist campaign. It said that 'students of Jewish origin, children of the Jewish dignitaries and Jewish oppressors from the Stalin's security forces, prompted by the Zionist-revisionist emissaries, had lead naïve Polish youth to the anti-Communist party rebellion'. The students' revolt was a coup d'état arranged for the purpose of pulling Poland away from the Socialist states camp which supported the Arab countries in the conflict.

This anti-Semitic campaign went on not only in the media. All regional party committees organised huge rallies (for example hundred thousand people in Katowice) in which, 'the society' condemned 'Zionist instigators'. In one of them, Edward Gierek referring to the favourite Gomulka's metaphor (who was wound up by anything that concerned his government) threatened that 'the Silesian water will crush the bones of the rebels, if they keep trying to reverse the current chosen by the nation'. Open meetings were organised in all institutions, offices, factories. Jews were condemned and requested to be sacked. If no Jews were found to hand, a random intellectual or anyone of a foreign sounding surname would be picked on.

Besides officers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, journalists, editors, teachers and scientists were sacked as well as ordinary workers, tailors or shoemakers.

Even if we consider that March events were not very dramatic (particularly after the Holocaust), even if only a handful of people died of 'just a heart attack', for the people forced to once again emigrate despite their patriotism and the will to stay in Poland, the departure for Israel was a stab in their hearts. Once again, they were evicted from their homes and their own country. On the wave of anti-Semitic feelings, many Poles did not even hide their joy on the news that the Polish Jews were leaving, even though a part of Poland was leaving with them.

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