

Alfred Döblin on Germans, Poles, and Jews in Lodz (1926)

Abstract

Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) wrote extensively on turn-of-the-century society and the effects of World War I in Germany—as, for example, in his most famous novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). Döblin, who was of Jewish heritage, was also fascinated with eastern Europe's vibrant, though often persecuted, Jewish communities. In 1925, he traveled to various towns and cities in Poland; his account of that experience was published the following year in *Journey to Poland* [*Reise in Polen*]. His rather dark view of “Eastern European Jews” [*Ostjuden*] in the industrial city of Lodz offer a glimpse of what being German and Jewish meant to him.

Source

Lodz

[...]

I walk across the pavement of Lodz; I am filled with friendly warmth upon viewing the houses, stores, markets; I've been to Zakopane. I've seen these mountains and the winter passing across it. The house in Zakopane is still in back of me. I had joy and warmth with them. It's as if I had taken part in a family festivity and am now encountering the members of the family in everyday life. I sat in their home, even though now, a stranger as always, I wander outside, along the house facades.

And lo and behold: the painted female faces, the eyes, the legs in light-colored stockings—the black-haired Jewish men, bearded, in caftans and skullcaps, the wretched crumbling houses. I'm in Russian Poland, Warsaw is here. I celebrate our reunion. I like them all. I love the Russian blend, I love it more than the Galician street; the latter was too smooth, too West European.

A strip is drawn all the way through the city, from top to bottom; I've never seen a strip like this in any city. It's Petrikow Street. And, on this street, amid millinery shops, restaurants, sales of men's furnishings, I read a sign in German: a German-language newspaper in Lodz. So in this city I'll be guided better than anywhere else; I'll be reading a newspaper myself, local items, ads.

And I sit in a restaurant and read. “Don't drink unboiled milk.” That's the thick warning in the

middle of the text. Oh, why not? This triggers deep probing. Is dysentery going around? I cast a shuddering glance at the town's sewer system. So far as it exists. Ecce: Russian dirt also has its dark sides.

[...]

The health statistics grab my eye:

In the 1923 Lodz Yearbook, we find remarkable figures on the activities of the Municipal Scabies Institute during the past few years. The number of people who had to make use of this institute came to 12,805 in 1918, 11,337 in 1919, 8,283 in 1920, 5,203 in 1921, 4,337 in 1922, 1,409 in 1923. We may infer from the compilation of these data that scabies, which was widespread in Lodz during the war, has been declining since 1918. On the whole, it has been

established that scabies is more widespread in the Jewish population than in the Christian population. This leads us to conclude that the hygienic conditions of the Jewish populace leave a great deal to be desired. After all, in the year 1918, fifty-seven percent of all scabies sufferers were Jews, while the Jewish percentage of patients treated at the Municipal Scabies Institute was fifty-one in 1919, sixty-two in 1920, sixty-seven in 1921, forty-six in 1922, and eighty-two in 1923.

From scabies, I casually shift to “Art and Culture.” The German Theater is doing two plays, *The Post Office* and *Eternally Amen*. “Wildgans’s adaptation of Tagore—the difference was great, but it provided, I might almost say, a textbook case of realistic literature in contrast to a series of witty ideas, poetry transplanted to the stage.”

Inimitable, I might almost say. The difference between Lodz German and normal German is great, supplying a textbook case of the textbooks and the German that’s taught here. Wouldn’t it be better simply to speak Polish, in contrast to the double Dutch, or should I say double Deutsch, that’s smeared into the gazette. Incidentally, “the content of Wildgans’s play is very short, it is limited to fascinating dialogue,” which is gratifying for all concerned. In regard to a French play done at the Polish Theater, the writer reports “that the production was successful on all scores; one can safely say that it couldn’t have been better.” I think: One can safely say it; why, my son, should you not safely say something like this? It will do you good, it’s no disgrace. Granted, the fact that the performance couldn’t have been better is slightly unpleasant. But what can you do. And who’s lying on the ground in the advertising section? A “victim of uric acid.” Didn’t I say so? Didn’t I guess it right off the bat? Only uric acid can wreak such havoc. For years now, I’ve been a staunch opponent of uric acid. I intend to speak to the “inventor in Warsaw” first chance I get. I’ve already read about this cancer medicine, Geduro!; also about the two hundred zlotys for intellectual workers. Just what’s going on? I can’t read newspapers anymore.

[...]

I ask a German to enlighten me; Lodz, the city, has half a million inhabitants. Oh, how regrettable. That’s too many. A Polish city is big because of its diversity. Once it gets bigger, it organizes itself and is already smaller. Lodz was supposedly built by Germans. And indeed, a lot of German used to be spoken here; now, Polish has gained the upper hand. Germans are industrialists, factory owners. There are German schools: high schools, some thirty official elementary schools with German as the language of instruction. However, enrollment is dropping; every year the parents are asked to provide a special declaration stating that they wish to have their children taught in German. Their religion is mostly Evangelical [i.e. Lutheran]. A German writers’ association exists in Katowice. The Germans have a theater. Yes, I know all about it. And the newspapers review the productions regularly; I know, I know. The actors are mostly Austrians; it’s hard to get performers from Germany.

Now just how do Germans, one hundred thousand of them, get along with the Poles? Oh, very well—the richer they are, the better. How come? The rich are the fastest to assimilate. So, does patriotism increase with the melting away of money? Or does intelligence increase with the size of the purse? No. A poor man is simply needy; poverty makes you belligerent, it prevents compromises. But the rich man wants something for his money, and also imports his glamour from abroad: gold vs. nationality. The Germans socialize together, as is appropriate, in clubs. There are about thirty clubs. The Germans have formed two political parties: a German middle-class party, which is rather weak and barely active; and a socially engaged party with a nationalistic streak, a German Workers’ Party. Upon hearing this, I ask him, insidiously, about the elections: for instance, whom do the German industrialists vote for? And I get the answer I expected: the industrialists do not vote German; they voted for —an industrialist, who, incidentally, didn’t get elected. What about the workers? Yes, their party teams up with the Polish Social Democratic Party.

The Poles in Lodz number one hundred fifty to two hundred thousand. Most of them are workers. They vote Christian Social and Christian Democratic. The Catholics have a bishop here; the city has five Catholic churches, two Evangelical, two Russian.

Along with these Poles and Germans, says the gentleman, the city also contains Jews, as I have already noticed. In fact, I noticed a few at the station. And if there were no Jews in Poland, speaking German with me, helping me at railroad stations by telling me when my train stops and leaves, then I wouldn't have gotten beyond Warsaw. Of these Jews, there are all of one hundred fifty to two hundred thousand in Lodz—a nice round number. They are economically powerful, producing industrialists, merchants, and craftsmen. I bet that whole battalions of them are starving. I'd rather not ask him anything else about the Jews: he's a Prussian, and I know his colors.

Ah, my dear Germans, my dear Jews, here I find you side by side. What a bizarre situation! Now both of you are alien nations! With equal rights amid inequality of rights. Lo and behold, an odd kettle of fish. You've got little else in common; maybe you can now find something worthwhile in one another—it doesn't have to be baptism for Jews or tefilin [prayer thongs] for Germans. Now I am walking along Petrikow Street. And—my demon is guiding me—I stumble upon a bookshop, a German one. My heart leaps, my ears prick up: I'm in clover. The bookshop has two windows: I ignore the Polish one with its hieroglyphs. Then, two paces to the left: *The Sin Against the Blood*. I can read this, I don't have to translate it. Ah, I'm home again, a thousand greetings. "Mother tongue, mother sounds, oh so blissful, oh so sweet." *The Sin Against the Blood*; a whole row. Nothing but German words, German to the core! Meyer's encyclopedia: a book about lacemaking and artistic knitting ("On Saturday, the women's clubs are putting on a big fair with surprises for old and young"). The Gospels, so many Gospels. Yes, the Germans here are Evangelical. It must be Luther's translation. But why so many Gospels? Is this a new translation? Why are they propagating the book about the executed man, the memory of whom makes me close my eyes. These are such strikingly thick tomes. The four ancient books can't be all that thick. Do these have commentaries? And then I see: the swastika on the cover, and the name of a German nationalistic agitator above it. His Gospels! His! Yes, that's good, now I'm in the picture, now there's order in the shop window. No doubt he's proved that Wotan is the true God, or else Christ came from Mecklenburg. Yes, that's what makes the book so thick. He could have made it thinner; people would still believe him. Dear homeland, a thousand greetings. Just how are things with the interesting situation of the Germans and Jews? They will walk together for five paces. But I doubt whether the Germans will be putting on tefilin.

[...]

In the mid-eighteenth century, Lodz had fewer than two hundred inhabitants, and by the end of the century 89 men, 90 women, and 11 Jews. (I can't determine how many males and females among the Jews; as far back as in ancient Rome, slaves had no sex.) There were 44 houses, plus 44 barns and 18 unbuilt lots. The people and Jews lived with 18 horses, 97 oxen, 58 cows, and 63 head of black cattle. [...]

"Jews, however, are not permitted to reside in the new industrial colonies. Nor shall any Jew, in the future, be permitted to maintain a tavern or to manufacture spiritous liquors." Jews are neither foreigners nor natives. What are they then? This strange nation enjoys such preferential treatment everywhere. A chosen people indeed. Their neighbors tastefully and affectionately call them "bedbugs."

A master dyer named August Sanger (a good Polish name!) regulated the old city and founded the first dyeworks. Saxons and German Bohemians were brought here by the cotton industry. A man named Louis Geyer from Zittau built the first large cotton mill. Then came the Evangelical church and the town hall; by 1829, Lodz had some 4,000 people and 400 houses; ten years later, there were 20,000 people, and it was the second- largest city in the

Kingdom of Poland.

Soon this number was increased by Karl Scheibler. He brought 180,000 rubles along and built his colossal factory. The West mounted the great attack. By 1864, Lodz already had 38,000 people: 7,000 Orthodox, some 12,000 Catholics, 13,000 Lutherans, 6,000 Jews. "We by God's grace Alexander the Second, Emperor and Sovereign of all the Russias, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland" decided on and decreed the building of a railroad line connecting Lodz with the Warsaw-Vienna line; the contract was awarded to the bankers Johann Bloch, Eduard Frankenstein, Josef Zablkowski, August Raphan, Karl Scheibler, Matthias Rosen, Moritz Mamrott. They appeared to have been mostly Germans—and bedbugs.

When the railroad was opened, a Lodz newspaper greeted the fervently longed-for day: "Never has our city worn such a festive air. Upon descending from his railroad carriage, His Excellency Governor Count Berg was welcomed by a deputation of citizens with bread and salt." That's a Russian custom that Germans are following in Poland; but given the teeming crowd, what's one nation more or less. That evening the entire city was illuminated; meticulously made signs bearing the name of His Majesty the Tsar were set up in many places. First the governor reviewed the dragoons stationed in Lodz; having been recruited in Siberia, they were the only natives.

During the banquet that the governor enjoyed, he condescended to announce: "The city of Lodz owes its prosperity to German industry, to the enterprising spirit of the Germans, and to German hard work. I believe I am giving these people good advice when I encourage them to emulate loyally the virtues of their fathers and to maintain the German character. It is the determination of our Very Gracious Monarch to give every nationality in the Kingdom of Poland that which belongs to it."

[...]

On the day of the celebration in Lodz, the Germans were granted permission to open German schools taught in the German language: "Gentlemen, you must realize the profound significance of this wise determination! Strengthen your industrial capacity for the benefit of the great state in which you have found your second home."

[...]

Sunday, Memorial Day. The tenth anniversary of the dreadful battle of Lodz. Leaving from the factory station, I take an hour-long train ride out to the country. The man I am visiting is not in the station; we meet at the barrier. Vast fields, soil thrown up, the ground muddy, loamy. We come to a village: a German colony. Clean cottages stand in a row; the Evangelical church. We stroll through the park by his home. He shows me remnants of the great battle. The cast-up embankments for setting up cannon. Here is where the Germans were stationed. The embankments are lined up in a wide semicircle; now, they are bushy, overgrown. We approach a pond; it's supposedly filled with guns and ammunition. A dreadful bombardment took place; the steeple of the Evangelical church was destroyed. At the pond, we come upon wide, ribbonlike depressions; young saplings are rising out of them. Those depressions are the trenches. They are already being covered by the forest, human beings don't have to cover them. [...]

This street is dominated by Jews; and the further north I go, the more Jews there are: in high fur caps and black fur coats, black skullcaps, with long, thick beards, their hands in their pockets, their feet in top boots; furrowed brows. As in Warsaw, scores of them emerge from deep courtyards. Very crowded side streets. Young women come along on high heels, their coats snugly hugging their shoulders and buttocks. A stooped old man with a puffy, malevolent face grumbles past. Bales of red, yellow, blue cloth, packages of linen, calico are driven on wagons, lugged one by one. New Ring, a shabby, round, wide square; to the left, the old town hall; to the right, scaffoldings, a colorful

building; the new town hall. The old city, narrow streets, crumbling small houses. I step into a dreadful house, cross the courtyard, pass through a door, find myself in a different street. It's teeming with kids; the ground sinks in waves. Lots of slaughterhouses for geese. A small synagogue is open. They stand in a circle in the vestibule, praying; I wonder why they don't go in. I hear a woman weeping and shrieking; what's she doing among the men? She looks pitiful, she pleads with everyone; they have to let her in. Her three children are critically ill; the doctor has little hope. She's managed to get inside, she goes over to the elders; my companion tells me that they're supposed to read *tillim*, psalms of David, prayers for her children.

Outside, I plod laboriously through fog and sleet. The proletarian district. A poster is pasted to a house: "Poles, don't buy from Jews! You can't, mustn't charge more than the Jews. This is not just for your benefit, it's your patriotic duty." The message is signed by a Development Committee. "Support Polish commerce and industry. Then you'll truly be children of the Fatherland."

The young woman who speaks to me teaches Polish and Jewish children together in a Polish school. "The little Poles are better in writing, in composition and handicrafts; but the little Jews are better in language and comprehension." However, the questions asked by the little Jews are dreadful; at times you're absolutely horrified. Recently, they were talking about Jesus, when a Jewish child asked very calmly: "Did he really exist?" And the Polish children gaped and gawked. She once told them about a heroic patriotic Pole who allowed his hand to be burned off in the war with the Turks; she demonstrated that he had shown courage. A Jewish child sat there, reflecting, and then remarked: "Yes. But the Turks also showed courage." They analyze a lot: they weigh questions precisely, justly; it's impossible to implant any opinions in them. The children find out all sorts of things at home; when it's taught in class, they say disdainfully: "We've heard all that at home." They're very unabashed in coming out with their opinions. Someone else cheerfully cuts in: He was teaching in a school, and when he enthused about a certain Russian author, he saw the Jewish pupils smirking. He understood fully: they meant: "What a jerk!"

The Jews have fine editions of Schiller in their homes: they read him; he's got grandiloquence, ethics, determination.

The Poles are far superior to them emotionally, in gentleness.

[...]

Once again I am summoned to the dark lanes. A rebbe lives here, the Rebbe of Strzegom. I'd like to speak to him.

Why don't I speak to any Catholic priest, any monk? I'd really like to. I don't know Polish, I can't ask for directions to reach one; however, the people whom I speak to, and who know what I want, are no help. If I say I'm interested in culture, they think I mean art galleries. I complain. My will is good: a scoundrel that gives more than it has.

The great Rebbe of Gura Kalwarja wouldn't accept me; this one sits down with me at the table. He lives in a tenement, his *bes-medresh* [synagogue] is small. A couple of men pray and study in it. Then the rebbe stands there in his round hat, a tall figure with a powerful gray beard. They tell me he is Reb Sadye, a grandson of the great Rebbe of Gichlin. They take his wet umbrella and his silk overcoat. He sits down at the head of the table in the parlor. He has to live here, I was told; he was forced to abandon his home in Strzegom, a nearby village, during the war; now someone else is occupying his home, and the rebbe is trying to get back in. The men coming from the *bes-medresh* settle gradually around the table. When I ask questions, and the rebbe answers, they join in, giving me explanations; meanwhile, the rebbe sits wordless, self-absorbed, sometimes listening, nodding. I've heard that he's fighting to keep the Sabbath holy and he's head of an organization that's also active in other countries: it's aimed

particularly at industrialists and businessmen. I ask him about the Sabbath.

“The Sabbath and its observance are a major principle of religious Judaism. The Sabbath is a rope that God has thrown to the Jews, for them to hold on tight.”

During the war, the religious and ethical feelings of the Eastern European Jews were weakened, the love of material things gained control. But eventually, Jewish life stabilized. And he, the rebbe, took on the task of propagating the religious and moral life of the Jews, the sanctity of the Sabbath. He encountered great difficulties among the employers. They refused to permit Jewish workers, say, the packers in the textile industry, to take off on the Sabbath. In 1922, the rebbe founded the Organization to Observe and Maintain the Holy Sabbath. Its activities are practical, it sends delegates out into the streets.

It's not easy for me to ask questions. But I take heart when the rebbe, that tremendous figure with a gray beard, responds calmly and kindly, in a highly intelligible way. I've seen a lot of Jews, I say, I've visited synagogues, prayer rooms, and cemeteries, and learned a lot. But there's one thing I still don't understand: Why do the pious Jews form factions, according to their rebbes? Why are they devoted to their rebbes? In the West, I heard that there is only one Judaism, one faith. They smile amiably at the table; one man nods by way of confirmation: “A good question.” The rebbe ponders deeply, then gazes at me with his very gentle eyes:

“All people have the same goal, which leads to God. There is a great land. A king rules the land. But the king cannot rule the land all by himself; he needs soldiers and generals. Those are the rebbes. How do the rebbes differ from one another? They all hold to one and the same thing. A rebbe can understand the Torah harshly or leniently. One can construe the Torah in different ways. There is a Torah of *Middas haddim*, I command, to a Torah of *Middas horakhim*, I commiserate. It's a matter of interpretation. The rebbe who understands the Torah harshly has his followers; and the one who understands it leniently has his followers. And that is what makes for the number of followers. The rebbes are pious and the sons of pious fathers. Each man chooses the rebbe with whom he sympathizes.”

At the table, they tell me: At a rebbe's grave, his followers shake hands with the son or grandson who has proved capable and worthy, they congratulate him.

While the mild, lovely words resonate within me, the men sometimes get into violent, chaotic disputes. They sit or stand around; so do the rebbe's two sons, one with a full downy beard, the other softer. They smile a lot. The rebbe's brother is also present; he attends to me and tries to read my thoughts. “One has to study a lot,” he says. “I was far from being as good a student as my brother, I wasn't up to it.” He whispers reverently: “And then teaching children. He never allowed himself to sleep. And these men here are no scholars. They're all businessmen and simple people. They just come here.”

The rebbe, with his tremendous beard, sits at the narrow side of the table, huddling, his head sinking into his chest. He has deep, very calm eyes, which do not gaze out of him, but are turned inward. They are windows peering inside him. There is something sad and still about him; under his beard, his face looks pinched. He's modest, kindly. He's a very poor man. What a contrast with that rich autocrat, the Rebbe of Ger. And soon, as I sit among them, I notice that this rebbe has almost an excess of softness and gentleness; a childlike silence rests upon him. When I open my lips to ask another question, he looks across the table without sitting up: “Quiet—a question.”

How does the rebbe, I ask, feel about Orthodoxy and Zionism? “The Orthodox Jew does not alienate himself from

Erets Israel [the Land of Israel]. Zion and the Torah belong together. Without the Torah, Zionism is not a Jewish movement.” He talks lovingly about the Zionist Jews: He is no enemy of Zionism. But in the eyes of God, a man is a Jew if he keeps nation, country, and Torah together. Without this, there is no Zion. And that is what the Jewish people must remember.

In his pronouncements, the words “Talmud” and “Torah” keep recurring. When I talk about the Western European Jews, he points to Poland: many Western Jews have turned their backs on the Talmud and the Torah, so that their children have no Jewish upbringing. A child must first study the Talmud and the Torah, and then have a secular education. If a child has a good mind, then he can learn secular things anyway.

And how do the old sacred writings relate to modern science and scholarship; can they be made compatible with one another? The rebbe sits there and shrugs. His hobby is astronomy. And he comes up with the following statements:

“The Torah is the source that makes everything fruitful. Science is only a single body of water deriving from it. It cannot survive without the source; it would have to dry out. There are natural phenomena that transcend the highest power, the most cunning calculation. There is a divine supervision that can foil anything.”

A marvelous conversation, a perfect treat.

I avoid a Zionist agitator with whom I’ve made an appointment. While preparing for my final departure, I receive a visitor, a young Yiddish writer. Again, one of them sits with me in a Polish hotel, in a warm room, and I reflect about their concerns with him.

“Before the war,” says the young man on the sofa, “the intelligentsia of our people was largely assimilated. Then the intellectuals returned: the middle classes became Zionists, others joined Poale Zion. The Socialists sidestepped the Jewish question.” When I talk about the Rebbe of Strzegom, he tells me about a rebbe in a village near Warsaw: for forty years now, he has been weeping, freezing, praying for the entire world, for its sins. Another rebbe has been singing his own songs for many years, he enjoys eating and he eats a lot—an optimist: “Life is wonderful.”

And now, what is your situation today? I’ve heard the name Bialik.

“Oh, a partisan issue. He writes in Hebrew, that’s all it takes. He’s mediocre, weak, philistine. There are artists who are Jews and there are Jewish artists. You have to distinguish. The difference exists in all nations. Poles or Germans or Jews who depict a piece of Polish or German or Jewish life are not necessarily ‘of the people.’ We have many artists who are Jews. They paint ghetto pictures, historical motifs. It doesn’t mean a thing. You have to have talent and rely on talent; that’s all.”

The lively man speaks skeptically but not sharply about Palestine; I can hear notes from my conversation yesterday:

“Perhaps they’ll succeed in establishing a state there. Perhaps, for how many? And what will they have achieved? They’ll provide soldiers, statesmen, and industrial workers; the world will then have more of them. But they will never breed a Spinoza, a Bergson.

“That’s not where the future of the world lies. Zionism is a physical movement. The world has to be humanized. Things are horrible not only for the Jews. The Germans, the Poles, the French, the Americans, the British are also badly off. What’s so great about their culture anyway? We’re not impressed. We saw a lot of things in the war.

Everything has to be humanized. Slowly. That will also solve the great problems confronting the Jews. Without destroying our substance.”

It feels good hearing such voices without moving my own lips. How clear it becomes that one is not alone in the world. No utterable feeling. The feeling of all feelings. [...]

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