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JEWS IN POLAND IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

A post-war story in photographs

by Monika Heinemann, Julia Roos

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Photo credit: Julia Pirotte, Ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, intersection of Bohaterów Ghetta (Ghetto Heroes) and Mordechai Anielewicz Streets, Warsaw 1946. Photograph from the collection of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. Free access - no reuse

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Self-determination and violence, mourning and new beginnings, reconstruction and emigration – photographs illustrate the ambivalence of Jewish lives in post-war Poland. How were these pictures created and distributed, and what is it that they fail to show us?

A sign is visible at an intersection in the middle of the ruins of Warsaw: the street names on it are dedicated to the "ghetto heroes", the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and Mordechai Anielewicz, one of its leaders. In other words, the sign was erected only shortly before 1946 when this photograph was taken in the "desert of bricks", as the Polish author Jerzy Putrament described the area of the former ghetto at the time. The image, like all of the images referred to in this essay, is part of the photograph archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw.

Stories in Photo Albums

The photographs

photographs

The photographs referred to in the text can be seen until the beginning of 2026 in the exhibition, "The Determining Gaze. Images of Jewish Life in Postwar Poland," at the Leibniz Institute for Jewish History and Culture – Simon Dubnow. The exhibition was prepared in close cooperation with the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. It can be visited on a public tour or a pre-booked guided tour.

preserved in the archive are sources that offer us a very specific insight into the immediate postwar years in Poland. However, they are not objective, direct illustrations of their time. After all, the images here have been taken by specific photographers for specific clients, and so subjects and compositions are typically chosen to present particular perspectives and interpretations. It is therefore important to take a look "behind the camera": what was photographed for which purpose, what was prominently staged, what can only be understood today with the relevant background knowledge? What remains invisible?
Since photographs only played a subordinate role for many decades, both in historical research and within archives, in most cases there is no surviving information about the client or the photographer. In some cases, photos within individual collections became separated from the documents that they related to. Individual pictures were removed or lost, so that their background can no longer be reconstructed. This makes the collection of albums preserved by the JHI all the more valuable: here the photos appear as pictorial narratives and provide us with perspectives that were deliberately compiled for a particular audience. These collections were often produced by organizations such as the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP)

Central Committee of Jews in Poland

also: Central Jewish Committee in Poland, Central Committee of Polish Jews

The most important official organisation representing Jews in Poland after the Holocaust; from 1944 to 1950 it supported surviving Jews in various areas of life. The CKŻP sponsored programmes that provided support through the provision of food, accommodation, medical help and job placement as well as the organisation of educational and vocational training and cultural activities. It also coordinated aid for Jews repatriated from the Soviet Union and provided assistance for legal emigration. The institution, which was primarily financed by the Polish government, also received financial support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

or youth organizations.

Jewish life in post-war Poland

Jewish life in Poland immediately following the Holocaust was filled with contradictory experiences. Places where there had been large Jewish communities before the war were now marked by destruction, loss and emptiness. The ruined landscape in the centre of Warsaw on the site of the former ghetto became a symbol of this.
In Lower Silesia, a formerly German area, Jewish life briefly flourished for a few years. Jews who had survived the war in Poland, had fled from Germany to the Soviet Union or been deported there by the Soviet occupiers and then returned, settled here. The Polish government deliberately channeled people to this region. But at the same time there were assaults on Jews. The largest was the Pogrom of Kielce in summer 1946: inhabitants of the town murdered more than 40 Polish Jews and around 80 were injured.
For the majority of holocaust survivors, Poland resembled a gigantic cemetery, a place where millions of Jews who had been murdered by the German occupiers lay buried. This experience, together with the escalation of violence that continued even after the war, were the main reasons why many of the survivors had emigrated by the end of the decade.

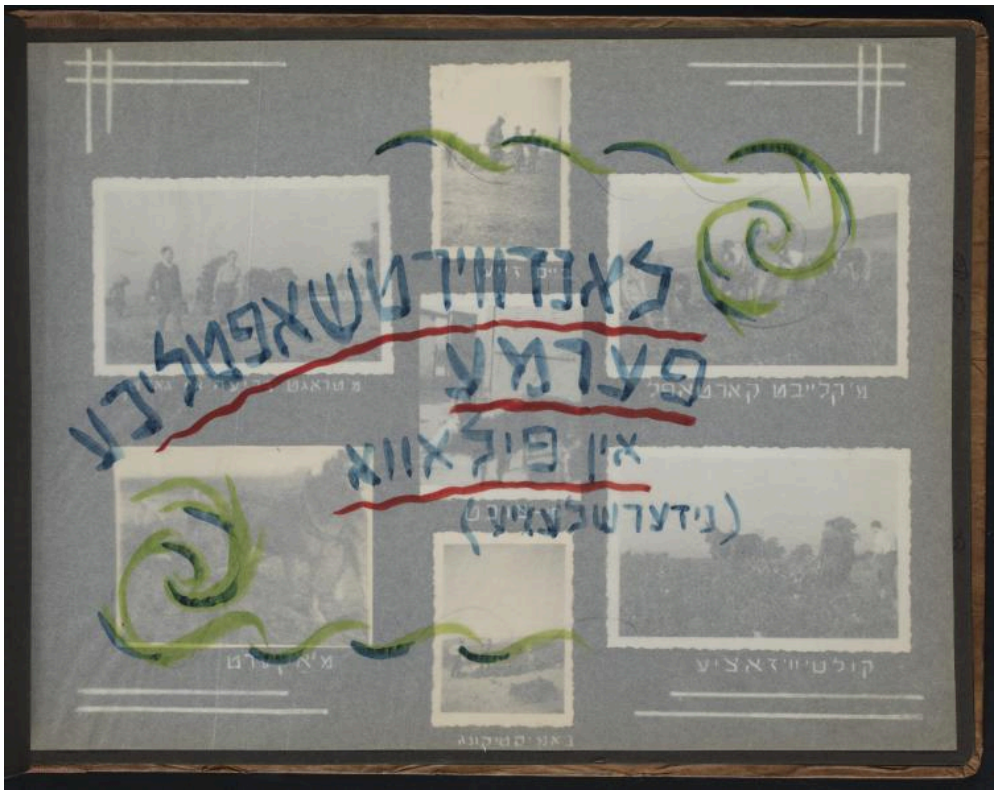
Visions for the future: to go or to stay?

Album: "From the life of the 'Gordonia Makkabi Hatzair' youth movement in Poland", Łódź 1947:

Title page.

Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute

The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.



> Album: “From the life of the ‘Gordonia Makkabi Hatzair’ youth movement in Poland”, Łódź 1947:
>
> Page from the Album.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album: “From the life of the ‘Gordonia Makkabi Hatzair’ youth movement in Poland”, Łódź 1947:
>
> Hebrew Lessons.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

Free access - no reuse

> Album: "From the life of the 'Gordonia Makkabi Hatzair' youth movement in Poland", Łódź 1947:
>
> Group photo with a portrait of Aharon David Gordon.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

One of the destinations of the emigrants was the British Mandate of Palestine, and various organizations promoted this choice. One of the albums in the JHI's collection describes a summer camp organised by the youth movement Gordonia Makkabi Hatzair

Gordonia

also: Gordonia Maccabi Hatzair, Gordonia-Maccabi Hatzair

Zionist youth movement that originated in Poland in 1923 and developed into a worldwide movement. Named after Aharon David Gordon, the pioneer and found of a non-Marxist, socialist-proletarian current of Zionism. Important principles of the movement were the construction of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the education of members in humanistic values and the reinvigoration of the Hebrew language.

in 1947 in Łódź. The goal of this Zionist organisation, established in Poland in the 1920s and reactivated after the war, was to prepare people for emigration. The album, which is labelled in Yiddish and Hebrew, and which has been preserved in its entirety, shows young people attending Hebrew classes as well as a group photo with a portrait of the man after whom the organisation was named, Aharon David Gordon.

Free access - no reuse

Album “Summer camp organised by the Tsukunft youth organisation”, Kamionkovo [today: Pieszyce-Kamionki], 1946:

Title page.

Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute

The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Summer camp organised by the Tsukunft youth organisation”, Kamionkovo [today: Pieszyce-Kamionki], 1946:
>
> Page from the album.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Summer camp organised by the Tsukunft youth organisation”, Kamionkovo [today: Pieszyce-Kamionki], 1946:
>
> Military exercise.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

Free access - no reuse

> Album “Summer camp organised by the Tsukunft youth organisation”, Kamionkovo [today: Pieszyce-Kamionki], 1946:
>
> Group photo with weapons.
>
> © Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

Another album is from a summer camp in Lower Silesia in 1946, organised by Tsukunft

Tsukunft
also: Future

Founded in 1913 as a socialist and non-Zionist youth organisation, after 1916 the official youth organisation of the Bund (General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia).

, the official youth organisation of the Bund

The Bund

also: General Jewish Workers' League in Lithuania, Poland and Russia

The "General Jewish Workers' League in Lithuania, Poland and Russia" was founded in 1897 in Vilnius and united numerous socialists of Jewish origin. The Bundists opposed the desire for a Jewish state, as propagated by Zionism, and advocated expanded Jewish autonomy rights in the Diaspora. During World War II, the Polish branch of the Bund continued to operate underground and participated, among other things, in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

after 1916. The few who managed to survive the Holocaust campaigned for Jewish self-determination in Poland. The album shows members participating in military exercises and a group photo with weapons. In contrast to the Gordonia album there are large gaps since many photos have been removed.

The albums of the two youth organizations illustrate the heterogeneity of Jews in Poland and their different visions for the future of the Jewish community. The Tsukunft album also makes it clear that, at least initially, many planned to remain in Poland.

Commemoration: Anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Commemorative celebration on the second anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by a memorial plaque on the site of the former ghetto at the intersection of the (pre-war) Zamenhof- and Gęsia Streets, Warsaw, 19 April 1945. Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute.
Free access - no reuse

For the survivors, it was not only these very different visions of the future that defined this period. The memory of the catastrophe of the Second World War and the Nazi policy of extermination also played an important role. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising represented an important mental anchor for the Jewish community: on 19 April 1943, inadequately armed Jews rose up in opposition to further deportations to the extermination camps. They fought against the German occupying forces for several weeks.
The first anniversary of the uprising took place while the German occupation was still ongoing.Participants in the uprising and Jews who were living in hiding secretly commemorated this act of opposition, which was the largest to take place during the Holocaust. On the second anniversary on 19 April 1945, a few people including survivors and former fighters as well as members of various Jewish parties met in the middle of the sea of ruins into which the Germans had transformed the ghetto when they suppressed the uprising. German troops had been forced out of the city in January of the same year, but the war was not yet over. The return of the population of the city of Warsaw following its deportation in the course of the uprising by the Polish Home Army in August and September 1944 had only just begun. But even at this early stage, the collective commemoration of the Uprising was considered so important that the CKŻP commissioned professional photographers to document the gathering.

A camera team for the Department of Culture and Propaganda of the Central Committee for Jews in Poland films the fourth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Warsaw, 20 April 1947. The whole album is devoted to this event. The photos were taken by a photojournalist from the photo agency of the state enterprise Film Polski, probably Stanisław Dąbrowiecki. Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. Free access - no reuse

The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

In the years that followed, the commemorative events continued to be systematically recorded. In 1947 the CKŻP designed an album with more than 70 pages of large format photographs to mark the fourth anniversary. The photos were also sent to Jewish media in other countries. From this year onwards, the celebrations expanded considerably. Tribute was paid to the heroism of the fighters, connecting them with narratives about rebirth and the building of a new life. From the 1950s onwards, the events gradually became more politicized and increasingly fell under the control of a state whose universalistic narrative concentrated on the Polish nation, eventually removing any reference to the specific circumstances of the Nazi extermination policy directed at Jews. Beyond their use for political means, the commemoration events played an important social role for Jews in Poland, since they brought Holocaust survivors together. Participation was not just a public display of solidarity, but also evidence of the continuing existence of the Jewish people.

Hope and a fresh start: Jewish life in Lower Silesia

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Theatre. The album contains several photos of this performance.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Taylor’s workshop with Singer sewing machines.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Agricultural work.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Worker’s pub. Its name is written on the window in Yiddish and Polish. The venue, right on the marketplace, was a centre for Bund activity.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

Free access - no reuse

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Fajwisz Nessing, ice-cream seller.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

> Album “Photo-reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia”; the pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]:
>
> Visit by the famous Jewish-American actress Molly Picon.
>
> Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
>
> The album can be viewed in full on the JHI website ↗.

A large collection of albums shows Jewish life in Lower Silesia. Photos that were taken in the former German regions tell of hope and a fresh start. At the request of the Department for Culture and Propaganda of the CKŻP, the Jewish Committee of Rychbach, today Dzierżoniów, compiled an album with 71 images that was supposed to showcase the daily life and achievements of the new inhabitants in a positive light. The photos show a performance by a children's dance group, crafts and agriculture, a worker's pub, an ice-cream seller and a visit by the American-Jewish theatre star Molly Picon. Captions have mainly been added by hand in Polish. However, the title page is set out in three languages – Polish, Yiddish and English – showing that the photos were also addressed to an international public. The Polish government used them to show an international audience the new start for Jewish life in Lower Silesia and with it also to justify the incorporation of the region into Poland after 1945.

Two members of the Jewish self-defense group guard the House of Culture; from the album "Photo reportage on Jewish life in Lower Silesia", The pictures were taken 1945–1946 in Rychbach [today: Dzierżoniów]. Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. Free access - no reuse

The Polish authorities as well as the CKŻP encouraged Jews to settle in the former German territories for a further reason: they feared conflicts if they returned to their former homes, since non-Jewish inhabitants had appropriated Jewish property. The anti-Jewish violence that was widespread in the early post-war years is only hinted at in the album from Dzierżoniów: two armed men are standing in front of the entrance to the House of Culture – Rychbach members of the Jewish self-defense group.

The Kielce Pogrom in the photographs by Julia Pirotte

Coffins for the victims of the Kielce Pogrom in front of the St. Alexander Hospital. In the foreground two children's coffins are visible. Taken by Julia Pirotte on 8 July 1946 in Kielce. Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. Free access - no reuse

Another photo collection from the JHI addresses violence against Jews but only indirectly, by showing its consequences. Photos taken immediately after the Kielce Pogrom of 4 July 1946 show heavily injured and traumatized people in the hospital and the hospital courtyard filled with the coffins of the victims. In the foreground several smaller coffins can be made out – an indirect yet oppressive reminder of the blind violence of the angry mob that spared neither old people, women (including a pregnant woman), babies or small children.

Julia Pirotte, self-portrait in the mirror with camera, Marseille 1943. Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute.
Free access - no reuse

The images were taken by the photographer and journalist Julia Pirotte, herself of Jewish origin, who had returned to Poland, the country of her childhood, just a few weeks earlier. Threatened with imprisonment due to her membership in the banned Communist Party, she left Poland in 1934.
How Julia Pirotte herself perceived the widespread violence against Jews in her homeland is not known. However, as a journalist for *Żołnierz Polski* (Polish Soldier), the weekly magazine of the Polish military, she was an attentive and critical observer. At the request of her editor, she travelled to Kielce during the night of 4-5 July, after news of the pogrom had spread. In a report about her experiences leading up to the funeral on 8 July, she quotes the following statement from one of the victims: “We lay the whole night outside the hospital. The doctors wouldn’t admit us. They also believed we’d killed a Polish child.”[1] The antisemitic accusation of a ritual killing which sparked the pogrom, together with the persistently hostile attitude of the non-Jewish population towards the victims, are aspects that remain outside the photographs. And yet, these photos are special: Pirotte was one of only a few photojournalists at the scene. Her photos, three rolls of film containing 118 pictures, were lost shortly afterwards under circumstances that remain unclear until today. Pirotte made new negatives of some of the pictures from the few contact prints she had already made. Some of them were published in a report on the pogrom in *Żołnierz Polski* in 1946. However, the images –

like the public memory of the pogrom – then disappeared for several decades. It was only on the 1991 anniversary of the pogrom that the photographer brought the photos from her private archive back to the public again.

Private perspectives, invisible realities

It was not only censorship that limited the range of subject matter in the images that we know today. Due to scarce financial and technical resources, few private photographs were taken in post-war Poland. Of the few images that were taken, some are no longer in Poland, having left the country together with their owners. Another important aspect is the fact that pictures in private collections are often not – or not yet – accessible through archives and databases. They remain with private individuals, glued into family albums.
Photos capture moments that later turn out to have been fleeting. In 1947, Julia Pirotte photographed a banner in a Jewish workers' cooperative in Warsaw. In Yiddish it says that the Polish People's Democracy guarantees the free economic and cultural development of the Jewish population in Poland. Only two years later, however, the government had dissolved almost all Jewish organizations, and most of the Jewish inhabitants had left the country.

Tailoring work in a Jewish workers' cooperative, Warsaw 1947, taken by Julia Pirotte. The banner on the wall reads, in Yiddish: "the Polish People's Democracy guarantees the free economic and cultural development of the Jewish population in Poland". Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. Free access - no reuse

The complex situation in which the tailors found themselves is not visible: traumatized, deprived of their families and destitute, they faced economic difficulties and had to find their way in a society that was partly hostile towards them. In this respect this image is also an example of what photos do not (or cannot) show. Photographs can thus have an effect that goes beyond the original intention of those who took and commissioned them. If one considers them in the wider context of the time in which they were taken, contexts that the photographers did not mean to include, as well as gaps become visible.

Footnotes

1. Cited from Helander, Joanna: Julia Pirotte's Documentation of the Kielce Pogrom. In: Twarze i dłonie. Faces and Hands. Fotografie Julii Pirotte ze zbiorów Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego. Julia Pirotte's Photographs from the Collection of the Jewish Historical Institute. Ed. Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, Warszawa 2012, pp. 24–29, here p. S. 25. ↥

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