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# Introduction

CENTOS is the name of a Jewish child welfare organization in Poland that existed for less than twenty years, from 1924 until 1940, when the Nazis delegialized Poland's prewar Jewish organizations. Its name is well known to scholars, and the organization provided significant support to Jewish children, especially orphans. The group's leaders continued its activities throughout the war, and the work of CENTOS comes up often in the history of the Warsaw ghetto. Yet the story of this group has not been told. Nor have scholars focused on how, after 1918, Jewish social workers helped to transform their community by improving the lives of children.

I first became interested in the history of Jewish child welfare when I realized many of the sources from the 1920s and 1930s that related to charity and philanthropy among Jews focused on support for children. CENTOS, an awkward Polish acronym for the Centralny Związek Towarzystw Opieki nad Żydowskimi Sierotami, or Central Union of Associations for Jewish Orphan Care, served as an umbrella organization for hundreds of smaller associations and institutions scattered throughout Poland, primarily in the *kresy*, or the eastern borderlands.<sup>1</sup> I became further

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1 CENTOS is usually mentioned only in secondary sources on general relief work after 1918. For example, see Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974). For a brief entry on CENTOS in English by Moshe Landau, see *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "CENTOS," accessed May 21, 2016, [http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX-2587504106&v=2.1&u=cuyahoga\\_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=257eea69361e79fd-5995c638bbc6e218](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX-2587504106&v=2.1&u=cuyahoga_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=257eea69361e79fd-5995c638bbc6e218). See also the entry by Rafał Żebrowski, *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny*, s.v. "CENTOS," accessed May 27, 2016, <http://www.jhi.pl/psj/CENTOS>. CENTOS is written in some sources without capital letters (as Centos). Additional Yiddish and Polish versions of the name include Farband fun Tsentrales far yesoymin farzorgung in Poyln; Farband far

intrigued as I read through the pages of one of its journals, the Polish language *Przegląd Społeczny* (Social review). A frequent tagline that appeared whenever necessary to fill blank space (for example, at the end of an article) was “The Child! The Future of the Nation.” There was never any mention of which nation this child belonged to, but CENTOS was a private Jewish institution. Its support came primarily from private donors and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter, JDC), but CENTOS groups also received subventions from municipalities and the Polish government. CENTOS published journals in both Polish and Yiddish, but the articles on child psychology and proper hygiene do not betray any strong ideological tendency. I wanted to learn more about CENTOS and its work in order to understand how Jewish community leaders tried to overcome the daunting practical challenges of life in Poland between the wars and how they wished to shape the future of the nation.

As I learned more from the CENTOS journals and archival sources, I began to understand the importance of the contribution the leaders of CENTOS made to Jewish life. These leaders participated in the transformation of Jewish life. The successful work of these secular leaders—teachers, doctors, lawyers, and others—increasingly removed authority from the *kehilot*, the official governing bodies of Poland’s Jewish communities (*kehilah*, singular). They then began to forge relationships with governmental institutions, including public schools. I decided I wanted to present the words of these social work professionals to readers directly, because much of what I was reading described precisely how community leaders could rebuild after the tragedy of war and what they actually did to shape their community into a modern nation. Their writings reveal the actions of these leaders, what they thought about their work, and how they affected the lives of the children they recognized as the future of the nation. *For the Good of the Nation: Institutions for Jewish Children in Interwar Poland* thus presents both a history of Jewish child welfare and a

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kinder shuts un yesoyim farzorgung; Centrala Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami; Centrala Związku Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami i Dziećmi Opuszczonymi. See also Bajla Lewin, “Związek Towarzystw Opieki na Żydowskimi Sierotami i Dziećmi Opuszczonymi Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (CENTOS),” *Prace magisterskie napisane przed 1939 rokiem* (sygn. 117), 1931–39, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma.

## INTRODUCTION



Leib Neustadt, Director, Joint Distribution Committee in Poland and member of Executive Board of CENTOS, Warsaw (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives)

selection of readings that describe the work of Jewish community leaders and the lives of the children in their care. It is my hope that this book can serve as an introduction to the topic and encourage further research into both the field of social work and the lives of Jewish children. The overview of Jewish child welfare included here addresses the indispensable role of the JDC in providing funds, guidance, and leadership; the development of CENTOS; and the debate between providing foster care or building orphanages. A review of the accompanying primary sources shows that more topics deserve further exploration, including the backgrounds of many of the workers and leaders of CENTOS and, perhaps most importantly, the development of vocational education.

The foremost leaders in Jewish child welfare during this period were Janusz Korczak (born Henryk Goldszmit, 1878/79–1942) and Stefania Wilczyńska (1886–1942). They were involved in CENTOS in different ways, but, because their work has received comparatively greater attention, this study addresses less well-known organizations in order to examine a wider range of experiences of both social workers



Children at play, summer day camp organized by the Association for Jewish Orphan Care, Kraków, 1930 (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, Warsaw)

and children.<sup>2</sup> The works translated here have been chosen to reflect the activities of Poland's Jewish social work professionals and to illustrate the diversity of experiences of Jewish children in need. They were published in CENTOS journals or in cooperation with CENTOS, and thus they reveal the values and concerns of Poland's most prominent organization for Jewish children. The writings selected exemplify the

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2 The most complete volume on Korczak and his work is Aleksander Lewin's *Korczak znany i nieznan* (Warsaw: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1999). See also Joanna Olczak-Ronikier, *Korczak: Próba biografii* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2011) and Magdalena Kicińska, *Pani Stefa* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015). Also outside of the scope of this study are children's health-care institutions, such as the Medem Sanatorium in Miedzeszyn, run by the Bund. See Magdalena Kozłowska, "In Sunshine and Joy? The Story of Medem Sanatorium in Miedzeszyn," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28 (February 2014): 49–62, and Ryszard Zabłotniak, "Sanatorium Dziecka im. Włodzimierza Medema w Międzeszynie," *Archiwum Historii i Filozofii Medycyny* 55, no. 3/4 (1992): 317–22. For a history of Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej (Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish People), see Ignacy Einhorn, *Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej w Polsce w latach 1921–1950* (Toruń: Wydawn. Adam Marszałek, 2008).

range of issues confronted by social work professionals in the 1920s and 1930s, including the ongoing search for funds, the need to train children to live independently, and how to provide care for children with special needs.

The readings have been divided into three sections. The first highlights descriptions of homes for Jewish children. A report from Pinsk describes care for orphans in a smaller city. A review of publications written by children reveals life at an orphanage in Lwów. Reports of teachers portray children in the classroom, and brief inspection reports of children's homes summarize care for orphans in both small towns and larger cities. The second section highlights the Home for Jewish Children and Farm in Helenówek, near Łódź. Helenówek is of special interest because its founder was Khayim Mordkhe Rumkowski (1877–1944), who later became the leader of the Łódź ghetto. More importantly, though, Yekhiel Ben-Tsiyon Kats offers an extended look at life inside Helenówek in his publication *Dertsiung oder farbrekhn? Funm togbukh fun a dertsier* (Education or crime? From the diary of an educator), translated here in its entirety. The third section features a group of articles describing the work of the CENTOS Therapeutic and Educational Institution in Otwock. This institution (often simply referred to, confusingly, as CENTOS in Otwock) served children with special needs and exemplifies how child welfare leaders aimed to help children with mental and physical challenges. Taken together, the articles by Zofia Rosenblum, Kalman Lis, Helena Boguszevska, and Abraham Berger offer a surprisingly complete picture of the work of the doctors and teachers and the lives of many of the children.

Most of the authors of the articles included here worked directly with children. They were social work professionals engaging in vital work in the aftermath of war. Some of the authors have not left behind any trace of biography beyond their published work. This is especially true of the authors in the first section. There is no information about Ben-Levi, the author of the short sketch of the orphanage in Pinsk, or about Yakov Sarner, who describes a strike of the children in an unidentified home. Similarly, details of the career of Tsvi Tarlovski, who recounts an instance of childish stubbornness, have been lost. Two of the authors, A. (Aron)

Goldin and Leon Gutman, worked as representatives of the JDC. Maks Schaff, a lawyer and Jewish community leader in Lwów, is among the more prominent of these authors.

The selection of readings describing homes for children begins with Ben-Levi's description of the orphanage in Pinsk. This is a typical description of how a local committee provided for war orphans. Significantly, Ben-Levi shows awareness of the role of the JDC and the significance of the JDC's support. Both gratitude for the support of the JDC and tension with the community's "foreign brothers" are apparent in his remarks. Maks Schaff's reviews of the Special Issues published by the orphanage in Lwów reveal much about the lives of the children. The institution was a stable one, with the resources that allowed children to put out sixty-page issues of a publication including children's writings. Schaff shows the range of the children's interests, their love of the outdoors and animals, and their knowledge of both Polish and Yiddish literature. Leon Gutman's account of images of youth in school publications, published in the Polish language *Przegląd Społeczny*, quotes the children in Yiddish, illustrating the interaction between Polish-speaking leaders and Yiddish-speaking children. The classroom and schoolyard scenes portrayed by Tsvi Tarlovski and Yakov Sarnier depict some of the normality of childhood. The children were stubborn; they often did not want to go to school and teachers often confronted them. Though institutionalized, some children went to other private and public schools and, in addition to whatever traumas led to their being orphaned, experienced the same trials and tribulations of any child. They were playful, stubborn, cheerful, disobedient, vulnerable, and strong-willed. The inspection reports of A. Goldin yield fascinating insights into the histories of the committees and associations of CENTOS. Goldin makes short, summary judgments about the organization of a committee or about the level of the community's financial support for an institution. His judgments are those of a bureaucrat, concerned with doing his job and improving the general effectiveness of his agency's work. His reports reveal the range of activities of those involved in Jewish child welfare, in both small towns and large cities.

Yekhiel Ben-Tsiyon Kats describes his experiences teaching at the Home for Jewish Children and Farm in Helenów. He worked as a



teacher there before publishing his text with the support of the CENTOS journal *Dos kind*.<sup>3</sup> His text, *Dertisiung oder farbrekhn?*, is a slim volume—less than sixty-five pages—excerpts of which were previously published in *Dos kind*. The text is an exposé of life in Helenówek and so demands, more than the other writings, additional explanation. Khayim Rumkowski ran Helenówek from its founding through the 1930s. An insurance salesman and manufacturer of velvet, Rumkowski was active as a member of the *kehilah* in Łódź and a Zionist. He is best known for his role among the community during World War II, when he was appointed *Judenälteste* (Eldest of the Jews). In this leadership role, Rumkowski adopted a policy of productivization, hoping that the Germans would not kill those who were able to work. This led him to concur with the deportation of Jewish children. As he explained in a public speech in September 1942, “The ghetto has been hit with a painful blow. They are demanding from us our most precious fortune—children and the elderly. I was not privileged to have a child of my own, so I gave the best years of my life to children . . . In my old age I must stretch out my hands and beg: ‘Brothers and sisters, turn them over to me! Fathers and mothers, give me your children . . .’”<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to overestimate Rumkowski as a tragic figure. Rumkowski has been condemned for what many have described as an act of collaboration. Yet it remains true that nearly seventy thousand Jews remained alive in the Łódź ghetto in 1944. Moreover, he was the founder of an orphanage; he had spent a significant part of his life working on behalf of Jewish children. In addition, rumors of sexual abuse cloud any evaluation of Rumkowski, before or after the war. As Robert Moses Shapiro writes in his biographical sketch of Rumkowski in the *YIVO Encyclopedia*, “Unsubstantiated prewar rumors alleged that Rumkowski sexually abused a number of orphans and staff members at Helenówek; similar unconfirmed allegations about his wartime behavior

3 There is no information about his career later in the 1930s.

4 An English language version of the original Yiddish speech appears in a work by Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto: A History*, trans. and ed. Robert Moses Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 272–74.

were made by some survivors of the Łódź ghetto.”<sup>5</sup> Kats’s book is at least one source of these prewar rumors, which account for only a small portion of the entire text.<sup>6</sup>

Shapiro’s statement about unsubstantiated prewar rumors and unconfirmed wartime allegations is perhaps the most just and evenhanded judgment that can be made about the situation. While Kats’s text does offer details, some of which could yet be confirmed through the additional work of researchers and genealogists, the rumors are unsubstantiated, even if often repeated in fictional treatments of the Łódź ghetto. The Polish scholar Monika Polit offers an interpretation of Rumkowski based on an especially thorough and analytical review of the sources describing Rumkowski’s life and experiences in Helenówek in both Yiddish and Polish. She concludes that the incidents Kats describes are most likely exaggerated, and, indeed, the tone of Kats’s work is far from objective. She also points out that, whatever the truth of the allegations against Rumkowski, he was not a pedophile. The rumors concern older teenagers. Polit asks the difficult question, “Can the sincere engagement of Rumkowski redeem him for his guilt toward several, even more than

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5 Robert Moses Shapiro, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, s.v. “Rumkowski, Khayim Mordkhe,” accessed August 30, 2015, [http://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Rumkowski\\_Khayim\\_Mordkhe](http://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Rumkowski_Khayim_Mordkhe).

6 Philip Friedman referred to this book in an essay on Rumkowski, “Pseudo-Saviors in the Polish Ghettos: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski of Lodz,” in *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, ed. Ada June Friedman (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980). Referring to Rumkowski, Friedman wrote, “His enemies accused him of being excessively familiar with female students and teachers.” He provided additional information in an accompanying note: “He was publicly accused of that in a book written by a physician, which I read in the late 1930s. It was published in Yiddish in Lodz or Warsaw. The author was, to the best of my recollection, a Dr. Pecker, or Preger. I do not recall if Rumkowski took legal action against the author.” Ibid. 335, 349n. Dr. M. Peker wrote the introduction to Kats’s book, and so I think that *Dertsung oder ferebrekh’n* must be the book to which Friedman refers. Friedman’s essay first appeared in Hebrew as “Goalei sheker ba-gitaot polin,” *Metsuda* 7 (1954): 602–618. Referring to Friedman’s imprecise recollection of Kats’s text, Isaiah Trunk cites this “brochure” by “a certain Doctor Preger, or Peker” in *Łódź Ghetto*, 456n85. In this same note, Trunk also cites the work of Lucille Eichengreen as “a first-hand, eyewitness testimony that Rumkowski was, in fact, a sexual predator.” See Lucille Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, with Harriet Hyman Chamberlain (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), and *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Lodz*, with Rebecca Camhi Fromer (San Francisco: Mercury House, 2000).

several, teenage girls?”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Israeli scholar Michal Unger points to “the gray zone” described by Primo Levi, suggesting that any assessment of Rumkowski and his behavior must avoid definitive judgments.<sup>8</sup>

Kats’s allegations against Rumkowski clearly served as the primary motivation for his writing. He presents his work with prefatory and concluding remarks from Jewish leaders who attest to the truth of his descriptions, juxtaposing them with testimonials from former teachers and residents of Helenówek. But the image Kats leaves of Helenówek is not entirely negative. Helenówek was a substantial institution, an effort to improve the lives of Jewish children and, not least, a reflection of the Zionist goals of Rumkowski and others.<sup>9</sup> The home was established in what was then the country surrounding the city. The establishment of a farm was meant to offer the children the facility they would need to prepare for one of their possible futures, a life in Palestine. Kats’s “diary” includes what we might think of as several set pieces, descriptions of incidents that must have occurred in other locations as well. These incidents show us something of what must have happened countless times in both the *shtetlakh* (small towns) of the *kresy* and the larger cities. For example, he describes a widower with a daughter already in Helenówek, bringing in two more of his children, one tugging his hand and the other in his arms clinging to him. He recounts the roughhousing of a boy and girl in their early teens, acting out their sexual impulses. He tells of young women and girls turning to the dormitory of the Froyen-shuts fereyn (Women’s Defense Association) for assistance. His descriptions reveal how teachers and children interacted and how children interacted with each other. Kats also raises the important question of just how far courts of children could go in their prosecution of teachers for what children deemed offenses. The notion that children can rule themselves, while important pedagogically, was never entertained without the concomitant notion of adult authority.

7 Monika Polit, “Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski: Prawda i zmyślenie” (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2012), 39 (translation mine).

8 Michal Unger, *Reassessment of the Image of Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 13.

9 For the institution’s own approach to child-care issues, see *Der yosem: tsaytshrift gevidmet di inyonim: fun yesoymin-farzorgung, kinder-dertsung, un froyen-shuts* (Łódź: Internat far yidishe kinder un ferme in Helenuvek: Yidish froyen-shuts-ferayn in Łódź, 1926).

Kats depicted Helenówek as an institution that catered to the whims of adults and neglected the well-being of those it was meant to serve. It stands in contrast to the CENTOS Therapeutic and Educational Institution for Children in Otwock. This home for children with special needs, founded in 1928, was the subject of much interest in its day and remains of interest to historians.<sup>10</sup> The authors describing CENTOS in Otwock were better known than the other authors whose works appear here. Zofia Rosenblum (later Szymańska, 1888–1978) was a leading figure in Warsaw's medical community. She was from a linguistically and culturally assimilated Jewish family, well educated, and, until her involvement in social welfare, generally unaware of the living conditions of her Yiddish-speaking neighbors. She lived a long life, surviving the Holocaust in hiding and establishing herself as one of Poland's most respected health professionals after World War II. Her memoir, *Byłam tylko lekarzem . . .* (I was just a doctor), details her career before and after the war and includes much information about her years at CENTOS in Otwock.<sup>11</sup>

Kalman Lis (1903–42) was prominent in a different field. He was a well-known Yiddish poet, first published in the late 1920s. Born in Kowel in Wołyń and educated in both the *kheyder* and in a Polish high school, and later at the University of Warsaw and Vilna University, Lis was a writer, teacher, and administrator. Lis specialized in working with developmentally delayed children. He became director of CENTOS in Otwock in 1937. Lis published several books of poetry and became known as an anti-Fascist proletarian poet.<sup>12</sup> His poems, criticism, and reportage

10 The most thorough overview of this institution is Marzena Pękowska, "Organizacja Zakładu Lecznico-Wychowawczego 'CENTOS' dla żydowskich dzieci niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie w Otwocku (1928–1939)," *Przegląd historyczno-oświatowy* 57, no. 1/2 (2014): 141–56. In Polish this institution is most often referred to as Zakład Lecznico-wychowawczy "CENTOS" and in Yiddish as the Hayl-pedagogisher anshtalt "TSENTOS." CENTOS appears as an entry in the Glossary of Terms and Concepts in the comprehensive work on the Warsaw ghetto by Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie: Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2001), 787. Translated by Emma Harris in *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 835. Engelking and Leociak refer to this institution in Polish as Klinika Medyczno-Pedagogiczna w Otwocku, translated as the Medical and Pedagogical Clinic in Otwock.

11 Zofia Szymańska, *Byłam tylko lekarzem . . .* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 1979).

12 Salomon Łastik and Arnold Ślucki, *Antologia poezji żydowskiej* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1983), 14.

appeared in Yiddish publications throughout Poland, including in *Literarische bleter*. In spite of his significant work in both literature and social work before the war, he is perhaps best known for his verses written during the Holocaust. He was seriously wounded in the German bombardment of Poland on September 1, 1939, but he was able to return to his work in Otwock. During the liquidation of the Jewish population of Otwock in August 1942, the children under his care were shot, and he attempted, briefly, to hide with the help of a peasant before being shot and killed by the Germans near Otwock.<sup>13</sup>

Helena Boguszewska (1886–1978), author of a sketch describing her visit to the institution in Otwock, was known as a writer with leftist sympathies. She also published with Zofia Rosenblum.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1930s Boguszewska was one of the leaders of *Przedmieście* (City Outskirts), a writers' group project that aimed to tell the stories of everyday people who were otherwise neglected in the period's contemporary fiction.<sup>15</sup> Boguszewska often wrote and collaborated on this "literature of fact" with Jerzy Kornacki (1908–81).

These accounts of the institution—by a doctor and teacher who worked there and two outside observers—reveal a much different kind of institution than Kats's Helenówek. Rosenblum, a medical doctor with an interest in children's health, outlined the work of the institution in essays in *Dos kind* and *Przegląd Społeczny*. Her view of the institution is perhaps best described as clinical. She is most interested in how and why the organization operates. She describes the process for the selection of the children, the need for an isolation ward, and the staff's therapeutic and educational methods. Lis, in contrast, offers a colorful picture of the boys in his care, describing how he woke them up every morning. Boguszewska, a Polish writer with a deep interest in child welfare, describes her two

13 Zofia Borzysmińska, *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny*, s.v. "Lis Kalman (Kałmen)," accessed May 29, 2016, [http://www.jhi.pl/psj/Lis\\_Kalman\\_\(Kalmen\)](http://www.jhi.pl/psj/Lis_Kalman_(Kalmen)). A more complete entry for Kalman Lis written by Khayim-Leyb Fuks can be found in the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, ed. Shmuel Niger and Yankev Shatski (New York: Alvetlekhon Yidishn Kultur-Kongres, 1956–81).

14 Helena Boguszewska and Zofia Rosenblum, *Co się należy wszystkim dzieciom*, from *Życie dziecka* (Life of the Child) (Warsaw: Polski Komitet Opieki nad Dzieckiem, 1928).

15 See Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 427.

visits to the institution in Otwock and offers another set of images of children's lives. Abraham Berger, a representative of the JDC, wrote an account of eight years of CENTOS activity in Otwock that suggests both what was achieved and how much more was yet to be done.

The sources describing CENTOS in Otwock outline the types of children accepted and the process for admission. The language of the day identified the children as, quite literally, stupid, feeble-minded, idiotic, or psychopathic. Other terms used were less directly derogatory, such as developmentally delayed or mentally underdeveloped. In each instance I have chosen English phrases that reflect the Yiddish or Polish as closely as possible. The writings about Otwock reveal an institution that made a sincere effort to improve the lives of children who faced greater challenges than others. Included is a teacher's description of "days of independence," when the children assumed the roles of the staff in order to show they could handle the tasks of day-to-day living. The authors show that those who led Otwock were aware of changes in both pedagogy and medical practice. But their work had limits. The statistics offered by Rosenblum reveal that many children left CENTOS in Otwock because CENTOS no longer had the money to care for them. I have included the texts on Otwock to draw attention to a unique institution and to the history of special education.<sup>16</sup>

The leaders of CENTOS prepared children to live productive lives, whether in Poland or Palestine. The question of the nation to which these children belonged has perplexed more than one writer. Stanisław Vincenz (1888–1971) was a close friend of Maks Schaff, the Jewish community leader from Lwów. In one of his many essays on Jewish themes, Vincenz recalled a visit, at Schaff's invitation, to a home for Jewish boys in Lwów during Passover.<sup>17</sup> Vincenz recalled how the children sang songs for the

16 Polish scholars have covered the topic. See Marian Balcerek, *Rozwój wychowania i kształcenia dzieci upośledzonych umysłowych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1981) and *Dzieje szkolnictwa i pedagogiki specjalnej*, ed. Stanisław Mauersberg (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1990). For additional context from another country, see Michael Grossberg, "From Feeble-Minded to Mentally Retarded: Child Protection and the Changing Place of Disabled Children in the Mid-Twentieth Century United States," *Paedagogica Historica* 47, no. 6 (2011): 729–47.

17 Stanisław Vincenz, *Tematy żydowskie* (Gdańsk: ATEXT, 1993), 47. The visit is also mentioned by Teresa Schaff in her memoir of her life with her husband Adam Schaff, the

holiday in Hebrew and how he, not for the first time, made a mistake. Vincenz took his hat off during a moment he deemed celebratory enough to command respect. Others left their heads covered. The children sang in Hebrew and conversed among themselves in Polish. One child even read a verse in Polish dreaming about the land of Israel. The child, “a typical Polish type,” provoked Vincenz to ask Schaff, “Where are we? With people from which nationality?”<sup>18</sup>

Schaff proudly explained that the goal of those working with the children was to connect Israel and Poland, for now and for the future, even if—or especially if—some of these children might eventually emigrate to Palestine. Vincenz approved of this goal. Schaff, a leader of the Jewish community who had assimilated linguistically and—at least to some extent—culturally, was one of the foremost leaders of Jewish child welfare in Poland after 1918. He wrote often for *Przegląd Społeczny*. Vincenz’s observation highlights the fact that children in institutions led by Schaff grew up belonging to two nations. The work of Schaff and others like him benefited Poland’s Jewish children, who spoke in Polish, sang Hebrew songs, and prepared for a possible life in Palestine.

Vincenz was simply not sure to which nation these Jewish children belonged. The cultural flexibility of the Jewish children shocked the educated and cosmopolitan Vincenz, more familiar than most with the cultural diversity of his native Galicia. Many professionals like Schaff devoted their careers and their philanthropy to Jewish children. They worked tirelessly on behalf of the most needy and vulnerable, those who had been orphaned as a result of violence and pogroms during and after World War I. The organizations of which they were a part were most certainly Jewish institutions, established by Jews, run by Jews, for the benefit of Jewish children. They provided aid and imparted ideals of national belonging but, most importantly, they aimed to prepare children to live independently, wherever that might be.

Beset by challenges from the conclusion of the war in 1918 and obviously constrained financial circumstances, the associations of CENTOS

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son of Max Schaff. *Mój Adam* (Warsaw: “Kto jest Kim,” 2012), 103–4. Vincenz was a Polish writer known for his love and knowledge of the Hutsul region of Galicia.

18 Vincenz, *Tematy żydowskie*, 47.

were quite literally still in the middle of figuring out the parameters of their work in the 1930s. CENTOS leaders wrestled with questions such as which children should be institutionalized and which children *could* be institutionalized, given money and resources. At the outbreak of war in 1939, CENTOS itself was still a teenager, just sixteen years old. The leaders of CENTOS had yet to define the precise roles of private and institutional care. They were still setting up organizations and programs to train child welfare workers. Jewish community leaders, abroad and in Poland, had done much to improve the community's material circumstances and to transform how children grew into Jewish adults. Their pioneering social work serves not only as a reminder of the vibrancy of the interwar Polish-Jewish community but also as a call to examine the relationships among nations living together in one state. Their legacy is an urgent appeal to protect the rights of children.

### ***A Note on Translations and Names***

All translations and errors are mine. I have made an effort to follow the rules of YIVO for transliteration, but, when they exist, I have used common English spellings for place names and some terms. In other cases, I have rendered place names in Polish, whether published in Yiddish or Polish. I have also indicated the Yiddish name if given in the original text. In the few instances when Polish language authors employed Yiddish phrases, I have retained the Polish transliteration of words in Yiddish. I have adopted the modernized spelling Zofia Rosenblum for Zofja Rosenblum. Rosenblum (also occasionally spelled Rozenblum) adopted the name Szymańska during the war and used the name Zofia Szymańska professionally in the postwar period.



## A History of CENTOS

The system of social care that emerged among Jews in Poland after 1918 was radically new. It brought together laws and institutions from the period of the Partitions and a national Jewish child welfare movement whose leaders were perhaps the clearest example of the community leadership's transformation from religious to secular authority. Some of them, like Maks Schaff and Zofia Rosenblum, came from Polonized Jewish families. Others, such as Kalman Lis, came from more traditional, Yiddish-speaking backgrounds. They came together because of the crisis that resulted from years of war. Collectively, their work reflects the values of the Jewish community in Poland.

Poland in the 1920s was a place of turmoil and growth. Its diverse populations sought many different ways to improve living conditions, outside of and within the already established communal and governmental structures. Poland's Jewish community leaders responded to the formation of the Polish state by founding organizations to reach their goals and by working with the new Polish government. There were some continuities in philanthropy from the prewar period throughout the 1930s, but the newly independent Polish state and the position of Poland's Jews as members of a community with ties abroad conditioned the development of social welfare.

Jews made up about ten percent of the population of the newly formed Polish state.<sup>1</sup> Four-fifths of Jews were urban, and in most large

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 36; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 23; Ezra Mendelsohn, "Interwar

cities Jews accounted for a quarter of the population or more.<sup>2</sup> Jews also lived in the smaller towns and villages of Galicia and the *kresy*, the eastern borderlands. While there were some who attained high positions in commerce or the professions, the Jewish community is perhaps best described as generally lower middle-class or proletarian, with the same economic challenges as their neighbors but the additional burden of exclusion from certain types of work and general economic, political, and social discrimination.<sup>3</sup> The increased pauperization of the Jewish community became a pressing issue during this period.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the war was not truly over in 1918. Violence continued as the new state consolidated its borders and was exacerbated by accompanying pogroms.<sup>5</sup> The challenges of war and the ethnic violence that followed often devastated smaller communities.

Seeking solutions to the political, social, and economic conditions under which they lived, many Jews turned to the ideologies of nationalism and socialism.<sup>6</sup> Many strove to develop national identities grounded in different conceptions of Zionism. Still others held fast to conceptions of Jewish identity grounded in the practice of religion, but even the Orthodox were increasingly involved in political life. Through the brief period of Polish independence, the Zionists, Bundists, Orthodox, and Folkists (advocates of Jewish cultural autonomy) would compete for the attention of Poland's Jewish population. The question of language exacerbated the political and religious differences. Interwar Polish Jewry was a tri-lingual culture.<sup>7</sup> Most Jews in Poland spoke Yiddish in the home, but the use of

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Poland: Good for the Jews or Bad for the Jews?" in *The Jews in Poland*, ed. Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 130–39.

2 Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 35.

3 Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 27.

4 Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 40; Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3, 1914–2008 (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 62.

5 For an overview of the pogroms and continued violence, see Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3, 45–50.

6 See Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3, 59–66.

7 Chone Shmeruk, "Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture," in *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, ed. Israel Gutman et al. (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 285–311.

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