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Future generation of schoolteachers for Soviet Yiddish schools. Instruction of students of the Jewish pedagogical technical school in Minsk (academic year 1923/1924). (Source: The Belarusian State Archives of Films, Photographs and Sound Recordings, sygn .0-18/68).

School is one of the most essential elements of cultural and social life in any settlement. Exactly, this institution opens the way for children into their self-dependent life and played an important role in their education and socialization. The new Soviet school played a significant social role in reconstruction and Sovietizing of small towns (*shtetls*)¹. The authorities

¹ In this article the *shtetl* is considered as multiethnic settlement where alongside the Jews other ethnic communities (Belarusian, Russian, Polish and Tatar) lived.

realized the multiethnic picture of small towns², however in the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s the government considered the small towns of former „pale of Jewish settlement” as places with strong Jewish communities and targeted them separately³. The Soviet officials underlined the social and cultural degradation of *shtetl*, as the crowdies of the Jewish population and its poverty were interpreted as the evidence of the Tsarist policy. They proved the necessity of the radical transformation of such „remnant” settlement and they liked to emphasize loudly that the *shtetl* would change its image after the reconstruction of economy and society⁴. The Soviet school was an important instrument to embody those ideas.

Many authors have studying the history of Soviet Jewish education in *shtetls*⁵. Within Bolsheviks’ national policy the network of Yiddish language school was established in the post-revolutionary years. The main task of this article is to demonstrate how the regime used schools for its ideological purposes in small towns; to highlight the specificity of schools in these settlements; to demonstrate evolution of Soviet school in Yiddish, their achievements and problems, the struggle of the authorities against religious education. This article is based on archival data from Belarusian, Russian and Polish archives⁶, interwar published data of Soviet and Party authorities and some recollections of former *shtetl* residents.

Bolsheviks’ reforms of schooling

Residents of pre-revolutionary small towns had no such educational possibilities as city inhabitants had. Though the network of various education institutions were established there as well, among them were church parish schools, vocational schools and seminaries. Some bigger

² In 1926 the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) officially numbered 56 small towns (mjastečki). By this time due to socioeconomic reasons some former small towns had lost their urban status and they were registered as rural settlements, and other townlets received a „city” status.

³ In the interwar period the Jews in Belarusian small towns, likewise in Poland and Ukraine, constituted a relatively high proportion of population (from 40% to 90% of *shtetl* residents).

⁴ During the interwar period it was a typical idea of the small town as a community afflicted by „social diseases” (crowdies, insanitariness, total poverty, hopelessness). R. Mačulski, *Mjastečki pry sucel’naj kalektyvizacyi*, „Bałšavik Belarusi” 1930, nr 1–2, s. 70; J. Kantor, *Nacional’noe stroitel’stvo sredi evreev v SSSR*, Moskva 1934, s. 58.

⁵ A. Zeltser, *Evrei Sovetskoi Provincii: Vitebsk i Mestečki*, Moskva 2006; L. Smilovitskij, *Škola na idiš v pervye desjattiletija sovetskoi vlasti v Belorussii, 1921–1941*, „Novaja evrejskaja škola” 2002, nr 11, s. 171–212.

shtetls (centers of certain area-volost') had the people's schools (*narodnye učilišča*). In small town Bobr a school was attended by about 90 pupils who studied there two year⁷. In the pre-revolutionary time Jewish traditional and secular education developed in *shtetls* encouraged by the modernization⁸. The wide network of heders, Talmud Torahs, non-classical and parish schools existed in many small towns. Jewish residents enjoyed their own educational system, and everywhere Jewish children were covered by schooling. Even the smallest *shtetl* had a free school for the children (a Talmud Torah financed by the Jewish community). For Jewish families to give education to their children was one of the most essential priorities. A Jewish boy even in the remotest small town and from the poorest family studied at a heder⁹. However, the modernization brought the critics of this institution from the side of secular intellectuals¹⁰.

One of the first steps of the Soviet leadership was to monopolize the field of education, since the first months of their power Bolsheviks declared education reform. The first Decree *On Separation of the Church from the State and the School from the Church* was issued on January 23, 1918¹¹. The Orthodox Church schools, vocational schools and theological seminaries were closed or transformed into the institutions of secular education, mainly into Soviet primary, secondary and specialized schools, colleges. The Soviet schooling was widely and effectively used by the Soviet regime as sociopolitical tool, segregating the different strata of population. For instance, within „the class approach” (*klassovyy podchod*) the Party administration tried to cover majority of children from the poor families with schooling. Their parents were exempted from paying for education and in some places mostly poor peasants' children were provided with boarding

⁶ National Archives of the Republic of Belarus [NARB], State Archives of Minsk Region [GAMO], State Archives of Gomel Region [GAGO], State Archives of Public Organizations of Gomel Region [GAOOGO], the Russian State Economic Archives [RGAE], The State Archives of Russian Federation [GARF], Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie [AAN].

⁷ V. Jaševič, M. Kisľjakou, *Recollections on shtetl Bobr*, [in] *Pamjac': Gistoryka-dokumental'nyja chroniki garadou i rajonau Belarusi: Krupski rajon*, red. Dz. Chromčanka, Minsk 2001, s. 108.

⁸ A. Cała, *The Shtetl: Cultural Evolution in Small Jewish Towns*, [in] *Polin. The Shtetl: Myth and reality*, vol. 17, ed. A. Polonsky, Oxford Portland Oregon 2004, s. 140; B. C. Pinchuk, *How Jewish Was the Shtetl?* [in] *ibidem*, s. 117.

⁹ S. Stampfer, *Heder study, knowledge of Torah, and the maintenance of social stratification in traditional East European Jewish society*, „Studies in Jewish Education” 1988, nr 3, s. 271–289.

¹⁰ More detailed on heder see: *Heder*, [in] *Polski słownik judaistyczny. Dzieje, kultura, religia, ludzie*, t. 1, red. S. Borzymińska, R. Żebrowski, Warszawa 2003, s. 281–283.

¹¹ *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR: Sbornik dokumentov, 1917–1973*, Moskva 1974, s. 17.

houses. The school curriculum was directly subordinated to the chief tasks of propaganda¹². In the 1920s many Bolshevik leaders claimed that their regime had to create a „new Soviet man”, whose characteristic and personality traits must be quite different from people of the capitalist world¹³.

In the period of the War Communism (1918–1921) the state was unable to solve at once many problems of education. The development of the Soviet school system evolved in Russia more intensively than in Belarus, suffered greatly from the wars and pogroms. Soviet schools were established at many small towns already since 1918. However, the hostilities of the wars, resulting in impoverishment of many small towns' residents, paralyzed this process¹⁴. Former pupils recollected that their classes in a Ščadryn school continued even in the hardest war days¹⁵. Since the beginning of the 1920s within policy of Belarusification, the Government of the Belarusian SSR supported the establishment of Belarusian schools¹⁶. Their network was gradually covering all cities, small towns and villages. The Belarusian schools in *sbtetls* (especially secondary ones) were also intended for the children of peasants from surrounding villages. *Ad interim* since 1921 with development of the New Economic Policy the school network began to shrink due to different reasons, first of all such as the financial crisis and establishment of the fixed budgets for school instruction¹⁷. The central and local authorities hardly managed to stop that decline. They considered it reasonable to close schools in those places where parent's support was missing. The parents had to bear the burden of costs for education. However, the paid education compelled some children to leave schools because their parents were not able to afford it¹⁸. In the first half of the 1920s in different places some Soviet schools existed only with the

¹² More detailed on ideological tasks of Soviet school in E. Balašov, *Škola v Rossijskom obščestve 1917–1927: stanovlenie „novogo čeloveka”*, St. Peterburg 2003.

¹³ J. McLeish, *Soviet Psychology: History, Theory, Content*, London 1975, s. 76.

¹⁴ More detailed on schooling in Belarus during the First World War see: U. Ljachoŭski, *Školnaja adukacyja u Belarusi pad čas njameckaj akupacyi (1915–1918)*, Białystok Vilnius 2010.

¹⁵ M. Ljachovitskij, *Sto let suščestvovanja evrejskogo mestečka Ščadryn*, „Rodnik” 1993, nr 25 (aprel'), s. 9.

¹⁶ Belarusification (Belarusization) – national policy in the Belarusian SSR during the NEP (New Economic Policy) period (1924–the beginning of the 1930s) to promote Belarusian language and implement it into the work of Soviet administration, the Party bodies, educational institutions and etc.

¹⁷ More detailed on system and hierarchy of Soviet schooling in Belarus' in the 1920s in H. Głagowska, *Białoruś. Kultura pod presją polityki, 1914–1929*, Białystok 1996, s. 132–133.

¹⁸ N. Głinskij, *Nužno pomoć škole*, „Polesskaja pravda” 1922, nr 514, 2 fevralia, s. 2.

direct help of the state. From year to year the state invested more in school development especially in the rural area and in the borderlands¹⁹.

Attack on religious education

The regime demonstrated that it would never bear any alternative education, as only Soviet school had the right to exist. The elimination of religious education served the base of imposition of the Soviet school. All Hebrew schools were closed because the Bolsheviks associated the Hebrew with Zionism. However, this language was not officially forbidden by the authorities, as there was no such law, and Hebrew was taught at universities in Moscow and Leningrad. A certain role was played by the Jewish Section (special department of the Party), which patronized any social, political, economic, and cultural activity of Jewish population²⁰. This body inevitably destroyed traditional forms of community organization, struggling with religion and Jewish traditions. The so-called *beder campaign* conducted by the authorities swept all *shtetls*. In Soviet Belarus' the law banning those institutions was adopted later than in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR)²¹. Public court hearings were organized over the Judaic religious teaching in Vitebsk and Gomel gubernias²². Such falsifications as the *Trial of the beder* in 1921 and trials of heder teachers (melamedim) were arranged in Vitebsk and Gomel where the local Jewish sections selected judges and witnesses for such ideological „shows”²³. At the same time the government of the Belarusian SSR concentrated mostly on urgent economic problems of schooling. There was a shortage of means to open new Soviet schools, and having eliminated the net of religious schools in many small towns, the state could not

¹⁹ GARF, P-8418 (Komitet Oborony), op. 4, d. 169, The special measures for economic and social-cultural development of the Western borderlands for three-year period (1930–1933), December 1929, k. 86.

²⁰ More detailed in Z. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics. The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930*, Princeton 1972, s. 294–296.

²¹ *Rezałjucyja SNK BSSR „Ab zabarone bederaŭ” (26.5.1922)*, [in] *Zbornik čynnnych zakonau BSSR za 1921–1924*, Minsk 1927, s. 38–40.

²² These gubernias were annexed by the RSFSR in January 1919. During two enlargements of the Belarusian SSR territory in March 1924 and December 1926, the republic received Vitebsk, part of Gomel and Smolensk gubernias back. V. Krutalevič, I. Jucho, *Gitaryja dzjarżawy i prava Belarusi*, Minsk 2000, s. 150.

²³ J. Rothenberg, *Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, [in] *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, ed. L. Kochan, Oxford London New York 1978, s. 173.

provide anything instead of them. Moreover, the closure of religious schools deprived the children of the opportunity to study at all. The Jewish sections reported that the former heder pupils in some *shtetls* had no occupation, and they strolled outdoors without any purpose, upsetting their parents. The authorities took into consideration that such situation could naturally lead to discontent about Soviet schooling policy²⁴. Even the most active officers of the Jewish section or school inspectors had to admit that it was not so easy to eliminate heders. The practice became common in groups of two or three pupils; and it was much harder for the authorities to reveal them²⁵. In some cases Jewish boys attended the underground heder in Azaričy after classes at Soviet school. Studying the Torah the pupils were sitting together on the same bench as did they at the „legal” school. The teacher vividly described the subjects from the Old Testament that the pupils would remember forever²⁶.

The Bolsheviki's propaganda accused melamedim of self-interest, stating that they taught the children for the money. However even poor Jewish family could afford such education for their children. Some parents being religious people donated to such schools in their townships. For example in small *shtetl* Daraganava of Sluck region as in many other places a melamed received financial support from the local Jewish community²⁷. Religious education, that had been practically knocked down by the state by 1923, started to revive since 1924 due to the support of the Joint and other foreign Jewish charity institutions. In the mid-1920s such „illegal” schools existed in the majority of Belarusian *shtetls*. Many pupils with help of donations from America were provided with stipends²⁸. Such support was effective and some poor Jewish families preferred to send their children to Talmud Torahs where they received clothes and shoes. Such situation occurred in Padabranka, where a heder were more popular than a local school in Yiddish²⁹. From 1924 to 1929 during the politically liberal period of the New Economic Policy the state's official relation

²⁴ NARB, f. 4, op. 10, d. 6, Reports of Jewish section on situation in small towns of the BSSR, October 1924, k. 23–26.

²⁵ GAOOGO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 1229, Protocol of the Jewish section of the Gomel' gubernom of the RCP(b), May 7, 1922, k. 8.

²⁶ M. Gindin, *Dectvo v Azaričach (Fragmenty vospominanij)*, „Vestnik Evreiskogo Universiteta v Moskve” 1998, nr 1 (17), s. 234.

²⁷ A. Skir, *Evrejskaja duchovnaja kul'tura v Belarusi*, Minsk 1995, s. 63.

²⁸ D. Fishman, *Ljos judaizmu u Saveckaj Belarusi (1920–1930)*, „Belarusika” vol. 4, Minsk 1994, s. 114.

²⁹ *The Byelorussian Evseksitii and Jewish Religious Life in 1927: A Change in Policy*, introduction by A. Zeltser, „Jews in Eastern Europe” 1998, nr 1 (35), s. 59.

to religion was no so strict. All the same such „illegal religious classes” were periodically revealed by Jewish section officers, local authorities and the OGPU³⁰. The melamedim were on the register of the Soviet court bodies as well. In order to avoid such thorough attention the classes were arranged at private homes. In Azaričy the spouse of the melamed stayed outdoors at the time of classes watching that a stranger would not enter. An unexpected visit could bring some troubles to a teacher, as the cases of violence were frequent. For example, Red Army soldiers found out a heder in Retčica. They had humiliated its teacher publically cutting off his beard³¹. Jewish underground religious schools that were able to exist until religious education were definitively banned in April 1929. However some authors believe that in many *shtetls* of Soviet Belarus they existed until the end of the 1930s³².

Soviet Yiddish schools in small towns

The Soviet Yiddish schools were being established since 1918 and their ideological tasks became evident and they were discussed publicly in parallel to the elimination of heders. The Jewish section was patronizing the existing and establishment of new schools in Yiddish. The schoolteachers were instructed about the „specific features” of working with Jewish children in those schools. First of all they had to fight against the religious schools and so-called „clericalism” (the Judaism tenets, the traditional norms and values, and the role of rabbis)³³. However, such „duties” were obligatory for all teachers of all „national minorities schools” (Jewish, Polish, Latvian and others)³⁴. The teaching not only of Hebrew, but of ancient and modern Jewish history was prohibited. Naturally it was unreal to exclude other Jewish subjects from the Jewish school curriculum. For example, the study of contemporary Yiddish literature was required³⁵.

³⁰ OGPU – United State Political Administration (Russian: Ob’edinjonnoe gosudarstvennoe političeskoe upravlenie) – the Soviet secret political police to 1934, when it was subordinated to NKVD.

³¹ D. Rubinov’s recollections, lin| A. Kaganovich, *Rechitsa. The History of a Jewish shtetl in Southeastern Belarus*, Jerusalem 2007, s. 266.

³² A. Zeltser, *Evrei Sovetskoy Provincii*, s. 190.

³³ L. Smilovitskij, *Škola na idiš*, s. 172.

³⁴ A. Beika, D. Vīksna, *Latviešu skolas Krievijā un to serve (1917–1938). (Latvian Schools in Russia from 1917 to 1938 and their Destruction)*, lin| *Latvijas Okupācijas muzeja gadagrāmata 2000-Yearbook of the Occupation Museum of Latvia 2000: „Gadagrāmata: Komunistu un nacistu jūgā”*, red. H. Strods, Riga 2001, s. 43–44.

The archival sources demonstrate that in many cases the Soviet officials opposed to close „unprofitable” Yiddish schools in small towns. Realizing the political significance of Soviet Yiddish schools existence in *shtetls*, the authorities undertook all measures to preserve their network. For instance, it was decided unacceptable to liquidate such school in Mahil’na. The Jewish Bureau officers voiced their fears that such measure „could affect the attitude of *shtetl* inhabitants towards the policy of the Communist Party”³⁶. In June 1923 the congress of public education inspectors of Gomel’ gubernia considered some questions of further Soviet schools development. To solve the accumulated problems school administration established the special «campaigns» to repair school buildings and similar facilities³⁷.

In spite of difficulties the number of schools in Yiddish was growing since the beginning of the 1920s. So, during one decade their number increased threefold. A major part of primary schools (4-year) in Yiddish was set up practically in all small towns with Jewish population, meanwhile 7-year schools (secondary) prevailed in major *shtetls* and cities. Soviet schools in Yiddish had typically fewer children than Belarusian or Russian ones. For example, each class in a Yiddish school had 30 pupils on average, while the ordinary schools had at least 40 pupils in a class. That would raise the quality of teaching, which was often better at Jewish schools than at Belarusian ones³⁸. The main goal was to make Soviet Yiddish-language school attractive. The problem of escape of Jews from Yiddish schools is widely known. The school administration revealed the facts that some secular Jewish families ignored Soviet Yiddish schools. In many Belarusian cities (Minsk, Mogilev and other) Jewish parents preferred to send their children to Russians schools, as they opened up the better career opportunities for Jewish and non-Jewish youth in major Russian cities (Moscow, Leningrad and other). Yiddish schools granted limited possibilities for higher or professional education in this language. Moreover these schools were harshly censured in comparison with Belarusian and Russian-language ones. Additionally abusing anti-Judaic antireligious education campaigns were mounted periodically there³⁹. By

³⁵ S. Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, Syracuse 1951, s. 130–131.

³⁶ GAMO, f. 24, op. 1, d. 164, The protocol of the Jewish Bureau meeting (19.8.1925), k. 22.

³⁷ GAGO, f. 60, op. 1, d. 1556, Resolutions of the Fourth Conference of the inspectors of departments of Peoples Education of Gomel’ gubernija, June 1923, k. 11.

³⁸ L. Smilovitskij, *Škola na idiš*, s. 175.

³⁹ A. Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosber: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union. 1923–1939*, Bloomington 2006, s. 3.

the way the financial reason was also obvious. In the mid-1920s school inspectors stated that some children left Yiddish schools because their parents had no possibility to pay⁴⁰.

As a rule in the 1920s two Soviet schools (Jewish and Belarusian) were established in many *shtetls*. For example, a Belarusian 7-year school (secondary) and a 4-year (primary) Jewish school existed in Baguševiči⁴¹. The Soviet authorities realized that this small town was by right the center of education in its district and established secondary school in Belarusian. Peasants' children were pupils of the *shtetl's* school, which became rather popular among the local peasantry because many school leavers were able to enroll into the pedagogical college⁴². By the way some Jewish children attended Belarusian schools as well. The investigation conducted by ORT⁴³ in 1928 revealed that in Uzda some Jewish children studied at a local Belarusian school⁴⁴. Meanwhile, in small rural *shtetl* Ščadryn only 7-year Jewish school in Yiddish was established. If Belarusian children wanted to receive further education, they had to attend classes there⁴⁵. The schoolchildren in many *shtetls* spoke fluently both Yiddish and Belarusian. The language of a titular Belarusian nation was introduced at all Soviet Yiddish schools in the republic. The Jewish section reported that majority of Jewish teachers normally accepted introduction of this subject. At the same time many Belarusian pupils in some *shtetls* were able to speak Yiddish fluently, for example in Čashniki⁴⁶.

Naturally a small town resident had no such educational alternative for his children as he would have in a city. The place of residence of fami-

⁴⁰ GAMO, f. 24, op. 1, d. 164, The protocol of the meeting of the Jewish bureau, August 19, 1925, k. 22; NARB, f. 4, op. 3, d. 14, Document of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus *Tezisy po dokladu o sostojanii evrejskogo naselenija mesteček BSSR po materialam obsledovanija komissii CK KP(b)B*, June 1926, k. 714.

⁴¹ Since 1922, the reforming school system was based on the 7-year secondary education. In Russia the 9-year schools continued to exist, but after some territories annexed by Russia in January 1919 (Vitebsk and Mogilev areas) were returned back to Soviet Belarus, they were reformed into the 7-year schools. *Narysy gistoryi Belarusi*, red. A. Kascjuk, I. Ignaczenka, U. Vyšynski, vol. 2, Minsk 1995, s. 119.

⁴² V. Samcevič, *Ekanamična-kul'turnae stanovišča mjastečka Baguševičy Barysaušskaj akrugy*, „Naš Kraj” 1927, nr 3 (18), s. 31–32.

⁴³ ORT (in Russian – Obščestvo Remeslennogo Truda) – is a World non-governmental organization whose target was / is to promote training and in Jewish communities. ORT was founded in 1880 in St. Petersburg.

⁴⁴ I. Zalesskij, *Mestečko Uzda*, linl *Materialy po demografii i ekonomičeskomy položeniju evrejskogo naselenija SSSR*, nr 8, Moskva 1930, s. 70.

⁴⁵ RGAE, f. 5244, op. 1, d. 11, Report by ORT agronomist B. Shik about socioeconomic development of *shtetl* Ščedrin, March 12, 1929, k. 39.

⁴⁶ G. Reles, *V našich Čašnikach*, linl *Evrejskie pisateli Belorusii*, Minsk 2006, s. 216.

lies affected strongly the possibilities to study. Only 4-year schools existed in villages and many small *shtetls*. Mostly small towns with the administrative status of district centers had 7-year schools. In practice only the children attending such schools had more opportunities to enter higher education institutions. That social gap between urban and rural residents was obvious. Such situation rooted in a historically unprivileged position of peasants in comparison with urbanities caused protests. The authorities revealed anti-Soviet as well as some anti-Semitic remarks from the peasantry. Many Belarusian peasants expressed discontent on the Soviet schooling system, especially in the field of costs for education and unequal possibilities for their children in comparison with urban residents⁴⁷.

However the Jews settled in rural area faced certain difficulties as peasantry did. The problem of schooling in Jewish collective farms (*kolkhozes*) was discussed by the authorities. Children from Jewish farms located nearby their *shtetl* usually attended Soviet schools in Yiddish, in other cases – Belarusian ones. Most difficulties occurred in the *kolkhozes* established far away from any settlement. Small towns' residents of Jewish nationality joined also collective farms in order to improve their social and material status. *Kolkhoz* membership in the 1920s (before the massive collectivization in 1929) granted many social benefits. Even people deprived of civil rights could receive them back⁴⁸. This agrarian policy along with a generous international support in the 1920s targeted to reconstruct a weak *shtetl* economy⁴⁹. However, the authorities had found out that to set up schools at Jewish collective farms was unprofitable. In such places Jewish families were deprived of the possibility to send their children to schools. The youth obtained education from seniors, in some cases – from former *melamedim* who had also joined collective farms. The Soviet authorities were concerned that *heders* revived in some remote Jewish collective farms⁵⁰. Only in 1929 the Session of the Collective Farms Union of

⁴⁷ NARB, f. 4, op. 3, d. 14, Report *Ab savetskaj škole na Belarusi* (no later than third decade of 1925), k. 21.

⁴⁸ In the period from 1918 to 1936 „lishentsy” represented a specific group of Soviet citizens deprived of some civil rights (to vote, to join state service, to receive higher education and etc.) The specificity of this group in *shtetls* was, that it covered the considerable part of their dwellers, because of their „bourgeois” occupations (merchants, traders, middlemen, and others). Detailed on this policy in G. Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936*, New York 2003.

⁴⁹ More detailed on Jewish agricultural colonization in the Soviet Union in J. L. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941*, New Haven and London 2005.

⁵⁰ *Kul'turnoe obsluživanje evrejskich kolchozov*, „Tribuna” 1929, nr 19, 10 oktjabra, s. 8.

the BSSR decided to create primary schools at those collective farms where there were at least 25 children. For the „national minorities” kolkhozes (Polish, Jewish, and Latvians) this quota was only at least 20 pupils⁵¹. The task was rather obvious – to promote the massive collectivization among all ethnic groups in the republic. Therefore, the authorities mandated to finish this task by 1930, but it was unrealistic in fact⁵².

How to evaluate the role of Yiddish schools in small towns? On the one hand they were preserving Jewish youth from acculturation and assimilation. The language assimilation was weaker in small *shtetls* than in cities. Practically all larger small towns were covered by activity of Yiddish schools. Yiddish was used for dialogues with authorities and Yiddish press was widely circulated. Hence, the role of Russian and Belarusian languages was increasing through the interwar period. Some Party leaders emphasized that the Jews, like other national minorities of the republic, would master three languages⁵³. In addition to the mother tongue, they would speak fluently the Russian and Belarusian. From the other side, the task of those Yiddish schools was to enforce Sovietization of young people.

Schools of other ethnic groups (Poles, Russian and Tatars)

The Soviet Polish schools were established in the Belarusian SSR during the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. Because of the specific features of re-settlement of the Poles (they were mostly peasants or qualified workers in bigger cities) such schools were set up in the countryside or in some major cities (Minsk, Gomel and others)⁵⁴. One Polish 7-year school functioned in small town of Kojdanava (present day Dzierżyńsk). This school was under the strict control of the Polish Bureau of the Party. This school should be exemplary one, as it was located not far from the Soviet-Polish border. Hereby the Soviet authorities intended to demonstrate the advantages of Soviet Polish schooling. However the facts of

⁵¹ *Instrukcyi pa stvarénju škol u kalgasach*, Minsk 1929, s. 8–9.

⁵² NARB, f. 11, op. 1, d. 190, Materials of Komzet (the Committee for the Settlement of Toiling Jews on the Land) on situation in Jewish and internationalized collective farms, June-September 1930, k. 7.

⁵³ V. Knoryn, *Za kul'turnuju revalucyju*, Minsk 1929, s. 103.

⁵⁴ A. Zamojski, *Pol'skaja diaspora Soveckoj Belarusi v usloviach totalitarnoj sovetskoj sistemy 1920–30-yh godov*, [in] *Rossijsko-Pol'skij istoričeskij al'manach*, Stavropol' 2006, s. 130.

„Catholic clericalism influence” were revealed among its pupils⁵⁵. Diplomats of the Polish Embassy in Moscow characterized the Soviet Polish schools quite briefly: a rather low level of education, experimentation with various methods of teaching, the negative effect of the communist and atheistic education on the youth⁵⁶. Because of the number of reasons, the parents avoided sending their children to the schools with the Polish language of education that were strictly controlled by the Party authorities⁵⁷.

The Tatars represented an ethnic minority group divided between Poland, Belarus and Lithuania. They were the most urbanized ethnic group in Soviet Belarus. Tatars inhabited mostly Minsk and Sluck *okrugi* and their communities existed in such places as Smilavičy, Uzda, Smaleviči, Kapył' and other small towns. In the interwar period there were no schools in their language, though they wanted them sincerely.⁵⁸ The central authorities in Minsk had received a proposition from Tatar community leaders how to improve this situation. Jachja Gembitski was one who petitioned to set up Tatar-language schools or classes⁵⁹. However, the regime was not interested to invest into this field.

There were a few Russian schools in some small towns, mostly in the East and the North-East of the BSSR. These schools carried out their activity mostly either in the cities or Russian rural councils (*sel'sovety*). The Russians lived practically in all small towns, and Russian minority groups concentrated mostly in Gomel', Vitebsk and Mogilev *okrugi*⁶⁰. In the pre-revolutionary times they formed a privileged, well-paid group of urban

⁵⁵ GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 48, Report on activities of the Catholic clergy in Minsk okrug, March 1925, k. 59.

⁵⁶ AAN, MSZ, sygn. 6697, Report *Szkolnictwo na Białorusi Radzieckiej* of the Polish Embassy in Moscow sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw (27 IV 1934), k. 67.

⁵⁷ More detailed on the developing of the Polish schools in the Belarusian SSR in the 1920 and the 1930s in K. Sierocka, *Polonia Radziecka 1917–1939. Z działalności kulturalnej i literackiej*, Warszawa 1968; M. Iwanow, *Pierwszy naród ukarany. Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921–1939*, Warszawa–Wrocław 1991.

⁵⁸ One Tatar language school was established in Minsk in 1917. Children from local Tatar families as well refugees attended it. U. Ljachoŭski, *Školnaja adukacyja ŭ Belarusi*, s. 183.

⁵⁹ This Tatar community activist was repressed twice in 1933 and 1938. I. Kanapacki, *Jachja Gembicki – lider adradžennja belaruskich tatar (da 120-aj gadaviny z dnja naradžennja)*, „Białoruskie Żeszyty I historyczne – Belaruski Gistaryčny Zbornik” 2005, nr 23, s. 213–231.

⁶⁰ The Russians made up less than 8 per cent of the population of the Belarusian SSR in 1926. Russified Belarusians constituted the certain part of Russian minority group. G. Garecki, *Nacyjanal'nyja asablivasci naseł'nictva BSSR i belaruskaga naseł'nictva SSSR pavodle perapisu 1926 godu*, „Polymja” 1929, maj, s. 88–89.

residents. They were engaged chiefly in governmental or military service. The Russian population opposed to Belarusification of schools. In some places in Vitebsk region some Belarusian teachers were even attacked for their activity⁶¹. Especially strong national feeling had so called „starovery” (the Old Orthodox Church believers)⁶². Their unofficial „capital” was small town Vetka located not far from Gomel'. Here and in other places Russian-language schools activity covered the local Russian population⁶³.

General problems of soviet schools in small towns

The problems that Soviet schools faced in all small towns were mostly similar. It was already mentioned that they were mostly maintained by the state and local authorities. The local budgets were often limited and it made the negative impact on normal activity of schools. Constantly it was inhibited by poor equipment, lack of libraries, specialized study rooms and teaching aids. Schoolteachers in Bobr had to produce text books and school desks themselves, as they were missing; and a director had personally pleaded Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education of the RSFSR in Moscow, to render their school financial support. Because of the principal's efforts, it was rated as the best in the district (*uezd*)⁶⁴. Frequent rotation of teachers affected negatively the educational process as well. For example, the school in Baguševičy experienced the high outflow of teachers⁶⁵. They were leaving the small towns because of different reasons. The lack of housing and the shortage of suitable premises were rather severe. The weak point was unsatisfactory sanitary condition of many school buildings. Special public education commissions in cooperation with the local authorities and sanitary councils inspected schools periodically⁶⁶. In many cases they revealed an unfavorable situa-

⁶¹ N. Vakar, *Belorussia. The Making of a Nation. A Case Study*, Cambridge 1956, s. 136.

⁶² Historically persecuted in the Russian Empire for their faith, „Starovery” settled on the Belarusian lands alongside the border of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth in the 17– 18th centuries.

⁶³ A. Zamojski, *Nacyjnal'naja praca z ruskim nasel'nictvam BSSR u 1920-ja gady*, [in] *Materyjaly navukovaj kanferencyi „Etničnyja supol'nasci ŭ Belarusi: gistoryja i sučasnaśc”*, Minsk 2002, s. 217–218.

⁶⁴ A. Usačeva, *Recollections on activity of Soviet school in Bobr*, [in] *Pamjac': Gistoryka-dakumental'naja chroniki garadou i rajonau Belarusi: Krupski rajon*, s. 138.

⁶⁵ V. Samcevič, *Ekanamična-kul'turnae stanovišča mjaścėčka Baguševičy*, s. 32.

⁶⁶ M. Barsukov, *Za dva goda: (stroitel'stvo zdravoochranenija v BSSR za 1925–1926 gg.): Doklad na 2-m Vsebelorusskom s'ezde učastkovych vračej i rabotnikov zdravoochranenija*, Minsk 1927, s. 30.

tion of them. For instance, one of the sanitary inspections was carried out in Minsk region in summer 1925. The commission revealed the unsatisfactory sanitary conditions of most school buildings. For instance, a school in Magil'na was accommodated in the former house of an Orthodox priest (it was confiscated by the local authorities during the revolution). The building was wooden and dilapidated, and its stoves, roof and floor needed to be urgently repaired⁶⁷. In many cases there were no boarding facilities for children from villages. Some pupils had to walk to Buguševičy school about 6-8 km every day and to return back after their classes⁶⁸.

Soviet schools (Jewish, Polish, Lithuanian and others) faced the lack of literature in „national minorities' languages” and Belarusian language as well. Textbooks for such schools were published in Minsk, Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad. In the first half of the 1920s only in exceptional cases the textbooks were imported, for instance from Lithuania⁶⁹. In accordance with ideological principles the Soviet regime was hostile to all textbooks edited abroad. From the end of the decade, all imported during the NEP period books were withdrawn from the use of school libraries during so-called „purges of libraries”⁷⁰. A large campaign of purging of all libraries in small towns was conducted at the end of the 1920s and repeated at the beginning of the 1930s when the Stalin's policy of „the Great Turn”⁷¹ was underway. For instance, the special commission of the Belarusian State University had „purged” a local Lepel' library in 1930. The „ideologically harmful” literature (mostly the works of some pre-war, foreign and local authors which were accused as the „enemies”) was vanished, hence the collection decreased considerably. Some libraries were purged and liquidated by the local authorities, according to the definition „contest is outdated”⁷². Nevertheless some officials noted that the libraries were still littered with harmful books⁷³. However, they were being purged also during the 1930s.

⁶⁷ GAMO, f. 29, op 1, d. 85, Acts of the sanitary inspections of schools of Minsk okrug (June 1925), k. 23, 46–48.

⁶⁸ V. Samcevič, *Ekspanamična-kul'turnae stanovišča mjaštečka Buguševičy*, s. 32.

⁶⁹ V. Skardzis, *Litoŭcy ŭ Saveckaj Belarusi: narys ab uzniknenni litoŭskich pasjalencaŭ na Belarusi*, Minsk 1935, s. 55.

⁷⁰ NARB, f. 701, op. 1, d 108, Materials submitted to the National Commission, October–December 1930, k. 101.

⁷¹ „The Great Turn” (Russian: *Velikij perelom*) is the term from Stalin's article on collectivization in the Soviet press. This term is used to define the liquidation of the NEP and radical changes in the Soviet economic, social and cultural policy.

⁷² NARB, f. 701, op. 1, d. 101, Report on liquidation of the Latvian library of „Sovtorgslužačii” trade-union club in Vitebsk, January–March 1931, k. 695.

⁷³ *Mjastečki BSSR ŭ rekanstrukcyjny peryjad (Z materyjalau absledavannja, pravedzenaga Nackamisiŭaj pry CVK BSSR i jaŭsektaram BAN u. 1931 g.)*, Minsk 1932, s. 35.

National schooling in the 1930s

Until the middle of the 1930s the increase in the number of so-called „national minorities schools” corresponded to the interests of the state. Such statistics and references in the Soviet press were able to demonstrate the achievements of the Soviet educational system⁷⁴. According to the official data by 1932 the situation in the field of primary and secondary education in small towns looked rather attractive. The number of schools in these places could reach to three or even four. An average small town usually had two schools (4-year and 7-year). They were both Belarusian and Jewish schools, and in some places – Polish and Russian. In 1936 the Soviet regime loudly announced that education system would provide compulsory and free education for all children⁷⁵. However, the new Soviet national policy based on „Great Russian idea” implemented actively a massive introduction of the Russian language into all spheres of everyday life. The „national minorities” schools (Yiddish, Polish, Latvian and others) were eliminated by the regime in 1937. They were transformed into Belarusian and Russian ones. The protests of parents were not heard by the Soviet school administration in the period of the „Great Terror”⁷⁶. Soviet Yiddish Schools had a right to exist only in the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidžan⁷⁷. The liquidation of national schools was one of the decisive factors in erosion of preservation of native languages among small town’s communities, as well as Belarusian one. The migration of young people has influenced the demographic image of these settlements. The Soviet school opened a door to colleges, institutes and Universities. As the youth left, middle age and senile people stayed in their *shtetls*. Such disproportion was remarkable among the Jewish communities. The reduction of the number of people who declared Yiddish as their mother tongue was rather considerable⁷⁸. After September 17,

⁷⁴ *Nacyjanalnae budaiŋnictva na Belarusi*, „Zvjazda” 7.10.1934, s. 2.

⁷⁵ *Ab Škole. Zbornik pastanoŋ SNK SSSR i CK VKP(b) ab pačatkovaj, njapoŋmaj sjarednjaj i sjarednjaj škole (1930–1935)*, Minsk 1936, s. 17–22.

⁷⁶ More detailed on liquidation of Yiddish schools in small towns in A. Zeltser, V. Selemenev, *The Liquidation of Yiddish Schools in Belorussia and Jewish Reaction*, „Jews in Eastern Europe” 2000, nr 1(41), s. 74–111.

⁷⁷ More detailed in R. Weinberg, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidžan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland. An Illustrated History, 1938–1996*, London Berkeley Los Angeles 1998; A. Patek, *Birobidžan. Sowiecka ziemia obiecana? Żydowski Obwód Autonomiczny w ZSSR*, Kraków 1997.

⁷⁸ Demographers (M. Altshuler, V. Konstantinov) have revealed that in the period between 1926 and 1936 their number considerably decreased all over the Soviet Union from 72% to 39%, meanwhile, in Soviet Belarus – from 91 to 55%. Because of different reasons

1939 the Soviet regime was able to use its rich experience reforming the schooling of occupied territories of the Second Polish republic. Their dwellers of all nationalities would experience the destruction of former educational system, annihilation of religious and „bourgeois” schools.

Conclusion

The Soviet educational policy in small towns was closely related to political transformations in „the first proletarian state”. In the interwar period the regime was able to involve small town residents in the construction of the Soviet society mainly with help of schooling. The Bolsheviks tried to intensify destruction of the traditional education typical for all towns. The harsh attack was done on traditional religious schools, though local Yiddish Soviet schools faced the strong competition from „underground” heders. The struggle with religious „tenets” incurred significant damage to all religious communities. Small towns’ schools played significant role spreading knowledge between *shtetl* and rural populations. Within the national policy of the 1920s, the Soviet regime encouraged the development of the national minorities’ school network (Yiddish, Polish and others). The task was that instruction in all subjects would be given to pupils in their mother tongue. The modern Belarusian historiography proves it as a merit of the Soviet authorities. It is certain that in those complex conditions the provision of public schools with the native language teaching was a true achievement. However there were different reasons why many families preferred non-Jewish schools to Jewish. By the end of the 1920s the Soviet school had become a single alternative to obtaining knowledge in any small town. The *shtetl* inhabitants were gradually recognizing the principles of new system of education. Its adoption was favored by the general political and socio-economic situation in the country. Many families were attracted by new social opportunities provided by the Bolsheviks’ regime for their children, especially the possibility to receive higher education in cities. Schooling was a strong tool modernizing small towns according to the Soviet model; simultaneously it was undermining the basis of small town (*shtetl*) itself as the center of preservation of the national traditions of different ethnic communities.

Andriej Zamojski

Szkolnictwo radzieckie jako czynnik zmieniający obraz wielonarodowościowych miasteczek na Białorusi w okresie międzywojennym

Streszczenie

Na przykładzie rozwoju radzieckiego szkolnictwa w miasteczkach na Białorusi, zamieszkiwanych przez mniejszości narodowe, głównie Żydów, ale także Polaków czy Tatarów, autor ukazuje, jak władze radzieckie wykorzystywały edukację do osiągnięcia swoich celów politycznych i ideologicznych. W życiu żydowskich wspólnot zamieszkujących te miasteczka, tradycyjne religijne wykształcenie odgrywało bardzo ważną rolę. Bolszewicy, w pierwszych miesiącach swojej władzy, prowadzili walkę o oddzielenie szkoły od religii, poczynając od konfiskat budynków szkolnych, a na prześladowaniach i dyskredytacji nauczycieli kończąc. Nie zważając na to, że walka z tajnym szkolnictwem żydowskim w *shtetlach* nie przynosiła sukcesów, władza radziecka twardo obstawała przy założeniu, że oprócz szkół radzieckich żadne inne nie mają prawa bytu. Do połowy lat trzydziestych reżim radziecki dopuszczał rozwój sieci szkolnej mniejszości narodowych (szkół w języku jidisz, polskim i innych). Wraz ze zmianą stalinowskiej polityki narodowościowej, w szkołach tych wprowadzano jako wykładowy język rosyjski i białoruski. Szkoła radziecka stała się ważnym elementem zmiany charakteru tych miasteczek. Przyczyniała się do zniszczenia tradycyjnego obrazu *shtetla* jako ośrodka narodowych tradycji różnych grup etnicznych, zwłaszcza Żydów.