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Abstract

In 1929, the Polish-Jewish newspaper “Nasz Przegląd” announced “Miss Judaea Contest” – Beauty Pageant exclusively for Jewish ladies. In the following year, the Yiddish newspaper “Unzer Express” launched an additional similar contest. This article focuses on two elements related to the Jewish Beauty Pageants in Interwar Poland: First, by using quantitative research methods, it reveals the esthetics and fashionable elements of the typical Jewish young women. Despite the differences between different groups in Polish Jewry, they shared similar attributes and influences which were manifested in the fashionable choices. In addition

the article presents the vivid discussions that the contest aroused both in the Jewish community in Poland and in other Jewish communities abroad. The Jewish beauty pageants, as the discussions that followed, were representative of the process of change that Polish Jewry underwent in the interwar years. These pageants represented more than just pure entertainment and symbolized more than just modernity processes. For the Jewish community, as a national minority dispersed throughout Poland, such ethno-specific entertainment activities played an important role in shaping national identity.

Keywords: Polish Jewry; beauty ideal; beauty queen; history of emotions

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Jewish Beauty Pageants in Interwar Poland: Entertainment, Beauty Ideal, and National Emotions

In 1929, the Polish-Jewish newspaper *Nasz Przegląd* announced the “Miss Judaea Contest,” a beauty pageant exclusively for young Jewish women. Immediately following the announcement, Jewish women from across Poland sent their photographs in to the newspaper, and the photos were published daily in a specially designated section of the paper for weeks. The following year, the Yiddish newspaper *Unzer Express* launched a similar event with a similar method: after the contestants’ photographs appeared in the paper, readers were asked to clip and fill out a voting form and to send it back to the newspaper. The victorious beauty queen did not win an extravagant prize but rather received token gifts such as a professional modeling portfolio or a vacation at a holiday resort, in addition to being honored by the Jewish community officials.

The present article focuses on two aspects of the exclusive Jewish beauty pageants of interwar Poland. First, it provides an account of the intense discussions the contests sparked throughout the Jewish community in Poland and other Jewish communities abroad. These discussions, regarding the religious and moral aspects of the contest itself, reflect the Jewish communities’ rapid transformation during the interwar period vis-à-vis topics such as secularity, gender, fashion, and entertainment. The second part of the article considers the esthetic

and fashion-related sensibilities of typical Jewish young women by identifying common aspects of the contestants’ pictures, based on a viewing and statistical analysis of various elements appearing in hundreds of photographs. On this basis, it is possible to sketch the desired female beauty ideal of Poland’s Jewish community in the 1930s, and how it was influenced by international beauty ideals.

The number of photographs that appeared in the papers was impressive, and the study therefore employs quantitative research methods. Specifically, the article is based on big data extracted from the photograph collection. The included variables pertain not to racial characteristics but rather to consumer-related and fashion-related visual elements such as hairstyle, jewelry and hair accessories, facial expression, eyebrow style, modesty, fashion trends in shirts and blouses (all of the photos are from the chest-line up).

Entertainment as a National Tool

Pleasure practices and entertainment culture were among the tools that helped the Jewish population in Poland (re)construct their collective identity as a national minority (Shmeruk and Werses 1997, 7). Polish Jewry’s image as the epitome of Jewish suffering is well manifested in the historiography as well as in the

popular Jewish discourse – and for good reasons indeed. A substantial proportion of the Jewish population in interwar Poland did suffer poverty, antisemitism, and persecution. However, this paper will present a case in which the Jewish community actually used pleasure practices as a national tool. Polish Jewry was not unique in this sense, as the pursuit of happiness as a cultural value played a major role in the everyday life of common people in modern times, not only in Poland, but in societies and countries the world over (Stubbs 2013, 6). Non-Jewish Poles and Polish-Jews found happiness and derived enjoyment from the same practices, although the particulars of these practices were usually different. These factors of pleasure in the Jewish community played a dominant role in the construction of the identity of Polish Jewry as a national minority group in the new Polish state.

The article focuses on the role of the first two Jewish beauty pageants, which were held in 1929 and 1930 and were part of the evolution of the Jewish national entertainment culture in interwar Poland. To this end, it begins by presenting the political debates within the Jewish leadership that were sparked by the pageants and then analyzes the reshaping of the fashion-related and visual appearance of the modern Jewish woman in interwar Poland. These two aspects serve as a seismograph of sorts, allowing us to map the manner in which pleasure practices penetrated, influenced, and had a sometimes-controversial impact on the community.

In his groundbreaking article “Fashion,” George Simmel points out the role of social structures, emotions, and mood in the development of fashion perception (Simmel

[1904]2012). Fashion as a “life phenomena,” as Simmel describes it, not only distinguishes one group from another but also stimulates various kinds of emotions, individual and collective alike. Happiness and joy, confidence, comfort, flattery, and even hope can be considered part of the cluster of emotions that are related to dress and the practice of esthetics. At the same time, however, contexts of fashion and visual appearance can also spark negative emotions, such as jealousy, frustration, fear, and even tension between tradition and modernity. Collective emotions can also emerge in relation to fashion in the form of national pride, unity, and honor. In this sense, I argue that the Jewish community chose to celebrate its national or communal beauty and the esthetics of its female members in the framework of the Jewish beauty pageants that were held in independent Poland.

Kerry Wallach points out the myth that spread through many European societies regarding the beautiful and attractive visual appearance of female Jews. The term “beautiful Jewess” pertained particularly to Jewish women’s behavior, and particularly to their imagined attitude toward sexuality.¹ Although the practice of race theory was at its peak in the 1930s, its roots were well established in earlier periods. Jewish women were considered oriental, exotic, and erotic, and were typically portrayed as dark skinned or dark haired (Wallach 2017, 45). Eva Plach notes that according to the stereotype in Eastern European Jewish communities, Sephardic Jews were viewed as representing the “typical Jewish exotic beauty ideal,” as opposed to the so-called “Aryan” or Ashkenazy Jews, who were depicted as plain (Plach 2008, 381). However,

despite the importance of racial issues in social and cultural developments (certainly in light of the tragic fate of European Jewry in the 1940s), this issue will not be focused on here.

The Jewish Beauty Pageants in Poland

In response to *Nasz Przegląd*’s 1929 abovementioned announcement of the “Miss Judaea Contest” for young Jewish women,² Jewish women from across Poland sent their photographs in to the paper. On a daily basis over a 5-week period, a total of one hundred thirty contestant photos were published (between one and six photos per day). The newspaper’s readers were asked to vote for the 10 prettiest contestants using a cutout form that also appeared in the newspaper.³ More than 20,000 voting forms were sent to the newspaper, mostly from Warsaw (13,185). The largest number of votes – 13,091 – were garnered by Contestant 27, 21-year-old Miss Liza Harkawy from Warsaw. In second place, with 12,950 votes, was Contestant 60, 18-year-old Marja Łobzowska, who used the pseudonym “Amira” in the first stage of the contest. Ten of the 11 semifinalists came from the capital (not all were born in Warsaw – some moved to the city for employment or study). The only finalist who did not hail from Warsaw was Helena Holondówna (who used the pseudonym D.L.), a 22-year-old student from Łódź.⁴

The second stage of the “Miss Judaea” beauty pageant was held on March 28, 1929 in Warsaw at the luxury Hotel Polonia. The 11 semifinalists were asked to appear in evening gowns before a 12-man jury in a parade that was to last 11 min. The winner was Miss Zofia Oldak; her first “lady in waiting” (runner-up), the

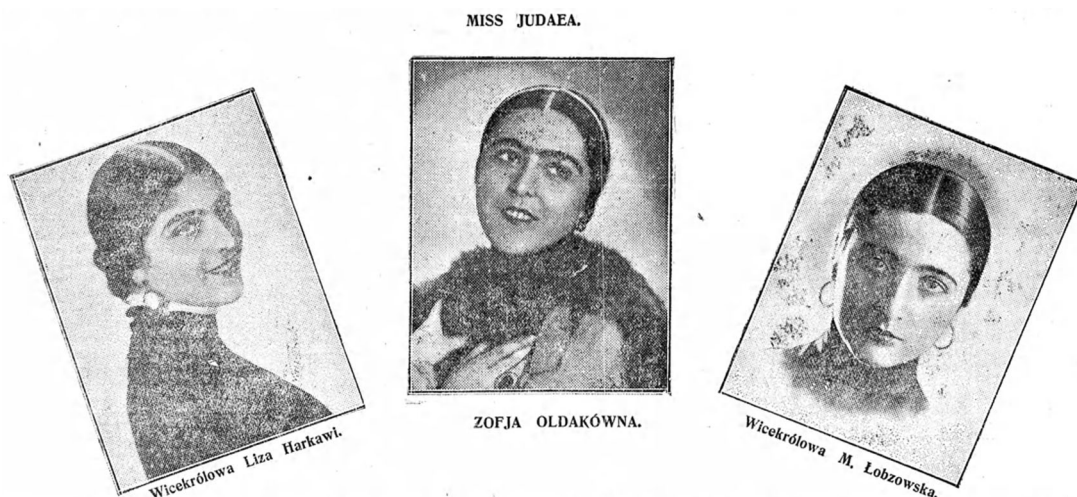


Figure 1

The winners of the Miss Judaea beauty pageant. "Wybór Miss Judaei," *Nasz Przegląd*, March 29, 1929.

readers' favorite, was Miss Liza Harkawy; and her second lady in waiting was Miss Mirjam (Marya) Łobzowska (Figure 1).⁵

The following year, in March 1930, the Yiddish newspaper *Unzer Express* launched another beauty contest for young Jewish women, "Schonest Froilen." Similar to the procedure followed by *Nasz Przegląd*, *Unzer Express* published a call for Jewish young women to send in their photos. One of the coveted prizes for the two winners was a professional photo-shoot with newspaper photographer H. Boim at his studio in Warsaw.⁶ Photos of the contestants started to appear on the newspaper's front page two weeks later, with two to eight photos appearing daily from mid-March to the end of June, along with each contestant's full name, contestant number, and hometown. In addition, a cutout voting form appeared beside the contestants' photos. During the final days of the contest, a large illustration of scissors appeared on the entire front page to draw the

readers' attention and to demonstrate what potential voters needed to do in order to influence the results (Figure 2). The voting form was supposed to be sent directly to the newspaper's offices, but unlike in the Miss Judaea pageant, *Unzer Express* allowed readers to vote for only one contestant.⁷

The contestants' came from geographical regions from across the country, not only because of the national circulation of *Unzer Express* but also due to the fact that it had several affiliated local newspapers that also publicized the contest. For example, *Grodner Unzer Express* (a local newspaper from the city of Grodno) followed Warsaw's *Unzer Express* by publishing a large number of the contestants' photos.⁸ In late June, almost three months into the contest, the names of the ten semifinalists were published, and a few days later the paper announced the three winners: Fanny Bekman of Radom won first prize and became the second beauty queen of the Polish-

Jewish community, her lady in waiting was Miss Tabdrgrora of Kielce, and Rena Hamershtein was named Miss Warsaw.⁹

The Miss Judaea context was not the first occasion on which young Jewish women participated in a beauty pageant. Following the first beauty pageant, which was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1920, such events became very popular. In 1926, a Queen Esther (*Malkat Esther*) beauty contest was held by the organizers of the Purim Carnival in Tel Aviv (Margalit-Stem 2011; Shoham 2012). This beauty contest in Mandate Palestine was held four years in a row, until 1929. In addition to the Queen Esther pageant, Jewish women also participated in general beauty contests in their countries of residence. One prominent example was in Hungary, where a woman of Jewish origin won the title "Beauty Queen of Hungary" in 1929. She was then sent to participate in the Miss Europe contest, which was being held for the first time that year. Upon returning to



Figure 3

Photo album of film stars containing a photo of the 1930 Polish beauty queen. "Album fotografii aktorów," Polish National Library, sig. AFF.I-64.¹³

Hungary after winning the European contest, anti-Semitic responses began to emerge, focusing on the fact that the crowned queen was of Jewish origin.¹⁰ Her victory had an impact on many Jewish communities around the world, which encouraged *Nasz Przegląd* to hold an exclusive event for Polish-Jewish women.¹¹

Why, one might ask, did these teenage girls and young women choose to participate in a contest that required expending resources they did not always have, particularly when winning provided them neither with direct financial benefit nor formal status of any kind. The reason is most likely twofold. First, newspaper contests became very popular in Jewish society in interwar

Poland, especially with the younger generation (Basok 2011, 8–12, 39). Indeed, participation itself, not to mention winning, became a status symbol among peers. Second was the increasing importance during this period of "cultural heroes" and stardom (Ganeva 2011, 14). Although stardom tends to be associated with American culture in general and with the Hollywood movie industry in particular, Joseph Garncarz explains that cinema stardom also flourished in interwar Europe (Garncarz 2010, 116). In Poland, stardom culture appears to have been well established since the nineteenth century, with theater stars, for the most part, serving as cultural stars. As a result of this phenomenon, some Polish

scholars have referred to the nineteenth century as the "star age" (Respondek 2015).

In accordance with the tradition of Polish stardom culture, "beauty queens," Jews and non-Jews alike, became stars and played a public and even national cultural role. An evidence for this can be found in a Polish movie stars photo album from 1930, which includes photos of the new "Miss Polonja" – the Polish beauty queen (Figure 3). The Jewish reaction resembled, immediately following the announcement of the winners, the new Jewish beauty queen – Miss Oldak – became a popular figure, and her presence at public events of the Jewish community was greatly desired.¹²

It should be mentioned that the all-polish beauty pageant, Miss Polonia, was held in Poland since 1927. Similar to other cultural activities as sport teams, the establishment of the ethno-specific beauty pageants did not reflect only a rejection of the Jews by the Poles but also an aspiration of the Jewish community to shape and maintain a distinctive national identity (Bleacking 2008, 20–26).

Criticism of the Beauty Pageant

As Miss Judaea was the first Polish-Jewish beauty contest, it drew a great deal of the criticism, for reasons I discussed below. When *Unzer Express* launched its contest in 1930, the concept of the Jewish beauty contest was much more common in many Jewish communities both in Poland and elsewhere. Many local communities sought to hold local beauty pageants, with the Jewish holiday of Purim serving as a trigger and many Jewish communities seeking to choose their own “Queen Esther,” as was done in Tel-Aviv.¹⁴

The public discussion surrounding the Miss Judaea beauty pageant revolved around a number of issues and was directly related to the style of the community in which the discussion occurred. For example, the Jewish community in the United States, which was accustomed to such events, reported in detail on the different stages of the Miss Judaea pageant, including the publication of the photos of the final nominees.¹⁵ The Jewish community in Budapest, where the same year a woman of Jewish origin was selected to represent Hungary in the Miss Europe pageant, also reported extensively on the Jewish-Polish contest.¹⁶ In

Palestine, on the other hand, voices were raised against the contest, as the *Yishuv* sought to oppose its bourgeoisie nature.¹⁷ The Zionist movement found another way to clash with the Polish-Jewish newspaper *Nasz Przegląd* – by opposing its use of the Polish language and the assimilation and the anti-Zionism that characterized its readers.¹⁸ But the double standard of the Zionist movement in Israel was blatant in this instance, for, as we know, a similar Queen Esther beauty pageant had been held in Palestine since the mid-1920s.

The attitude toward the beauty pageant within Jewish society in Poland was diverse, ranging from immense enthusiasm to outright rejection. Local Jewish newspapers across Poland reported on the contest and took pride in publishing exclusive photos of the victorious queen and her ladies in waiting.¹⁹ Joshua H. Farbstein, president of the Council of Warsaw’s Jewish Community (*Hakehila*) who himself was a member of the religious-Zionist *Mizrachi* movement, invited “Miss Judaea,” the new beauty queen, to an impressive ceremony at a meeting of the Council. At the meeting, Farbstein delivered a speech and congratulated the contest winner, quoting verses from the *Song of Songs* to show the importance that Judaism ascribes to female beauty.²⁰

However, despite the warm welcome that was afforded the contest winner at the Council meeting, there were also voices that opposed the contest, and particularly the *Kehila*’s “sponsorship” of it. The most prominent opponents were the Orthodox groups, who spoke out against the pageant because it “clearly” contradicted the Jewish principle of women’s modesty. A proposed agenda item submitted to the *Kehila* Council

by members of *Agudat-Israel* requested clarifications regarding the contest itself, but also regarding Farbstein’s decision to invite the elected winner to a special meeting of the Council. *Agudat-Israel* accused the pageant of violating Jewish morality, violating family values, and desecrating the *Song of Songs* through Farbstein’s usage of quotations in his speech at the special meeting attended by the beauty queen.²¹ The *Poalei Emonei Israel* delegate on the *Kehila*’s Council lent his voice to the opposition by quoting *Proverbs* (31:30): “*sheker hachen ve’hevel hay-off*” – charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting.²²

In addition to the religious opposition of the Orthodox delegates, ethical opposition was also voiced, this time by the Socialists. The socialist delegates – the *Bund* and *Poalei-Zion Right* (as Itzhak Lev was the speaker) – treated the beauty pageant as a popular stunt (*shpil*) and did not attribute religious fault to the pageant itself. The *Bund*’s representative, Hershl Himmelfarb, maintained that Farbstein’s invitation of the contest winner to the meeting was “pointless.”²³ This approach is surprising when we consider the Jewish labor parties’ position vis-à-vis female personal cultivation, which they considered to be bourgeois (Zohar 2022).

In contrast to the compromising attitude of the representatives of the socialist parties in the Council meeting, *Hashomer-Hatzair*’s newspaper in Warsaw voiced opposition to the beauty pageant on a number of grounds. First, an author writing under the name Eliyahu maintained that, on the surface, the Miss Judaea contest was “*kosher*” and reflected the kind of Zionist and Jewish character that he did not oppose, although he spoke



Figure 4

"Di emet-dige Miss Judaea" [The Truth Behind the Miss Judaea Contest], *Unzer Express*, February 15, 1929 (Yiddish).

out against the extravagant nature of the contest. Furthermore, Eliyahu emphasized the assimilating character of the newspaper, which, despite its Zionist orientation, was published in Polish, and not in a Jewish language such as Hebrew or Yiddish. Finally, the author criticized the newspaper's owners for their cynical and bourgeois economic exploitation, which had acquired a "national" scent.²⁴

We now turn to the visual aspect of the criticism that was leveled in the newspapers. One year before *Unzer Express* held its own beauty pageant, it harshly criticized the Miss Judaea contest. A caricature published in the paper sought to tell the "truth"

underlying the contest and to condemn its capitalist component – the prize – as well as its element of deceit: the ridiculous girl is holding a mask and is clearly not the type of girl one would expect to participate in the contest (Figure 4).²⁵

The corrupting impact of participating in the beauty pageant was also referred to in a critical article published in *Der Moment* shortly after the announcement of the Miss Judaea competition. In this article, the author reported that teachers, principals, and parents were complaining about the context's harmful influence on members of the young generation, especially young females. These affected girls, he continued, were preoccupied

with their outward appearance. Convinced that education and knowledge were mere trifles, they believed that the most important thing in life is beauty. As a result, these girls spent hours and hours in front of the mirror applying cosmetics.²⁶

As we can see, issues of beauty and pleasure had become fertile ground for public debate and political clashes. What is interesting, however, is that the gender issues that characterize the discussion regarding beauty pageants today – such as the objectification of the female body – were not part of the "official" political debate in interwar Poland. This view, however, was not absent from the discussion altogether, and was effectively



Figure 5

"A Beauty Contest." *Unzer Express*, August 8, 1930.

manifested in a caricature that represented men as consumers and women as consumer goods and showcase products. The caricature, which was published in *Der Moment* in the summer of 1930, showed three grotesque-looking women and three grotesque-looking men observing them (Figure 5). Both the caption, "Beauty Queen Pageant," and the characters' facilitators (the women seem to be walking along a modeling runway while the men are busy examining their appearance) suggest the criticism that the political cartoonist and the newspaper's editors sought to convey. A close look at the cartoon

reveals similarity between the characters (marked on the picture). I argue that the criticism that the cartoonist was trying to convey was that not only were the women humiliated by actually participating in the beauty contest, but that so were the men, by virtue of their consumption of it. In a sense, this cartoon can be understood as pertaining to the entire Jewish population, which had fallen victim to a ridiculous and meaningless event that showed all those who took part in it in a grotesque and wretched light.

One may notice that in each of the sources that relate to them, the

consumers or viewers of the contest are always men, it is also reflected in the photograph that was published in the newspaper and shows the crowd of mostly men outside of the *Unzer Express* headquarter on the last day of the voting (Figure 6).²⁷ Women did not watch the competition, did not look at the beautiful women to learn about the "right" look, did not take active part in the event, and derived no enjoyment from it except as contestants. This gender distinction led to the conclusion that although women were the focus of the discussion, they did not take part in it. The men watched and judged women,

א רייזערד המוז זאמעלע זיך פאר דער דעראקעציע
 „אינזער עלספרעס" אין טאג פון שענהייטס-קאנקורס

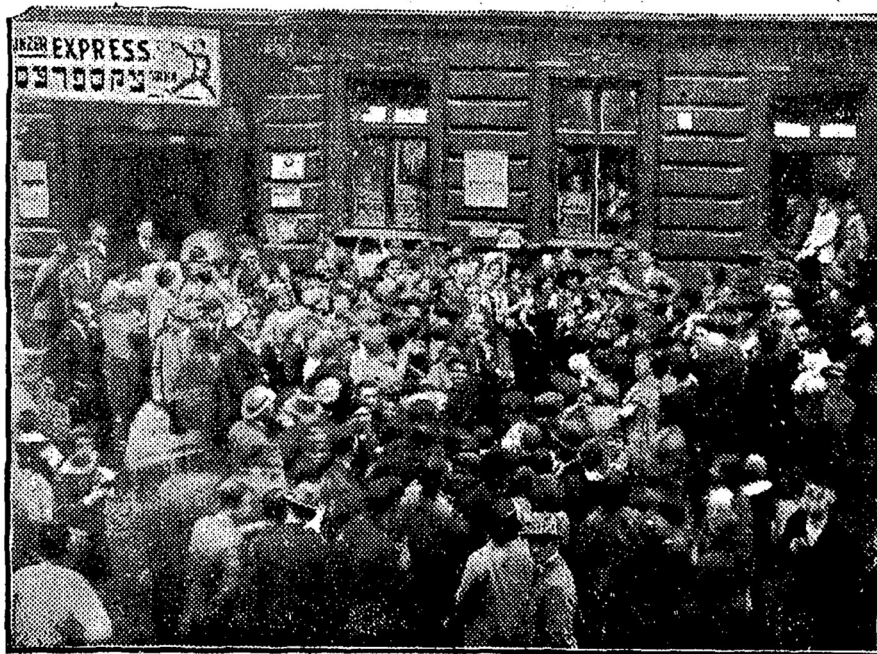


Figure 6

"A huge crowd gathers in front of the "Unzer Express" headquarters in the day the beauty pageant [ends]." *Unzer Express*, June 27, 1930.

enjoyed their beauty, and consumed their image. The women, on the other hand, played a passive role – both in the contest itself and in the discussion surrounding it. In this aspect, even though the beauty pageants reflect women's liberation with the growing presence of women in the public sphere, it still reinforces the tradition power of patriarchy as women are still seen as passive objects (Mihaila 2017; Vasvari 2019).

In conclusion, we zoom out from the prism of the visual object and add another layer to the discussion: choosing a Polish-Jewish beauty queen was a public act in which

the women in question no longer belonged solely to the private sphere but were also present in the public sphere, even if only passively. This is symbolic of the Jewish community's transformation in the modern era, particularly in the new democratic Polish state. The Jewish beauty queen became a national symbol that represented modern, Western-influenced society, as the Bourgeois values of equality, esthetic, pleasure, and self-fulfillment came to play a larger role in the public discourse and in practices in this newly formed community, as we see below.

Feeling Modern: The Polish-Jewish Beauty Ideal

In his article "Fashion," Simmel argues that fashion plays a more conspicuous role in modern times as a result of its quick rhythm. He also recognizes that fashion plays a crucial role in women's experience in modern life. In addition to the conflict between individualism and the desire to fit into society that is reflected in the attitude toward fashion, fashion also reflects a variety of emotions as mentioned before.

The dominant perceptions of Polish Jewry are linked to images of Ultra-Orthodox Jews and/or poverty

and lack. These images are the product primarily of two types of visual sources. The first are photo collections of Jewish photographers which aimed to capture the “true” Jewish life of eastern Europe. However, a closer look beyond the scene of the production of those collections, reveal that they were created with a certain purpose. The photos were intended to be used by the fundraising campaigns that were conducted in North America, and aimed at emphasizing the material and physical hardships of the Jewish population. These photo collections were meant to arouse compassion, guilt, and concern among the well-established American Jews and to encourage them to donate to relevant welfare organizations (Vishniac 1983; Zemel 1999, 202–203).²⁸ The second source is the photos that remain from the anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda, which sought to highlight the unesthetic, inferior side of Jewish life (Welch 1993, 28–57). In this case, however, the desired emotional reaction to the photos was one of disgust and revulsion.²⁹

These two photo collections formatted dominant perceptions of the visual appearance of the Jewish population, particularly in Poland. It may be true that photographs furnished evidence (Sontag 1977, 3), and that a large proportion of the Jewish population in Poland did indeed suffer from poverty and lived in challenging conditions in both urban and rural contexts (Mer 2019, 2). However, during the interwar years, the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions allowed the Jewish community's growing upper-middle class to adopt a bourgeois lifestyle.³⁰ This lifestyle is hardly reflected in the photographs of people of Jewish origin for many

reasons. The main reason is that unlike the abovementioned collections that were created to elicit certain emotional reactions, the photos reflecting a bourgeois lifestyle were taken during private events and were therefore kept primarily by a large number of individuals as private collections which, unfortunately, did not survive World War II.³¹

From this perspective, the 300 photographs of the contestants of *Nasz Przegląd's* “Miss Judaea,” and *Unzer Express's* “Schonest Froilen” beauty pageants are unique in that they were archived as part of collections. They reflect the leisure elements in the life of interwar Polish Jewry, as well as the role of the human body and fashion as cornerstones in the formation of the new Jewish bourgeoisie. That is not to say that all the contestants belonged to the upper class; however, the fact that the contestants sought to produce and project images of wealth and modern fashion codes is indicative of the values that were expected from such a contest.

Unlike the common visual documentation of Polish Jewry to which we are accustomed, this collection reflects an esthetic and attractive side of Polish Jews, as well as secular life and elements of pleasure. It is also important to note that, unlike the propaganda and the fundraising campaign photos that were taken by one or a small number of professional photographers with a defined goal, the photographs for the beauty pageant were taken by dozens of independent photographers, although their visual similarities are notable. All the photos were taken in a studio, and resemble the *carte de visite* style, which developed in the mid 19th century and maintained its

popularity in the 20th century (Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994, 9). Viewing the photos raises a number of questions: Were they the product of interaction with, or even imitation of, other beauty pageants that were taking place in the same region at the time? Were they reflective of comparable processes structuring fashion and esthetics across modern Europe? Did the visual representations constitute an explicit cultural repertoire or perhaps an expression of the intercommunal contact that transformed Western feminine visibility?

A photograph cannot be accurately analyzed in isolation from its cultural, social, political, and economic context (Sontag 1977, 3–5). Rather, it should be “read” in the social and cultural context in which it was created. Photographs can also be treated as “visual texts” that can reveal additional aspects that are absent from written materials (Barthes 1981, 5). An analysis of the photographs of the different contestants offers insight into the beauty ideal that was prevalent in the Jewish community in interwar Poland. These photos, it should be noted, are not indicative of the contestants' everyday appearance but rather reflect the desired image they aimed to convey and their perception of the beauty ideal in their community. Furthermore, as I rely on the photos that appeared in the newspapers, I have no information regarding the circumstances in which the picture were taken: who took the pictures, were the pictures taken specifically for the contest, which motivations lay behind dressing up and styling in a specific way, etc.

Fashion and style are affected by social processes. Due to its location, Poland was influenced by social,

political, and economic trends coming out of both the West (Germany, France, the UK, the United States) and the East (primarily Russia) (Stachura 1998, 1–13). Looking at photo collection of polish movie stars from the 30's, can reveal international influences on fashion and visual appearance. A closer look on the Polish beauty pageant, Miss Polonia, contestants' photos may hint that the western influence was more dominant. Out of 60 photos from the 1930s pageant, 90% had western fashion characteristics as *Bubikopf Frisur*.³²

The Jewish community in Poland maintained close financial, political, and cultural relationship with Jewish communities overseas, which, in conjunction with the immigration waves, made this population even more susceptible to outside influences than the rest of Polish society (Alroey 2008, 243–244). As a result, an analysis of Polish Jewry's taste in fashion styles and the beauty ideal reflects a number of international influences.

In approaching the beauty ideal, I decided to use the data of 325 photos from the contests held by *Nasz Przegląd* and *Undzer Express*. When viewing the photos, I first identified two levels of characteristics: a biological level (consisting of attributes such as hair color, obesity, etc.) and a level of fashion or style. I chose to disregard the "typical" stereotypical biological characteristics that are frequently the focus of discussions on Jewish appearance and to concentrate instead on the level of fashion, which stems not from genetics but from personal choice. As fashion and style are very difficult to analyze and compare using qualitative methods, I also employed quantitative research methods. In order to translate the visual object into a measurable system, I

had to define measurable variables. To this end, after looking at the photos, I identified 20 different characteristics and defined variables. Some of the variables were binary (yes or no – for example, were they wearing jewelry?), whereas others were ordinal or nominal (multiple discrete options – for example, type of haircut or type of necklace). Using Microsoft Excel, I produced a table in which each photo was ranked according to each of these variables (hair and eyebrow style, hair length, necklace, type of necklace, etc.). The result was a table I could use to describe and compare the photos by means of the 20 variables. Next, using statistical software (SPSS), I analyzed the data from the photos in order to draw more general conclusions.

The use of descriptive statistics revealed some general characteristics of the photos. First, jewelry was not commonly worn, and the majority of contestant wore no jewelry at all. Ninety percent of the contestants wore no earrings, and of those who did about half wore dangling earrings while the other half wore studs. Necklaces were slightly more common, although 60% of the participants did not wear one. The most common type of necklace was one made of pearls (representing 80% of the total number of necklaces). The vast majority (95%) of contestants wore no hat or hair covering of any kind. Like jewelry, fur too was a clear symbol of wealth and was not very common, with less than 10% of the contestants wearing it in their photographs.

Although one may conclude that the rarity of jewelry and fur in the photographs stemmed directly from the financial status of the contestants, these findings should be analyzed

with caution. During the interwar years, some professional photographers kept fashion items, jewelry, and fur in their studios as photographic accessories (Silverman 2011, 80). Therefore, women who submitted photos of themselves wearing a piece of jewelry or an accessory did not necessarily own it. Rather, contestants could submit photos in which they were wearing fur and jewelry in order to create an image of upper class and financial status, regardless of their actual social class belonging. Simmel argues that members of lower classes attempt to imitate the taste of the upper classes. And whereas in our case we can identify jewelry and fur as being representative of the upper classes, not all the contestants sought to create such an image. While the characteristics of the traditional carte de visite includes using the fanciest clothing and accessories available, the lack of such accessories may hint on a transformation in the characteristics of the genre (Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994, 9).

Unlike jewelry and fur, makeup was common, especially lipstick, which was the most widely used type of makeup and was identified in 80% of the photos. During the interwar years, makeup became more accessible to a wider proportion of the population and was frequently sold in pharmacies (Zohar 2022). Half of the contestants sent in photos in which they were smiling, with most (75%) showing no teeth. This focusing of attention on the lips and mouth emphasized its role as a symbol of the feminine ideal. Moreover, a photo with a distinguished smile can be considered a tool to arouse positive emotions. Finally, the choice to not reveal their teeth may have been part



Figure 7

Examples for Type 1 Style. "Miss Judaea," *Nasz Przegląd*, February 21, 1929, March 5, 1929.



Figure 8

Examples for Type 2 Style. "Miss Judaea," *Nasz Przegląd*, February 15, 1929, March 5, 1929; "Schonests Konkurs," *Unzer Express*, April 6, 1930, May 16, 1930.

of a norm of emotional restraint, but may also have stemmed from the poor dental health that was common among lower social statuses in those years. In the 1920s and the 1930s, the image of femininity started to be related to sexualization and erotic commodities (Romer 2011, 107). And indeed, cleavage, or a blouse revealing a woman's cleavage, was worn in over 50% of the photos as another symbol of femininity and a reflection of the link between sexuality and erotic appearance on the one hand, and the new feminine ideal on the other hand. Some contestants (16%) included floral decorations, possibly reflecting the image of flowers as a

symbol of utopic romantic love, which became common in the nineteenth century. According to George Mosse, "flowers were the sounds made by nature's soul," and roses became a symbol of virginity (Mosse 1985, 99).

Viewing the photos revealed two prevalent types of fashion styles that had to do primarily with hairstyle. Hair and eyebrow style were probably the easiest way of displaying individual taste and style. It typically required fewer resources than jewelry or makeup, and it was easily noticed, even in black and white photos. This resulted in the creation of two variable clusters, each of which defined a different "type" of beauty ideal. The

first cluster, Type 1, was a more "western influenced" beauty ideal. This cluster included wavy hair, "Bubikopf" (a bob haircut), and a side hair part and resembled the Weimar fashion or the Flapper girl's style (Figure 7).³³

The second cluster, Type 2, was a more traditional style consisting of long, non-wavy hair and a middle hair part (Figure 8). This style was more related to eastern and Russian fashion, which was also adopted by the Zionist pioneer women (Helman 2012, 203–205, 208). Half of the contestants fell completely under one of these two types. Type 1 was more common, with almost a third of the

contestants being fully consistent with its defined variables. For example, over 60% of the contestants had bangs, a clear nod to Weimar fashion. This may have reflected the growing influence of Western trends on the formation of the new middle class. Statistically, fur, necklaces, earrings, and cleavage were more common in Type 1, suggesting a link between Western fashion and the bourgeoisie, as well as a desire to imitate or create an image of wealth.

As each of the two newspapers had a different target audience, I assumed that the photographs that were received by the different newspapers may have reflected differing beauty ideals. Using statistical tests – the chi-squared test and the Fisher's exact test – that were designed to examine the statistical significance of differences in prevalence between groups, I examined my assumption. Surprisingly, no statically significant difference was identified. Type 1, which resembled the beauty ideal of the Weimar Republic and the West, was slightly more common in *Undzer Express*, which was published in Yiddish to appeal to the “common people.” Moreover, the winner of the contest in *Undzer Express* reflected the Type 1 style. In *Nasz Przegląd*, which targeted the upper classes of Polish Jewry, Type 2 was relatively more common, and the winner had Type 2 attributes. As noted, the difference in the prevalence of the two types was not statistically significant. It should also be noted that the contests were held in consecutive years, although it seems unlikely that this was responsible for any of the differences or that it affected the conclusions.

Here, I would like to share my insight regarding the method used,

specifically, the fact that my use of an integrated method enabled me to add an additional layer to my conclusions. That is to say, the qualitative stage, in which I defined the variables and the beauty ideal clusters, was followed by a quantitative stage that allowed me to examine and validate my hypothesis. This approach is a new way of analyzing visual data from an historical perspective.

Beauty Pageant and National Emotions

As mentioned above, the beauty queens became cultural-national symbols. Femininity and masculinity had been entwined in the discourse of nationalism since the end of the nineteenth century, and with greater intensity after the establishment of nation states in the twentieth century (Mosse 1985, 115–119). The so-called “Jewish community,” which was represented by a variety of Jewish newspapers, sought to create all sorts of national symbols and, in this framework, to also nationalize the female body. In its effort to create the “New Jewish Man,” the Jewish community sought to sketch its ideal attributes. By selecting a national beauty queen, the Jewish community identified and declared what the new woman should look like, her habits, and her expected behavior.

This approach was reflected in the instruction, given to the jury of the beauty pageant that was organized by *Undzer Express* in 1930, to choose the young woman with an esthetic shape and the greatest “typical Jewish beauty.”³⁴ Elhanan Zeitlin used the coronation ceremony of the beauty queen of 1930 to encourage Jewish girls to “show off” their beauty, calling on the “Jewish daughters” from rural counties to “hold their heads up

proudly, to highlight their beauty, and to do so in order to fit into the new world.”³⁵ These few words reflected the essence of the process of change that the Jewish society underwent in interwar Poland. It represented the new and still developing role of esthetics and beauty as a factor encouraging both socialization and assimilation. It also reflected the changing status of females in the Jewish community. Zeitlin's speech not only articulated the new presence of Jewish women in the public sphere but also highlighted the progressive social expectation that beauty would be made prominent and used as a tool.

Beyond the national aspect and the physical attributes they reflected, the beauty pageants of the Polish Jewish community also highlighted moral and ethical values that emerged in the Jewish community of interwar Poland. In earlier times, women had not been permitted to show themselves and were expected to remain in the private sphere, due to social etiquette and religious rules. After World War I, it was much more common to see Jewish (and non-Jewish) women in Poland engaged in fashion and personal esthetics. The use of make-up and cosmetics became more accessible and more common; the mass production of clothing was on the rise; and international influences on appearance and on women's habits and lifestyles were constantly increasing.

Furthermore, in the Jewish beauty pageants that were held in Poland during this period, it was clear that all the candidates were unmarried young women. The formal marital status of the contestants was emphasized by the title “Miss” (*meideleh* or *froilen* in Yiddish). It is clear that the vast

majority of the contestants were not religious, and, as noted, that only a negligible percentage wore head coverings. The very decision to note that the women shown were single highlights the social expectation from the chosen girl. Virginity was a symbol of social decency, and this was also the case in the Queen Esther contest in Tel-Aviv and the general Polish beauty pageant that was held during the interwar years.³⁶ However, it is evident that, despite the secular and permissive image of the contest, at least one contestant in the 1930 pageant observed the Jewish commandments, at least on a declarative level. This was the contest's winner, Miss Fani Bekman of Radom, who refused to accept the prize, which included accommodations at a Polish resort in Otwock, because the food served at the resort was not kosher.

Returning to the issue of gender, it should be noted that a married woman was perceived as someone else's property and as an object whose beauty the public was not entitled to enjoy not only in religious society but also in the secular community. Unlike a married woman, a single young woman was "permitted" in the public sphere as an object from which the public (in this case, especially men) could derive pleasure. After World War I, explains George Mosse, although German society sought to welcome middle class women into the public sphere, men were in charge of this social transformation (Mosse 1985, 112–113). In the case of the Jewish beauty pageants of interwar Poland, we see, male hegemony was manifested not only in the daily press, which was dominated by men, but also in the juries of the pageants, which consisted almost solely of men

(Plach 2008, 372), and in their approval by the representatives of the Jewish community (*Kehila*), who also consisted solely of men. The publication of photographs of such a large number of everyday women in the newspapers actually reflects that the Jewish hegemony managed to take the woman out of the private sphere and situate her at the heart of national-public action. The women's voices, however, were almost never heard, and they were accused – albeit indirectly – of immorality for disgracing their bodies, showing contempt for the Jewish religion, misrepresentation, and pretense.

Conclusion

The Jewish beauty pageants discussed in this article were not unique, as such contests and competitions were part of a growing tradition of entertainment practices that women and men alike viewed as an expression of modernity. Although many initially referred to the Jewish beauty pageants as a stunt or a joke, their reverberations made it impossible to ignore their significance.³⁷ The most prominent reflection of this dynamic was the formal approval which the beauty queens received from the officials of the Jewish community. Perhaps more than anything else, Miss Judaea's reception at a meeting of the Council of the Warsaw Jewish Community embodied the almost stately status the pageant enjoyed in the Jewish street.

Simmel's theoretical approach to fashion is based on the existence of conflicts. As we have seen, the beauty pageants and the public discussion that followed aroused numerous conflicts – both internal and external – between different groups that were involved in the competition. On the

internal Jewish level, these conflicts occurred between religious and secular Jews, between Zionists and non-Zionists, between proponents of Hebrew and those advocating the usage of Yiddish or Polish, and between socialists and capitalists. On the external level, conflicts were between East and West, tradition and progress, and men and women.

In closing, I would like to draw a number of conclusions. First, and not surprisingly, it is evident that fashion played an important role in the life of interwar Polish Jewry. Regardless of fashion type, style, or individual taste, each of the 300 contestants' photos represented an effort to look attractive and desirable. We can also conclude that, despite the differences between different groups in Polish Jewry, they nonetheless shared similar attributes and similar influences, as reflected in the analysis of the beauty ideal.

Finally, I argue that the Jewish beauty pageants themselves, and the discussions that followed, were representative of the process of change that Polish Jewry underwent in the interwar years. Women in the photos celebrated their femininity, their beauty, and the opportunity to present themselves to the community (Wallach 2017). All of these are clear symbols of modernity, bourgeois culture, and a secular orientation. Moreover, tens of thousands of people spent time and money to vote for their contestant of choice. These pageants, therefore, represented more than just pure entertainment and symbolized more than just modernity. As a national minority dispersed throughout Poland, such ethno-specific entertainment activities played an important role in shaping Jewish national identity. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that even

opponents of the contest saw it as a national event – perhaps pointless, and maybe even a disgrace, but an event with national characteristics nonetheless.

Notes

1. In the 19th and early 20th centuries Jews and specifically Jewish women were accused, as part of the anti-Semitic propaganda, of pathological sexuality that led to the destruction of the European social structure. See, Szobar (2002, 131).
2. "Miss Judaea," *Nasz Przegląd* 1.2.1929.
3. For the terms and conditions of the contest see, "Miss Judaea," *Nasz Przegląd*, 20.3.1929.
4. "Ostateczny rezultat głosowania," *Nasz Przegląd*, March 24, 1929.
5. "Wybór "Miss Judaei," *Nasz Przegląd*, March 29, 1929.
6. "Shene yudishe meidalach," *Unzer Express*, March 16, 1930 (Yiddish).
7. "Kandidatkes fun unzer shenhyst kankurs," *Unzer Express*, May 27, 1930 (Yiddish).
8. "Di kandidayeks fun unzer shenhyst konkurs," *Grodner Unzer Express*, May 9, 1930, May 19, 1930, May 22, 1930, May 26, 1930, May 28, 1930 (Yiddish).
9. "Di 10 shenste yudishe meidalach fun poilen," *Unzer Express*, June 24, 1930; "Frl. Fanny Bekman fun Radom gevehlts als das shenste yudishe meidel fun poilen," *Unzer Express*, June 27, 1930 (Yiddish).
10. See for example, "Mivzakim," *Doar Hayom*, March 20, 1929 (Hebrew).
11. "Miss Judaea," *Nasz Przegląd*, February 16, 1929 (Yiddish); "Michtav MiVarsha," *HaAretz*, April 22, 1929 (Hebrew).
12. "Filharmonja warszawska," *Nasz Przegląd*, April 9, 1929.
13. <https://polona.pl/item/album-fotografii-aktorow,NDIzMzk5MTM/14/#info:metadata>
14. In Grodno, the community decided to call the beauty pageant "Miss Judaea" in the name of the *Nasz Przegląd* beauty pageant that was held a year before. However, they clarified that the contest will take part in the Purim carnival and the winners will be crowned "Queen Esther" and her lady in waiting. See, "Greit zich tsum sensationlen purim-carnaval!"; "Greit zich tsu valn fun "Miss Judaea" fun Grodne!," *Grodner Express*, March 10, 1929 (Yiddish).
15. "Di shenste yiddishe techter fun poilen," *Forverts*, April 28, 1929 (Yiddish).
16. "Különös harcok egy zsidó szépségkirálynő körül," *Egyenlőség*, May 18, 1929.
17. "Michtav MiVarsha," *Ha'Aretz*, April 22, 1929 (Hebrew).
18. It is important to note that *Nasz Przegląd* was recognized with the Zionist movement. "Michtav MiVarsha," *Ha'Aretz*, April 22, 1929 (Hebrew).
19. See for example, "Miss Judaea," *Miedzyrzeczer Tribune*, April 5, 1929 (Yiddish).
20. "Nachvehenishen fun 'Miss Judaea' in kehila-rat," *Haynt*, April 16, 1929 (Yiddish).
21. "Nachvehenishen fun 'Miss Judaea' in kehila-rat," *Haynt*, April 16, 1929 (Yiddish); "Michtav MiVarsha," *Ha'Aretz*, 22.4.1929 (Hebrew).
22. "Nachvehenishen fun 'Miss Judaea' in kehila-rat," *Haynt*, April 16, 1929 (Yiddish).
23. "Nachvehenishen fun 'Miss Judaea' in kehila-rat," *Haynt*, April 16, 1929 (Yiddish).
24. "Metsia kshera," *HaShomer-Hatsair Warsaw*, September 30, 1929 (Hebrew).
25. "Di emet-dige Miss Judaea," *Unzer Express*, February 15, 1929 (Yiddish).
26. "Farvos haben mir nisht oifgenumen di 'Miss Judaea'?" *Der Moment*, April 4, 1929 (Yiddish).
27. "A riziger hamon zamelt zih far der redaktsie unzer express in tag fun shenhits kankurs," *Unzer Express*, June 27, 1930 (Yiddish).
28. See also, "A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac," *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2010.
29. Karry Wallach (2017, 44) suggested that since the early 18th century, Berlin Jewish enlightenment "looked down" upon the East European Jews due to various aesthetics characteristics.
30. This process characterized not only the Polish-Jewish population. See Reuveni (2017, 60–63).
31. See for example, Ashkenazi (2020, 263–294). While many private collections were lost,

some are still kept in museums and institutions as YIVO and USHMM.

32. I elaborate on Western and Eastern fashion characteristics below. See: "Kandydatki na Miss Polonje", *Kurjer Czerwony*, 1930; Milewska-Młynik (2016, 321–322); *Karykatury gwiazd filmowych*, 1932.
33. On the "Orthodox *Bubikopf*" see, Wallach (2017, 57).
34. "Gevehl't das shenste yudishe meidel in poilen," *Unzer Express*, June 26, 1930 (Yiddish).
35. "Frl. Fanny Bekman fun Radom gewehl't als das shenste yudishe meidel fun Poilen," *Unzer Express*, June 27, 1930 (Yiddish).
36. For more information on modesty rules among the Jewish Bourgeois Society, see Margalit-Stern (2011, 32; Hebrew).
37. "Miss Judaea," *Der Moment*, April 14, 1929 (Yiddish).

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