

**Thinking Globally, Acting Locally:
Joel Wegmeister and Modern Hasidic Politics in Warsaw**

by *François Guesnet*

Abstract

This contribution investigates how the emergence of the first modern Jewish metropolis in Warsaw in the second half of the 19th century challenged traditional visions of community cohesion. It argues that the acceleration of political and societal change within the Jewish community allowed observant elites to achieve political and cultural hegemony in Warsaw, and thus offers a sui generis pathway of Jewish metropolitan modernization. This claim is substantiated by following the communal and political involvement of a leading Hasidic civil leader, Joel Wegmeister (1837-1919), co-founder of the first outlets of the Agudat Israel in the Kingdom of Poland before World War One.

Introduction

For several decades in the 19th century, Warsaw was the largest Jewish community in the world. Already in the 1870s, it counted more than one hundred thousand registered Jewish inhabitants.¹ After many decades of steady growth, the number of Jews moving to the capital of the Kingdom of Poland, part of the Tsarist Empire, grew much more rapidly after the emancipation legislation of 1862, abolishing all settlement restrictions. The registered Jewish population doubled between the mid-1850s and the mid-1860s, from slightly above forty thousand to almost eighty thousand Jews. At the turn of the century, this number had reached more than a quarter million. The highest percentage of Jews in Warsaw was reached shortly before World War One, when around forty percent of Varsovians identified as Jews. The largest number in times of peace was reached shortly before World War Two, when around three hundred seventy five thousand Jews lived in the capital of the Second Polish Republic.²

¹ The actual number of Jews in Warsaw is difficult to establish for any period prior to the 20th century. Contemporary observers assumed that the factual number of inhabitants would exceed the number of registered inhabitants by at least a quarter.

² For a survey of the history of Jewish Warsaw see Antony Polonsky, "Warsaw", *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (New Haven, Conn., London: Yale University

In contrast to most other Jewish metropolises of the early 20th century, Jewish Warsaw was not created by immigration from afar - the Jews living in Warsaw were mostly from Polish provinces. Also, since the expulsion of 1527, Warsaw was off limits for any chartered Jewish settlement, and only a few thousand lived, often on noble grounds, the so-called *jurydiki*, or without permit. This smallish early settlement grew by the first group of Jewish immigrants from outside the historical territory of the Polish Commonwealth: a small group of Jewish entrepreneurs accompanying the new Prussian administration after the third partition in 1795, quickly joining the local Jewish commercial and banking elite. These enlightened entrepreneurs would have a relatively strong cultural impact by establishing a small but influential network, clustered around a reform-friendly and integrationist congregation.³ Two generations later, commercial opportunities as well as the improved legal status of Jews introduced in 1862 lead to a steady influx of Jews from a variety of Russian provinces.⁴ These so-called *litvaks* were highly successful in establishing commercial relations between the emerging Polish textile industry and the Russian markets. They identified with Russian and Russian culture to a higher degree than Polish Jews would relate to Polish and Polish culture. Later cohorts, arriving after the deterioration of the legal, political and social situation of Jews in the Russian Empire after the pogrom wave of 1881-82, would have a considerable impact in mobilizing and radicalizing the mass-based political movements in the Kingdom of Poland.⁵ The fact that autochthonous Jews would form the vast majority of Warsaw Jewry does not mean they were culturally homogenous. Besides the ubiquitous impact of social stratification, the conflict between traditional rabbinical Judaism (the so-called *misnagdim*) and Hasidic communities constituted a major religious rift within the community. The affiliation with one of the numerous Hasidic communities would have a strong societal impact on an individual and his or her family, beginning

Press, 2008), 1993-2004.

³ For the most compelling discussion of this often overlooked elite of Warsaw Jewry see Cornelia Aust, "Commercial Cosmopolitans: Networks of Jewish Merchants Between Warsaw and Amsterdam, 1750-1820", (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2010), 178-256.

⁴ François Guesnet, "Migration and Stereotype: The Case of Russian Jews in the Polish Kingdom at the End of the Nineteenth Century", *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 41/4 (2004): 505-518; François Guesnet, "'Wir müssen Warschau unbedingt russisch machen.' Die Mythologisierung der russisch-jüdischen Zuwanderung ins Königreich Polen zu Beginn unseres Jahrhunderts am Beispiel eines polnischen Trivialromans", in *Geschichtliche Mythen in den Literaturen Ostmittel- und Südosteuropas*, ed. E. Behring, (Stuttgart, München: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 99-116.

⁵ François Guesnet, "Khevres and Akhdes: the Change in Jewish Self-Organization in the Kingdom of Poland before 1900 and the Bund", in *Jewish politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100*, ed. Jack Jacobs, (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2001), 3-13.

with the membership in specific congregations and voluntary associations, and shaping kinship and commercial relationships.⁶

The consequences of a rapidly emerging large Jewish community is at the centre of this contribution. A process of accelerated demographic growth constituted a serious challenge to traditional visions of communal life. Communal consensus as informal, non-institutional glue holding smaller communities together would have been achieved with much less ease. Neither communal nor private institutions were able to cope with the administrative and material requirements of a rapidly growing and impoverished Jewish population. As will be argued later in this contribution, the formal Jewish community board, the *Zarząd Gminy*, was far from coping with these requirements, undermining its political and social standing. As a result, and in a unique process of societal adaptation and political modernization, misnagdic and Hasidic networks would establish a solid grip on significant segments of communal responsibility, above all in the realms of education and charity, securing also political clout. This cultural hegemony was established both in the wake of Russian legislation on voluntary associations, in the context of international orthodox cooperation, and due to the reactionary crack-down against revolutionary trends in Tsarist Russia after the revolution of 1905.

This argument shall be developed by looking at a specific personality, Joel Wegmeister (1837-1919). As a member of the Hasidim of Ger, one of the most significant Hasidic communities in Polish lands in general and in Warsaw in particular, Wegmeister was active in many spheres of communal activities. Despite his huge popularity in his lifetime, he has almost completely escaped the attention of historians.⁷ The basic information contained in the few sources available about him and his family will allow for a brief overview on the life of this Hasidic civil leader. He attained a position of influence in Warsaw and Polish Jewry between the end of the 19th century and the resurrection of independent Poland after World War One. Due to the scarcity of sources, this presentation has

⁶ For a description of the impact of the rise of Hasidism on Warsaw Jewry see Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: the Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), passim.

⁷ Jacob Szacki, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, 3 vols. (New York: Yivo 1948-53), mentions Joel Wegmeisters' activities in welfare organisations (vol. II, 182) without giving further details, as well as his function as co-administrator for the Warsaw funds for the Jewish communities in Palestine (vol. III, 372). He is mentioned in passing by Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition. Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916-1939*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996) and by Marian Fuks, *Żydzi w Warszawie*, Warszawa 1992, 266 f. Most recently François Guesnet, "Joel Wegmeister", *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (New Haven, Conn., London: Yale University Press, 2008), 2009-2010.

to refrain from formulating far reaching assumptions about Wegmeister's convictions and his value system.

Although the overwhelming share of entrepreneurs in civil leadership of Jewish communities is obvious, we have only partial investigations in their societal and political role in Eastern European Jewish history. An important starting point is the seminal essay by Arcadius Kahan about Russian Jewish entrepreneurs.⁸ The works of Jan Kosim⁹ and Ryszard Kołodziejczyk¹⁰ present important elements of analysis, but do not focus on the role of Jewish entrepreneurs on Jewish communal issues. In attempt to argue from a point of view of institutional genealogy, this contribution focuses in a first step on a central feature of the traditional Jewish community in Eastern Europe, the so-called *qlal-tuer*, or communal activist.¹¹ The *qlal-tuer* was a prominent community member taking it upon himself to react *ad hoc* in case of an emergency of any kind and on all level, be it communal or individual, out of a feeling of individual responsibility. This function would be typical for the rapidly growing intermediate and large Eastern European Jewish communities of the 19th century, and reflect the flexible response from within a community to the gap opening between its traditional institutional set-up and the rapidly growing requirements of an ever larger urban Jewish population.

The *qlal-tuer*: A preliminary definition

Who or what was a *qlal-tuer*? Literally someone who felt responsible for the whole of Israel within his home town, his community, and acted on its behalf. Basically, the *qlal-tuer* kept the wide range of tasks of the autonomous Jewish community alive when it ceased to exist, that is, beginning with the 19th century. The *qlal-tuer* thus assumed important elements of the community board's responsibility and authority. The following analysis will propose, as a first step, a preliminary definition of the *qlal-tuer*. The activities of Joel Wegmeister will serve as illustration for this function. It will be argued that one has to differentiate between his activities on behalf of the Warsaw community as a whole and his partisanship for the Rebbe of Ger, independently of the fact, that

⁸ Arcadius Kahan, "Notes on Jewish Entrepreneurship in Tsarist Russia", in *Entrepreneurship in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*, eds. Gregory Guroff, Fred V. Carstensen, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 104-24.

⁹ Jan Kosim, *Losy pewnej fortuny. Z dziejów burżuazji warszawskiej 1807-1830*, (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1972).

¹⁰ Ryszard Kołodziejczyk, *Miasta, mieszczaństwo, burżuazja w Polsce w XIX w. Szkice i rozprawy historyczne*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1979).

¹¹ Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772-1844*, (New York 1943, reprint 1970), 164, and François Guesnet, *Polnische Juden im 19. Jahrhundert. Lebensbedingungen, Rechtsnormen und Organisation im Wandel*, (Köln, Wien: Böhlau, 1998), 127-28, 263-80.

Wegmeister himself would not have accepted any difference between responsibility for the community as a whole and acting for the best of the Gerer *basidim*. The following attempt for a definition is based not only on the example of Wegmeister himself, but on many others, studied with the help of communal and administrative records.¹²

The *qlal-tuer* had to be a leading community member, and not a paid communal functionary. Certainly we know of many rabbis being active on behalf of their communities, functioning for example as intercessors (Hebr. *shtadlan*) or initiating philanthropic activities. There can be no doubt that in many cases the spiritual authority of a rabbi could purvey him with a far reaching freedom for communal or charitable action. On the other hand, although their dignity did not exclude all kinds of philanthropic generosity, it was not compatible with the tasks of a *qlal-tuer* with all kinds of high and low duties. The *qlal-tuer* definitely had to be a man, and not a woman. We know of a broad range of charitable activities from pious or secular female members of a Jewish community. These activities aimed sometimes at the requirements of a community as a whole and sometimes at specific needs of women, like funds for destitute young mothers. In many instances, the women involved in these initiatives were *gabetes*, the wives of the leaders of voluntary associations (Hebr. *gabaim*).¹³ But the function of the *qlal-tuer* went far beyond exclusively philanthropic initiatives. It involved responsibilities within religious and formal bodies of the local community, inaccessible to women. Only a community member of a certain wealth could pretend to the informal dignity of a *qlal-tuer*. His community expected him to be a member of a number of voluntary associations or *hevrot*, paying his dues on a regular basis. But his main vocation was to *be there*, to be able to help in an emergency of an individual community member or for the community as a whole. In this respect, the *qlal-tuer* was no different from other distinguished members of his community, but these could more easily retreat from this kind of obligation.

The *qlal-tuer* had to be a learned and observant Jew, taking upon himself the task of preserving the tradition of the Law. Jewish law or *halakha* was the only binding value system which served as guideline in his activities and defined his responsibilities towards the community. In 19th and early 20th century Eastern Europe, such a spiritual responsibility could only be based on religious observance. Furthermore, a *qlal-tuer* had to be not only active, but *engagé*. All descriptions of *qlal-tuer* we dispose of underline the readiness of these people to help, to intervene, to give money. They arose admiration for the scope of this involvement. There was an acute

¹² Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 231-32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 418, 423, 433 f., 441.

understanding of the difference between a basic level of philanthropic activities, a basic requirement of a responsible community member, and the kind of personal involvement in all relevant religious, philanthropic and political activities of a given community characteristic of a *qlal-tuer*. This involvement led to the status of being respected not only within a specific Jewish milieu, for example Hasidic, but within most or all large religious segments within the community, and by rich and poor. All of Israel constituted the *qlal*, not just the milieu of a given person. In the words of the contemporaries of Joel Wegmeister, a *qlal-tuer* acted on behalf of the public or general matters (Hebr. *davar ha-tsibur* or *enyane ha-qlal*). This was qualified as work on behalf of the whole of Israel (Yidd. *qlal arbet*).¹⁴

The *qlal arbet* included several distinct fields of activity. First, it should be stressed that a *qlal-tuer* took upon himself communal political responsibilities. They served as members in the officially sanctioned community boards (called synagogue overseers or *dozór bóżniczy* in the Kingdom of Poland), were active within the local burial society (Hebr. *hevra kadisha*), and, in the case of Hasidic *qlal-tuers*, prominent followers of a rebbe. They naturally were members of pious fraternities for the study of the holy scriptures (*hevrot shas*) or for some specific liturgic purpose (*hevrot ner tamid*, for the illumination in the synagogues, and others). The pauperization of many Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, and more specifically the Jewish metropolises like Warsaw or Lodz in phases of recession represented a serious challenge for the functioning of the community as a subsidiary organism.¹⁵ Without a leading role in philanthropy, one could not claim to the informal status of *qlal-tuer*. This was indeed an extremely well developed and vaste field of social action. This is certainly not only true for Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. But nowhere else, Jewish philanthropy featured such a living, dense and complex structure of traditional and more modern forms of self organization.¹⁶ Help for the needy covered many spheres of every day life: health services and institutions, educational associations and school boards, as well as more specified types of help. As already has been pointed out, the contemporaries made a very clear distinction between someone who as a member of a traditional society avoided personal involvement in its activities, and those who devoted personal resources on

¹⁴ Other terms used were *davar tsiburi* and *enyane ha-tsibur* (public matters) in Hebrew and *qlal sakh* (public issue) in Yiddish. These terms were used in the obituaries on Wegmeister in the Warsaw Yiddish and Hebrew daily press, *Haynt* (Warsaw), 20th February, 1919 and *Moment* (Warsaw), 21 February, 1919.

¹⁵ François Guesnet, "Jüdische Armut und ihre Bekämpfung im Königreich Polen: Grundzüge und Entwicklungen im 19. Jahrhundert", in *Juden und Armut*, eds. Stefi Jersch-Wenzel *et al.*, (Köln, Wien: Böhlau, 2000), 185-208.

¹⁶ Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 229-250, 413-446.

its behalf. The commitment of the *qlal-tuer* included political responsibilities as well. More specifically, to be a *qlal-tuer* meant to go to the gentile authorities and to intervene on behalf of the community or Jewish individuals if necessary.¹⁷ This responsibility was normally limited to a specific town. It included a wide range of matters. A necrologue for one of the *qlal-tuers* in the Polish town of Lublin, Natan Müller, reads: “When some peddler, who out of ignorance broke some police instruction, was arrested and led away with all her belongings - some herrings or baskets of apples - to the police station, some family member hurried to Reb Nute, who arrived on the spot to help the unfortunate one.”¹⁸ It seems noteworthy, that one of the obituaries for Joel Wegmeister used a parallel formula: “Wherever there was the need of an intercession, or some generous help, people hurried to see Reb Joel. In Reb Joel’s home one always met rabbis and business men for all kinds of public matters.”¹⁹ As will be shown later, these “public matters” could reach far beyond the limits of the Warsaw community.

Joel Wegmeister

When Wegmeister was born in 1837, Warsaw had approximately one hundred forty thousand inhabitants, a quarter of whom, around thirty six thousand, were Jews. When he died in 1919, the Polish capital counted almost one million inhabitants with a third of its population Jews. Wegmeister thus saw Warsaw grow from the largest Jewish community in the Kingdom of Poland to one of the most important in the world. Information concerning the economic activity of Wegmeister is scarce. In Hebrew and Yiddish contemporary texts, he is mostly referred to as *esken*, business man, who was owner of several houses in Warsaw.²⁰ He was member of the First Guild of merchants, and as such disposed of an important income.²¹ His wealth was a prerequisite for his function as one of the administrators for the funds collected to benefit the four Jewish communities in Palestine. These funds, called *haluka gelt* throughout Ashkenasic communities in Europe, were administered regionally. These

¹⁷ For a definition of the *shtadlan*, see Israel Bartal, “Moses Montefiore: Nationalist Before His Time, or Belated Shtadlan?”, *Studies in Zionism* 11 (1990): 2, 111-125, 116.

¹⁸ *Izraelita* (Warsaw), *Nekrolog*, vol. 31 (1896), December 22, 1895/January 3, 1896, 113.

¹⁹ *Haynt* (Warsaw), February 20, 1919.

²⁰ See references in fn. 14. Wegmeister lived on 8, Prosta Street.

²¹ State Archive Lublin, Lublin Government’s Administration RGL A I, 1913:9 (no pagination), circular letter from the Chancellery of the General Governor, Warsaw, July 13, 1913 (N° 3196/6), to all governors in the Kingdom of Poland. In this letter, Wegmeister is referred to as First Guild’s merchant. The chancellery comments positively on the by-laws of a voluntary charitable association founded by Joel Wegmeister and his brother Josef. For a more detailed discussion of this association, the *Shlome Emune Yisroel*, see below.

funds, collected in hundreds of synagogues and other Jewish places of worship, was brought to Warsaw, where the administration responsible for these funds was called *Erets yisroel kase* or *Kupat r' meir baal-nes*. Around the middle of the 19th century, the *Erets yisroel kase* had more or less the same budget as the official Warsaw Jewish community administration.²²

Wegmeister was a layman and married, thus fulfilling already two important, though not overly rare prerequisites to become a *qlal-tuer*. He was no doubt an observant Jew and very active in supporting traditional religious learning. He founded a *bevrat shas* devoted to the study of the mishna on Twarda street²³ and sponsored the main building for a *yeshiva* on Mila Street 63.²⁴ Beyond supporting higher Jewish learning, he also functioned for a long time as head of the *bevrat talmud-tora baqlalit* of Warsaw, the charitable communal Talmud-Tora-School.²⁵ Joel Wegmeister was member of the inner circle of laymen surrounding the Gerer Rebbe, Abraham Mordechai Alter (1866-1948). Alter sent him together with Lejb Weingott to the international gathering of Jewish orthodoxy in Kattowitz in May 1912 “as most trusted followers to discuss organizational matters.”²⁶ After the founding of the *Agudat Israel* as a result of this conference, Wegmeister was the most prominent civil leader of the formal organisations representing its Polish branch. His closeness to the Gerer Rebbe becomes especially clear during the German occupation in the years of World War One. During these years, and with the help of Wegmeister, the Gerer Rebbe successfully broadened his influence among Polish Jewry, as will be shown later.

The scope and the variety of his activities demonstrate that Joel Wegmeister was personally deeply involved Jewish public affairs. One of the obituaries reads that “until the last day of his busy life Wegmeister never lost his juvenile energy and his interest in qlal-arbet”, and the Hajnt wrote: “During a whole generation Joel Wegmeister was one of the most active community members in matters of philanthropy. He stood at the head of the most important public institutions in Warsaw. Through decades there was almost no public matter that was not resolved with the help of Reb Joel.”²⁷ As example for this dedication may serve a call for help that Wegmeister published during the severe depression in 1904, which hit - partly due to the war against Japan – Russia, including the Polish territories. Unemployment and starvation among Jewish craftsmen

²² Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 236, 244, 326, 372.

²³ Szacki, *Geshikhte fun yidn*, vol. III, 372.

²⁴ Shaul Stampfer, “Hasidic Yeshivot in Inter War Poland”, *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 11 (1998): 5-24, does not mention this institution.

²⁵ *Moment* (Warsaw) 21 February 1919 (see also footnote 14).

²⁶ Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition*, 36.

²⁷ See references footnote 14.

increased dramatically. In October, Wegmeister as the head of the philanthropic society *Ezra* (hebr. help) issued a call for help, published in the Jewish press: “One who has not seen the extent of the misery with his own eyes and how rapidly it spreads cannot imagine it. I am used to Jewish poverty; I am not young anymore and all of my life, I see this poverty. But I have not seen before what I am witnessing now [...] As our fathers had it that the hungry should be fed, I did not calculate the costs. Now, we have to suspend our activity, if not large circles of our society come to our help.”²⁸ It should be underlined that such a personal statement was quite unusual at the time. It expresses more than an emergency. Like many others involved in charity at that period, Wegmeister states that his traditional concepts of philanthropy are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of fellow Jews in a need.²⁹

An broad recognition as *qlal-tuer* constituted a central feature of this function. How to establish if Joel Wegmeister indeed benefitted of such a reputation? For our purposes, suffice is to consider those specific institutions and associations of Jewish Warsaw based on cooperation of the three socio-religious factions within the community: the Hasidic and Misnagdic Jews, as well as the integrationists. One of these institutions was the above mentioned *Erets yisroel kase*. Though a rabbi formally functioned as head of this fund, civil leaders like Wegmeister were its administrators. Another instance is the *ad hoc* committee formed in 1892, when the cholera threatened Warsaw, and representatives of all segments of Jewish Warsaw (among them Joel Wegmeister) cooperated to secure emergency medical services.³⁰ Finally, the broad alliance formed in Warsaw to help the victims of pogroms against Jewish communities in Western Russia in the fall of 1905 included Zionists, integrationists, as well as Hasidic leading community members, among them Wegmeister.³¹

Wegmeister has not left a specifically interesting trace as member of the Warsaw community administration, the *Zarząd Gminy*, to which he belonged for several election periods.³² This corresponds to the purely instrumental relationship Warsaw Hasidic Jews had to this representative body. Since 1871 functioned what Szacki has called the ‘unholy alliance’, uniting the *hasidim* and the *maskilim* (literally: enlighteners) against the *misnagdim*.³³ Whereas for the integrationists, the community administration

²⁸ *Izraelita* 35 (1904), 13/26.8.1904, Odgłosy [Echoes], 410.

²⁹ For concepts and developments of Jewish charity in Poland see Guesnet: *Jüdische Armut*, 185-208, and Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 146-160, 413-446.

³⁰ *Izraelita* 40 (1892), 25.9/7.10.1892, Kronika, 344.

³¹ Szacki, *Geshikhte fun yidn*, vol. III, 385.

³² *Moment*, as referred in footnote 14.

³³ Izaak Grynbaum, “Bor’ba za vlast’ v Varshavskoj evrejskoj obshchine”, *Vestnik evrejskoj obshchiny* 1 (1913): 4, 3-12, 5, 10-26, and Szacki, *Geshikhte fun yidn*, 118-130.

was the sole representative of Warsaw Jewry, the Hasidic Jews regarded it rather as a necessary evil required by state law. They left the leadership to the group around the Natanson family and claimed for themselves the supervision over most of Jewish schools, except for a small number of elementary schools for the poor, left to the *maskilim* as their experimental field.

Joel Wegmeister developed his philanthropic activities within the institutionalized framework of fraternities and associations of diverse character. His most important achievement was probably the establishment of *Ezra*, a philanthropic association which has already been mentioned. Its establishment was announced in the spring of 1901. It was supposed to function all over Jewish Warsaw and was founded by a large group of well-to-do Hasidic house owners, among them prominent families of Warsaw community life like the Braudes, the Ulrichs and Prywes. Within the first weeks of existence, four thousand silver rubles were collected to be distributed among the destitute.³⁴ The founders defined specific fields of activity for *Ezra*, including an agency for jobless craftsmen, financial help for sick, old and handicapped Jews, day care and schooling for orphans and children from destitute families as well as financial help for travelling Jews.³⁵ In 1902, a section was added to provide destitute young women with a dowry.³⁶ Confronted with the already mentioned job crisis in 1904, *Ezra* initialized a campaign to help the families of jobless craftsmen.³⁷ As the *Zarząd Gminy* did not dispose of any funds for this specific need, *Ezra* and another philanthropic society, *Achiezer*, founded mainly by Russian Jews in 1902,³⁸ were the sole Jewish institutions to cope with this crisis.³⁹ Wegmeister's society could rely on the steady financial support of two thousand members, as well as additional contributions of Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw. Before the crisis of 1904, the contributions amounted to ten thousand silver rubles annually, but rose to thirty six thousand silver rubles during the crisis. This significant rise in general support demonstrates the high standing of *Ezra* among Warsaw Jewry.⁴⁰ Another illustration for this excellent reputation can be cited for the year of 1905. The magistrate of Warsaw assigned the sum of 15.000 silver rubles for poor Jews. Of this sum, *Ezra* received by far the largest sum (8.000 silver rubles). Next in line was *Achiezer* with

³⁴ *Izraelita* 15 (1901) 6/19.4.1901, Kronika, 180, and *ibid.*, 22 (1901) 25.5/7.6.1901, Kronika, 261.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 (1901), 29.6/12.7.1901, Kronika, 314.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 (1903), 16/29.5.1901, Kronika, 250.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24 (1904), 28.5/10.6.1904, Kronika, 287.

³⁸ Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 42.

³⁹ *Izraelita* 31 (1904) 16/27.7.1904, Kronika, 366.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35 (1904), 13/26.8.1904, *Odgłosy*, 410.

5.000 silver rubles. In contrast, the *Zarząd Gminy* could dispose of just 2.000 silver rubles.⁴¹ Between May 1904 and January 1905, Wegmeister's society distributed more than one million portions or approximately 1.800 tons of bread - a very important achievement indeed.⁴² As the above quoted call for help of Wegmeister illustrates, the crisis overwhelmed *Ezra* as the other charitable institutions.⁴³ Some rudimentary information is available regarding other philanthropic activities of Joel Wegmeister – thus during World War One, he sponsored a kitchen to feed children from destitute families.⁴⁴

Another aspect of Wegmeister's and his fellow founders' philanthropic activity seems noteworthy. The registration of *Ezra* represented a successful attempt of observant Warsaw Jews to apply recent Russian legislation of 1897 on charitable associations (Russ. *obschestva posobiia bednym*). The significance of this legislation for Jewish social organisation in Russia and Poland has been widely ignored until today.⁴⁵ What was at the core of these regulations? Theoretically any private person was allowed to initiate such an association. It needed a certain amount of members and the approval for the statutes issued by the governor of the respective district. Unlike all other kinds of private associations introduced between 1897 and 1906 (sport, education, culture) the charitable associations were the only to have the right to restrict their activity to one religious community.⁴⁶ In all district capitals of former Congress Poland, Jews founded societies of this type on behalf of Jewish philanthropy. In contrast to the existing traditional fraternities, outlawed in 1821, they were not hampered by a lack of legal status.⁴⁷ Even more important, they seemed able to avoid the fierce battling within Jewish community administrations. In all cases Jewish notables demanded the establishment of a Jewish *obschestvo posobiya bednym*, the district's administration approved of it.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Ibid., 7 (1905), 11/24.2.1905, Kronika, 80.

⁴² Ibid., 9 (1905), 25.2/10.3.1905, Kronika, 105.

⁴³ Guesnet, *Jüdische Armut*, 207-08.

⁴⁴ *Jüdische Rundschau* (Berlin), 3 May 1918, n. 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 204-6.

⁴⁶ Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 231-32.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 223-29.

⁴⁸ The above mentioned society *Achiezer* was founded following the outline of the *obschestva posobiya bednym*, too. The Russian Jewish community in Warsaw, striving for independent organisation, founded it in 1901. After a first period with exclusively philanthropic activities, it opened a loan department, another for orphans, then a department for sick care. In 1904 a department for jobless help was founded, then an ambulance and a rehabilitation centre in Ciechocinek. Two years after its founding, *Achiezer* had 4.500 members, two years later 6.340. It constituted thus one of the largest private associations in the whole of the Russian Empire, see Guesnet, *Jüdische Armut*, 207.

Another philanthropic initiative of Joel Wegmeister encapsulates the tension between the available institutional resources and the requirements of the emerging Jewish metropolis of Warsaw, and illustrates how an observant civil leader could consolidate his role in the larger community. Since the 1870s it was clear that the Jewish hospital opened in 1834 was far too small for the requirements of the fast growing Jewish population. The doctors as well as the *Zarząd Gminy* very much wished to mark the transition from old to new not only by transferring the hospital to the new buildings in Wola, but by changing the traditional functioning, too. Thus, in 1899, the hospital's *hevra bikur cholim* (Society for Visiting the Sick), taking care for the patients since decades, was banned from the site. This society consisted in the eyes of the doctors largely "of the lowest stratum of our society, coming to the hospital in working clothes not washing their hands, distributing wine and vodka to all patients indiscriminately."⁴⁹ The attempt of the hospital administration to found a new 'Philanthropic Society for Auxiliary Services for Patients of the Jewish Hospital' failed, because nobody signed up. The new hospital was opened in 1902. Its capacity rose by fifty percent, but at the moment of the opening, no external charitable association existed to provide the essential sick care services. Very soon the hospital administration had to admit not to be able to pay for nurses and food for the poor patients, often originating from other towns. As the conditions reached scandalous proportions, the administration decided to give in. In 1905, it asked Joel Wegmeister to step in and to call for the establishment of a traditional society. He suggested the name *Hevrat achim rachmonim* (Society of charitable brothers). At the founding meeting, over two hundred active members signed up.⁵⁰

Political dimensions of *qlal-arbet*

The function of a *qlal-tuer* necessarily included contacts with gentile authorities. Up until World War One, we are not well informed on how Wegmeister fulfilled this task on behalf of the Warsaw community. We read in the obituary, published in the *Haynt*: "Not considering his important economic activities, he took responsibilities in matters of *enyane ha-tsibur* not only for the Warsaw community but for the Jews of all Poland. Wherever an intercession was necessary, people turned to R' Joel (...) More than once he travelled to St. Petersburg or even abroad [sic!] in *enyane ha-qlal*."⁵¹ Unfortunately, no more detailed information concerning these missions of intercession has come to our knowledge.

⁴⁹ Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 444.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁵¹ See reference as in footnote 14.

Despite the scarcity of detailed sources, the image of an extremely active and respected community member emerges. Two specific features of Wegmeister's activity should be underlined. It does seem probable that he developed the core of his *qlal arbet* in the last three decades of his life, as we do not find a trace of him in earlier overviews concerning the activities of notables on behalf of the community. The *Moment* expressis verbis mentions that fact in his obituary: "At an advanced age, Reb Joel Wegmeister has founded several health care societies, in which he played the role of an (...) energetic leader." The *Haynt* notes that "the deceased almost for a whole generation was one of the first members of the community in all matters of philanthropy." This article equally features a significant description of the *qlal-tuer* as a historically determined social function: "Warsaw has lost with Wegmeister one of the oldest representatives of a special kind of Jew, a kind that disappears and there is nobody to replace it."⁵² These lines echo the obituary of yet another *qlal-tuer* of Warsaw, Liber Korngold, deceased in 1897. One of the acutest observers of Jewish Warsaw of his time, Nahum Sokolow, combined his praise of Korngold with a generic description of the *qlal-tuer*: "His was a highly developed sense of community belonging, a deep knowledge of the people and their relationships, an unparalleled fervour and courage in thought as well as in his deeds." As has been shown for the philanthropic activities of Wegmeister, the traditional value of help for the indigent was combined with the ability to adapt to the developing social or legal framework: "Korngold represented the perfect image of a noble orthodox in harmony with the spirit of the time." In this praise of Korngold, Sokolow praised the *qlal-tuer* as such. He underlined the significance of the *qlal-tuer* for the local community, defining his attachment to it as 'hereness' (Pol. *swojszczyzna*), the equivalent to the Yiddish *dojkejt*: "Another sympathetic characteristic of these old representatives is their exceptional bond to the city and to the community, their specific 'hereness', their ambition of belonging here, to this place, which creates their measure for everything – cives romanus sum! (...) This creates a spiritual bond and care for local needs, without which the community just could not exist."⁵³ Underlining the existential significance of this bond, Sokolow thus qualifies Korngold, Wegmeister and other *qlal-tuer* of his time as dear, but outdated features of a traditional community.

Joel Wegmeister felt responsible for the whole of Warsaw or even Polish Jewry to the same degree as he was a partisan of the *Gerer Rebbe*. We only can ask the question here, if he was willing to make any difference between both. For the purpose of the present analysis, we assume that the interests of Abraham Mordekhai Alter and Joel Wegmeister were not

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Izraelita* 1 (1897), 20.12.1896/1.1.1897, Z tygodnia, 6.

identical with the interest of Polish Jewry as a whole, and discuss what we know about Wegmeisters' political activities for Hasidism and the Gerer Rebbe more specifically. The basis for this analysis will be the period prior and during World War One.

As already mentioned, Wegmeister served as leading lay person at the head of the Polish branch of the *Agudat Israel*. Most studies pertaining to the organisational history of Polish Jewish orthodoxy claim that the *Agudas Ho-orthodoxim*, founded in 1916 in cooperation with the German occupying administration constituted the first formal and registered organisation of this type.⁵⁴ In fact, chronology has it the other way round: After the conference of Kattowitz, Joel Wegmeister established at the end of 1912 or early in 1913 and without any doubt in close cooperation with Alter an association called *Shlome Emune Yisroel*. The basic concept as it appears in the statute of this society with the full title "Society for the Mutual Help of Orthodox Jews in the Town of Warsaw Shlome Emune Yisroel" is identical with the basic principles of the later *Agudat Israel*, to assure "the improvement of the material and moral living conditions of its members in the spirit of the Jewish religious law as well as the preservation of the traditional principles among them."⁵⁵ As a matter of fact, the new society guaranteed material help like help for the jobless, medical care, education and others. But there were two very important differences between the *Shlome Emune Yisroel* and a charitable society like *Ezra*. First, the pre-*Aguda* association limited these benefits to the members of the society and did not intend to distribute them indiscriminately. Second, they were distributed on the condition that "the member leads a life in accordance with the principles formulated in the statutes."⁵⁶

The *Shlome Emune Yisroel* can thus be regarded as the first attempt to legally organize in Congress Poland an association that can be labelled as a political organisation of the local orthodoxy. It thus followed the Galician forerunners of orthodox political organisation in particular, where

⁵⁴ Isaac Lewin, *The Jewish Community in Poland*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985), passim; Bacon, *Politics of Tradition*, 36, Matthias Morgenstern, *Von Frankfurt nach Jerusalem. Isaac Breuer und die Geschichte des 'Austrittsstreits' in der deutsch-jüdischen Orthodoxie*, (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995), 65-81, especially 72-74, with whose claim of German Jews founding the Shlome Emune Yisroel I disagree, see below. The most recent and most detailed analysis of these issues by Tobias Grill, "The Politicisation of Traditional Polish Jewry: Orthodox German Rabbis and the Founding of 'Agudas Ho-Ortodoksim' and 'Dos yidishe vort' in Gouvernement-General Warsaw 1916-18", *East European Jewish Affairs* 39/2 (2009), 227-247.

⁵⁵ Chancellery of the Governor General (Circular letter as in footnote 21), and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Berlin 1928, vol. 1, 'Agudas Yisroel'.

⁵⁶ Chancellery of the Governor General (Circular letter as in footnote 21).

organisations of this type were introduced to fight against tendencies of secularization among Jews around 1870.⁵⁷ The statutes of the *Sblome Emune Yisroel* were proposed for confirmation to the General Governor in the summer of 1913. It could not be established whether or not the General Governor finally approved the statutes before the outbreak of the World War.

The development of the orthodox political strategies in occupied Poland has been studied in depth by more than one scholar.⁵⁸ The German occupation during World War One allowed the *Gerer Hasidim* to significantly expand their influence among Polish Jewry. Unintentionally assisted by two German-Jewish advisors to the military administration, Pinchas Kohn and Emanuel Carlebach, the Gerer Hasidim were allowed to found the representative body of Polish orthodoxy, the *Agudas Horortodoxim*. The president of this association was no other but Joel Wegmeister. Contrasting our knowledge about the far reaching influence of the Gerer Rebbe in general and the significant power of his faithful follower Joel Wegmeister in Warsaw in particular, it seems that the influence of the German rabbis on Polish Jewry has been overrated. It rather seems that they were not aware to what degree the Hasidim of Ger were able to take advantage of the German Rabbi's standing within the German military administration to expand their own position. Reading the letters by Emanuel Carlebach sent to his wife from Warsaw to Cologne between 1916 and 1918 one cannot but admire the skill with which the Gerer Hasidim prevented Carlebach and Kohn to get in close contact with other Jewish milieus than theirs.⁵⁹ Carlebach arrived in January 1916 and gets invited to the home of the Gerer Rebbe himself: "You cannot imagine the wealth of Tora learning, the extent of *kedusha* [pious atmosphere, FG] and knowledge that were gathered in the Rebbe's refuge. (...) All we rabbis danced for half an hour, the beautiful cantor held one of my hands, the Gerer Rebbe the other (...) An unforgettable experience indeed."⁶⁰ Several times, he is guest in the house of the brother of the Rebbe⁶¹ and gets invited to the homes of numerous of his followers,⁶² among them Joel Wegmeister. Carlebach is deeply impressed by the splendour and spiritual wealth of the evenings spent in the Rebbe's house

⁵⁷ Guesnet, *Polnische Juden* (cf. fn. 5), 279 f.

⁵⁸ Further to the studies mentioned in footnote 51 see Egmont Zechlin, *Die deutsche Politik und die Juden im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969) and Mordehai Breuer, "Rabanim-doktorim bepolin-lita byame ha-khivush ha-germani 1914-18", *Bar Ilan* 24-25 (1989): 117-153.

⁵⁹ Alexander Carlebach, "A German Rabbi Goes East", *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* VI (1961): 60-121.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 71, 89.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 71.

as well as in Wegmeister's home.⁶³ Carlebach's description of one of these evenings portrays Joel Wegmeister in a very positive way: "We will be guests of Joel Wegmeister until Sunday. It is marvellous how we get spoiled here, how splendidly the meals are prepared even on the days without meat (for our sake, I guess), and how everybody is pleased with us and shows it. It would require much time to describe the nobleness, the wealth, the Jewishness and the solemnity of the Sabbath meal (...) Wegmeister himself is a beautiful *lamdom* (learned person, FG), thus the conversation never turns dreary; for sure I never had more grateful and understanding listeners for my Tora."⁶⁴ On the other side, Carlebach is much less pleased with the maskilic notables of Warsaw and does not accept their invitations.⁶⁵ He devotes much of his time for the introduction of religious schools for Jewish girls from indigent families, which at that time still interfered with Hasidic concepts of learning. After the Gerer Rebbe sent a delegation insisting on the traditional training methods, he quickly abandons his ambitious projects and limits himself to one school for Jewish girls.⁶⁶ A seemingly insignificant fact illustrates the degree of influence exerted by the Gerer Rebbe on the *rabanim-doktorim*. As the Hasidic leader does not accept the fact that a woman is doing the cooking for the German rabbis, Carlebach fires her. Not surprisingly, the new cook had his previous position in the Gerer Rebbe's house.⁶⁷ In July 1916, the German administration approves the *Agudas Ho-orthodoxim* under the leadership of Joel Wegmeister. At moment of its founding, the *Aguda* counts already two thousand members. When Gershon Bacon describes the importance of the German rabbis as "helping organize the official founding conference" of the *Agudas Ho-ortodoksim* in Warsaw, he is probably quite close to the truth.⁶⁸

With the so-called Polenproklamation (5 November 1916), defining Polish independence as one of the German war objectives, the German government hoped to win over Polish public opinion.⁶⁹ Shortly after, it nominated the members of a State Council. Among them and suggested by Carlebach, Joel Wegmeister is one out of three Jewish representatives. The others were Kazimierz Natanson from Warsaw, an integrationist, and

⁶³ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, *passim*. This negative attitude should change after World War One, which sees growing support for Jewish girls' religious education among Hasidic leaders; see Agnieszka Oleszak, "The Beit Ya'akov School in Kraków as an Encounter between East and West", *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry vol. 23: Jews in Kraków*, (Oxford, Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010); 277-290, 279.

⁶⁷ Carlebach, "A German Rabbi", 80.

⁶⁸ Bacon, *Politics of Tradition*, 37.

⁶⁹ Zechlin, *Deutsche Politik*, 205-220.

Mojżesz Pfeffer from Kielce, another Hasidic civil leader. Soon after, the *Varschoyer Tagblat*, a newspaper of national-autonomist tendency, is closed. A German Zionist newspaper accused the Gerer Hasidim of inspiring the ban. This seems plausible, as the German administration handed over the license to publish a newspaper to the Gerer Hasidim, who from then on published *Das yidische vort*.⁷⁰

Even if Carlebach himself supposes to be the inspirer of some political steps taken by Wegmeister and others, we do have reason to consider the political traditions of Polish Jewish orthodoxy as well to be the source of these measures. In January 1917, Wegmeister and a representative of the Warsaw rabbinate sent a declaration of loyalty to the Crown marshal. Wegmeister writes: “We expect with good hope that following to the best and brightest examples of the Polish past all measures of the State council will express the feeling of justice and that wisdom in stateguidance, which allow us and our children to serve the God of our fathers in the way we consider holy.”⁷¹ The wording in this letter may seem surprisingly assertive. The authors do not ask for favours or mercy, they ask for respect: respect of the law and respect of their dignity as Jews. This emphasis on the secure status granted to Jews in Poland is, however, characteristic or a specific political traditional of Polish Jewry.⁷²

Conclusion

The encounter of Jews with modernity and metropolis offers unique features in each case we investigate. In the case of Warsaw, the community grew very rapidly throughout the 19th century and had to adjust to the institutional needs of a large number of members very quickly. With a less well established and thus weaker institutional core, the community board mustered less authority over its constituency, or, to put it differently, the community board disposed of less political legitimacy than in the case of older communities. As a consequence, the diverse religious and cultural identifications in the community developed a higher degree of independence, the community was more compartmentalized. There is no doubt that the vast majority of the community was observant, but this in itself constitutes only a partial

⁷⁰ Ibid., 217, and *Jüdische Rundschau*, 3 May 1918, n. 18, as in footnote 44, and Grill, *Politicization*, passim.

⁷¹ Carlebach, “A German Rabbi”, 107-08.

⁷² It is amazing to compare the wording of this letter to a protest, voiced by a group of Jewish orthodox house owners from Warsaw in 1855 in matters of the community election system, see Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 407, and François Guesnet, “Political Culture of Polish Jewry: A Tour d’Horizon”, *Report of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies* (2007-2008), 61-76.

description of religious or cultural loyalties, as the rift between *Misnagdim* on the one side and various Hasidic communities on the other side created a complex landscape of observance. The integrationists struggled to maintain their influence in the later decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, but nonetheless established quite stable clusters with congregations, educational and charitable institutions, publications, and informal networks, just as the ever growing number of Jews from within the Russian Empire did. Political clout depended on a strategic and efficient use of the evolving legal and administrative framework, and on a strong demographic basis. Based on the description of one influential individual, Joel Wegmeister, this contribution contends that among the various cultural and religious identifications among Warsaw Jews, the Gerer Hasidim proved highly skilful in taking advantage of the institutional void resulting from the inadequacy of communal institutions confronted with a rapid demographic growth. It would be inadequate to describe this strategy in terms of a more or less rigid attitude towards processes of societal or cultural modernization. As has been shown, the communal ethos demonstrated by Wegmeister and others allowed for a very modern institution like a new hospital to be run, despite financial constraints. In return, the ubiquitous Joel Wegmeister would very efficiently expand the political reach of his community. It was in the two decades before World War One that the basis of the lasting impact of observant culture and politics in the interwar period was established.

François Guesnet is Sidney and Elizabeth Corob Reader in Modern Jewish History in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London. He studied History, Romance and Slavonic Languages in Cologne, Freiburg, Berlin and Warsaw, and was awarded a PhD at Freiburg University. His research and his publications revolve around the historical encounter of Eastern European Jews, above all in Poland in the early modern and modern period. Among his most recent publications are three edited volumes: *Der Fremde als Nachbar. Polnische Positionen zur jüdischen Präsenz. Texte seit 1800* (Bibliothek Wissen und Denken, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), *Zwischen Graetz und Dubnow: Jüdische Historiographie in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2009), and *Louis Meyer: Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften eines polnischen Juden* (Hildesheim u.a.: Olms Verlag, 2010).

How to quote this article:

François Guesnet, *Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Joel Wegmeister and Modern Hasidic Politics in Warsaw*, in “Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC”, N.2 October 2011
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=222