



De-assimilation Without Assimilation? The Continuities in the Polish Secular Model of Jewishness

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Abstract

This article critically examines Krajewski’s (in this issue of *Contemp Jewry*) argument about the assimilation and subsequent de-assimilation of the Jewish population in Poland. While Krajewski asserts that Polish Jews underwent a process of assimilation followed by a revival of their cultural and religious practices, the authors argue that the term “de-assimilation” is not applicable in this context. They propose that post-war Polish Jews consciously chose to embrace a secular identity rather than a religious one, keeping their Jewish life private. This secular identity, characterized by interests in secular Jewish culture, learning, and social justice, as well as maintaining specific distinctive habits, remained dominant even after 1989. The authors also compare this process to the experiences of Spanish and Portuguese *conversos*, who returned to Judaism but retained syncretic identities. They emphasize the importance of understanding the complex nature of Jewish identity and involvement, highlighting the significance of secular and cultural practices among Polish Jews.

Keywords Assimilation · Acculturation · Secular identity · Social identity · Polish Jews

Introduction

According to Krajewski (2023), the Jewish population in Poland underwent a comprehensive process of assimilation, resulting in the loss of their cultural and religious identity while becoming fully diluted into Polish society. The evidence supporting this complete assimilation includes a decline in interest in participating in the remaining Jewish institutions, the adoption of Polish-sounding names, the abandonment of synagogues, and a lack of religious practices. Krajewski specifically

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highlights the period after 1968 as a time when this assimilation reached its peak in Poland. However, in the 1980s, and especially following the systemic transition in 1989, Poland experienced a resurgence of interest in both religious and cultural practices, leading to a noticeable revitalization of religious communal life. Krajewski proposes the term “de-assimilation” to describe the Jewish revival process that commenced in Poland during the 1970s, gained momentum in the 1990s, and signifies a departure from the state of complete assimilation experienced by Jews.

In response to Krajewski’s argument, we propose that the term “de-assimilation” is not applicable to the Jewish revival in Poland after 1989, as the Jewish community did not undergo complete assimilation in the first place. Instead, we suggest that post-war Polish Jews made a conscious choice to embrace a secular identity rather than a religious one, while also keeping their Jewish life private. This process is characteristic of many historically traumatized communities. The predominance of this secular identity persisted even after 1989 and remains a central aspect of the contemporary identity of Polish Jews. Furthermore, we argue that a similar process occurred among Spanish and Portuguese *conversos*, which were cited by Krajewski (2023) as additional examples of a de-assimilation process.

Did Polish Jews in Fact Assimilate?

Assimilation is often viewed as an extreme form of acculturation, so that the assimilating minority group becomes socially indistinguishable from the members of the nation’s majority (Berry 2005). The concept of de-assimilation, as utilized by Krajewski, suggests that Polish Jews underwent such an assimilation process in post-war Poland. The term assimilation has been frequently used also by other scholars studying post-war Polish Jewry (Podemski 1977; Gudonis 2001). However, it can be argued that the assimilation experienced during the communist era was distinct and far from a complete absorption into the Polish ethnic majority. This “red assimilation” (a term used by Wat 2003) still kept Jews relatively separate from the dominant society. A survey of Wrocław Jews (Bronsztejn 1963) found that 19.5% of Jews in this city lived in homogeneously Jewish social environments with no Polish friends, and more than half of the Jewish population in Wrocław lived in mostly Jewish social environments. Simultaneously, the majority of these individuals did not engage in Jewish communal or religious life nor read Yiddish press. Therefore, their Jewishness was clearly private, without any publicly visible cultural or religious signs.

In the prominent psychological model of acculturation, Berry (2005) considers assimilation as one of the strategies of acculturation: the one in which the minority group does not maintain any heritage or identity, at the same time seeking to be part of the social network of majority group. According to Berry, assimilation is possible when the dominant acculturating group becomes a “melting pot,” an inclusive society open to full immersion of minorities. Polish post-war society was clearly not an example of such a society.

The ethno-nationalist character of post-war Poland is effectively exemplified by Czesław Miłosz, who emphasized the nationalist roots of Polish communism in his

"Treatise on Poetry" ("Jest ONR-u spadkobiercą Partia"; Miłosz 2001). Jews were acutely reminded of this fact through a series of recurring episodes of intensified antisemitism. The Kielce pogrom in 1946 stands as a notable example (Tokarska-Bakir 2023), accompanied by a wave of similar incidents in the early post-war years (Gross 2007). The prevailing anti-Jewish sentiment in 1956 (Węgrzyn 2014) and the antisemitic purge in 1968 (Plocker 2022) further contributed to a widespread atmosphere of hostility toward Jews. These events served as stark reminders of the enduring anti-Jewish sentiments within the ethnic Polish population, leading to the re-traumatization of a generation that had either survived the Holocaust or escaped the loss of their families and relatives.

In response to the hostile environment, individuals within the Jewish minority in Poland adopted expressions of Jewish identity that minimized the risk to the physical survival of the Jewish population. Paradoxically, this adaptation fulfilled the religious commandment of *pikuach nefesh*, which prioritizes the preservation of life. Examples of identity suppression during times of threat include the widespread abandonment of circumcision among Jews, the cessation of religious practices, changing surnames into Polish-sounding ones and the deliberate decision to refrain from passing down the Yiddish language to subsequent generations. However, it is important to note that despite these measures, certain interests and the maintenance of social networks allowed for the emergence of an alternative form of Jewish identity.

Intimate Secular Identity: A Key to Understanding Polish Jewishness

In a recent debate on assimilation among American Jewry, Aronson et al. (2019) call for acknowledging the multifaceted nature of Jewish engagement instead of a continuum from assimilation to involvement. Specifically, they proposed to distinguish a category of "cultural Jews"—the ones who are not involved in any regular religious practices, unaffiliated with synagogues, but still feel strong connections to the Jewish community. The concept of cultural Jewishness seems to be an appropriate description of the post-war Jewishness in Poland, as well as the current Jewish community in the country.

Bronsztejn (1963) already points to the fact that before 1968 a common expression of Jewishness were visits to Jewish theater. In addition to that, sympathies for Israel (albeit not publicly expressed), interests in secular Jewish-themed literature, culture of learning (highly valued education and science), and commitment to social justice (leading oftentimes to engagement in democratic opposition) became landmarks of Jewish identity in post-war Poland. This specific form of identity and set of values was common among the progressive Jewish left in other countries (the "non-Jewish Jews"; Deutscher 2017) and distinguished Polish Jews from the majority of Poles. It was also similar to the dominant Jewish identity in the Soviet Union, where the "Jewish bookshelf"—a set of books by Feuchtwanger and translations of Sholem Aleikhem—became cultural symbols of Jewish homes (Grinberg 2018). Reading practices replaced religious practices.

In fact, this specific cultural form of Jewish identity remained dominant after 1989. Although the rebirth of religious life has been well documented (Gudonis 2001; Reszke 2013), its scale has been quite marginal, relative to the size of the community. During the three decades after 1989 the few remaining Polish synagogues constantly dealt with the problem of forming a *minyan* for daily practices.

A survey looking at different communal practices (Bilewicz and Wójcik 2010) found that most Polish Jews preferred secular forms of Jewish involvement rather than religious activities or emigration to Israel. When asked, in the same study, what is important in their Jewish identity, Polish Jews most often pointed to “sensitivity to antisemitism”, “experience of the Holocaust”, “Jewish ancestry,” and “culture (music, literature)”. “Jewish languages”, “traditions and customs,” and “religion (Judaism, commandments, observing holidays)” were the least chosen options. The 2018 survey of Jewish communities in Europe conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA 2018) found that the majority of Polish Jews would not consider the potential prohibition of *brit mila* or *shechitah* to be a problem. Opposition to a circumcision or *shechitah* ban in Poland was the lowest among all 12 surveyed European countries, and Poland together with Hungary were the only European countries where the majority of Jews declared acceptance of a potential *brit mila* ban.

The study of values of East European Jews conducted by the IPSOS institute for JDC International Centre for Community Development (Kovacs 2011) confirmed that the majority of Polish Jews’ (52%) Jewish identity has nothing to do with religion. Polish responses to this question (“What does it mean to be Jewish?”) stand out even compared with other countries of the region—for 74% of Romanians, 60% of Bulgarians, and 51% of Latvians, Jewishness is a religion. On the contrary, the vast majority of Poles (67%) define their Jewishness in relation to antisemitism, or to the Holocaust (73%), much more than in other countries of the region (Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary, and Romania). Many Jews in Poland would affirm that one becomes Jewish by birth (82%) and by culture (79%). This clearly confirms that contemporary Polish Jews have a strong sense of Jewish identity, but this identity is not defined by religion.

At the same time, the Jewish revival described by Krajewski should not be trivialized. However, its most important expressions are massive Jewish festivals in Kraków (attracting Jewish and non-Jewish Poles alike) rather than Shabbat services in Nożyk synagogue. A study conducted in 2010 examining religious conversions revealed that a significant proportion of Polish *baalei teshuvah* were individuals with a deeply religious Catholic background, often lacking any Jewish ancestry (Buchwald-Pawlak 2011). Many of these individuals did not remain actively engaged within Jewish communities due to the considerable challenges associated with practicing their faith in a country where essential services for religious life were lacking. Consequently, this predicament led to either emigration or the complete abandonment of Jewish communal life. Buchwald-Pawlak (2011) argues that the motivations driving these conversions were primarily rooted in the pursuit of a distinct identity rather than purely religious factors.

Religious engagement among the Jewish minority in Poland did not extend to significant segments of the population, particularly among the youth from secular Jewish families. Instead, the younger generation expressed their Jewish identity

through secular and cultural practices, for example youth activism within Jewish student organizations such as ŻOOM, Czulent, Hillel, and PUSZ, as well as through initiatives focused on promoting Jewish heritage, including the Polin Museum, educational organizations such as the Forum for Dialogue, and Judaic studies programs at universities. This growing immersion in cultural aspects of Jewish life is also supported by survey data. For instance, in a cross-national comparative study by Kovacs (2011), 54% of Polish Jews reported an increase in their involvement in Jewish life within the preceding 5 years, a higher percentage compared with other countries in the region such as Bulgaria (36%) and Hungary (42%).

Similarity to Sephardic *conversos*

Krajewski compares the de-assimilation of the contemporary Polish Jews with Spanish and Portuguese *conversos*, that is, converts to Catholicism, some of whom, after emigrating from the Iberian Peninsula, returned to Judaism, joining existing Jewish communities. This happened especially in Holland, where they established one of the most vibrant Sephardic communities in Europe. However, the return of the *conversos* to their ancestral faith was not a simple passage back from Christian to Jewish identity. The identity of *conversos*, or, as they were called, *marranos*, was far from simple. In general, we can distinguish three basic *converso* attitudes to the new faith (Gerber 1992): (1) people who wanted to become Christians and fully embraced their new identity; (2) people who officially embraced Christianity but remained faithful in secrecy, practicing its specific, simplified form in disguise; and (3) people who were nominally Christians but acquired a secular identity and a rationalist mindset.

However, the situation of *marranos* was even more complicated. The identity of many *conversos* was ambiguous and fluid. As Calimani and Sulman (2005) argued, *marranos* were “people of the margin,” not being able to fit into established social categories. Calimani gives examples of people fluctuating between two religions and two communities, e.g., by getting baptized a couple of times. It was due to their ambiguity and incompatibility, Calimani argued, that *conversos* attracted the attention of Inquisition tribunals. Again, this was also due to the fact that Spain clearly did not meet the standards of a melting pot, a society allowing for assimilation to occur (Berry 2005).

Most of the *conversos* did not fully assimilate; they remained a specific, distinct group. In many places they constituted a community on their own rights, calling themselves *a nação*, or, in Portuguese, the nation (Kaplan 2000). They thus acknowledged their Jewish roots, forming a new sense of secret communal life, incompatible with any of the established categories. In many cases, as Yovel (1989) claims, their otherness was different and stronger than the otherness of Jews. Their ambiguity and a conviction that they may be not stable in their faith made them even more alien than religious Jews.

Even after returning to Judaism, as in the seventeenth century Sephardic community of Amsterdam, former *marranos* remained distinct from their Jewish communities. Many became heretics, embracing what they thought was a reformed version

of Judaism (Uriel da Costa, criticizing “the Pharisaic tradition”), rationalism, or even atheism (Juan de Prado). The most known case was Baruch Spinoza, a philosopher who was given a *cherem* from the Amsterdam community (like Uriel da Costa, who died by suicide) likened God with nature, and called for the establishment of a “religion of reason” that would constitute a base for a rationalist and tolerant state. Thus, it was secularism that was perceived by the *marranos* as a solution to religious doubt, ambiguity, and alienation.

It seems, though, that the *marranos* never fully assimilated to the Christian community, but after returning to Judaism, many of them did not fully de-assimilate but retained distinct, syncretic identities. This makes them somewhat similar to the secular Jews of contemporary Poland who did not fully assimilate to post-war ethnic Polish society.

Summary

Stanisław Krajewski accurately portrays the multifaceted process of the rebuilding of Jewish communal life in recent decades. The Jewish revival after 1989 has been characterized by an intensification of interest in Jewish culture, which was already evident in the 1970s and 1980s. This phenomenon can be compared with previous examples of secular Jews seeking knowledge about Jewish traditions without undergoing substantial changes in their core values and lifestyle. For instance, the Frankfurt Lehrhaus in the 1920s attracted secular German Jewish intellectuals who subsequently became inspired by religious traditions without losing their secular identity (Kern-Ulmer 1990). Similarly, the pre-war Polish author Deborah Vogel, who was raised in Polish culture, but with full awareness of her secular Jewish identity, began writing poems in Yiddish, a language previously unknown to her (Szymaniak 2007). While some may perceive the movement of individuals such as Fromm toward religious themes and Vogel toward the Yiddish language as de-assimilation, the outcome of this process was clearly a new quality, a renewed expression of Jewishness among people who had not completely severed their cultural Jewish connections. This observation holds true for many Polish Jewish families, as well as for the *marranos* mentioned by Krajewski.

The choice of privatized identities focused on culture rather than religious and communal practices is a common characteristic of historically traumatized societies. Unlike many Western Jewish communities, the Holocaust has never been a distant past for Polish Jews. The constant sense of threat from the host society was particularly pronounced among those who directly experienced the trauma of the Holocaust and their descendants (Grynberg 2022). In response to historical trauma, individuals often develop hypervigilance toward perceived threats from the host society and exhibit generalized mistrust (Bilewicz 2022). However, the experience of discrimination does not eradicate the sense of identity. On the contrary, according to the well-studied rejection–identification model (Branscombe et al. 1999; Giamo et al. 2012), members of ethnic, religious, and racial minorities who encounter discrimination tend to form a stronger sense of identity, albeit expressing it in more intimate and private ways for safety reasons. Therefore, we argue that the concept of

assimilation does not adequately capture the complex evolution of Jewish identity in post-war Polish Jewry.

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