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Jewish Community in the Bieszczady Mountains in the years 1918-1939 and its fate during the World War II

Doctoral thesis summary

The aim of the author carrying out the analysis of the Jewish community in the Bieszczady mountains was to present the social, economic, political, cultural and educational and religious characteristics of this population. The dissertation is also an attempt at a response to the question, how did the specific of the multicultural and, at the same time, provincial environment of Bieszczady affect the dynamics and the nature of the integration process of Jews living there, in the abovementioned fields of activity.

Furthermore, the aim was to present different forms of activity of the Jewish population living there through the prism of individuals, working in particular professions and performing different roles in social establishments. Such a perspective of the work would serve the purpose of highlighting the local aspect of the analysis contained in here and make it relevant for the society living there today and to help this society to get to know better the history of their Jewish one-time neighbours.

The results of the research contained in this dissertation cover the period from regaining independence by Poland in 1918 to the end of the interwar period 1939. The last chapter of this work contains an analysis of the histories of the Jewish population in Bieszczady during the Second World War. The basis of adopting this chronological framework was the commonly used periodization of Poland's history. It was also justified considering the nature of processes specific for this period, which are subject to the analysis. For a fuller understanding, the origin of the analysed phenomena in the time of Galicia autonomy was taken into account at some places of this dissertation.

In the light of the objective to conduct detailed analyses of particular issues and due to the availability of the sources, the territorial scope of this dissertation covers the Bieszczady area now belonging to Poland. The region stretches from the South, East and North along the borders of the interwar Lesko County, and from the West, it includes a part of the former Sanok County, bounded by the Łupkowska pass.

As far as the subject of the research is concerned, the dissertation presents essential issues of activities of the Jewish population, which remains specific compared to other national groups. The first chapter presents the population development and territorial distribution of Jews as well as their economic and social activity. The author analyses this activity with view to the participation of the Jewish population in agricultural, industrial, craft and commercial sectors, in social-economic and professional associations as well as in the development of cooperatives. The second chapter contains the analysis of Jewish participation in the political life, specifying affiliations and activities in Jewish orthodox, Zionist and socialistic organizations, as well as their participation in local government elections and activity in local public councils. One of the issues refers to the participation of the Jewish population in religious and secular education. The chapter contains also reflections regarding the cultural, educational and sport life.

The third chapter presents the problems involved in the functioning of Jewish religious communities in the investigated area, mainly with regard to their legal basis and structure, economic situation as well as the activities of persons employed at municipalities, as well as competition for leadership at municipalities, which usually appeared during the election of rabbis and for county councils. The analysis comprises also the essential areas of municipal activities, such as religion and charity. As regards religion, the issues of functioning of synagogues, houses of prayer, ritual baths as well as ritual slaughter have been analysed. When it comes to charity and social protection, the author outlines the general problems relating to poverty and the involvement of the Jewish population in assistance, mainly by establishing and operating charity associations.

This work is also aimed at investigation of the histories of Bieszczady Jews during the Second World War. These problems have been analysed in the fourth chapter, mainly based on the general situation of Jews living in Bieszczady at the beginning of the Second World War, including the problem of this population's expulsion to the Soviet zone of occupation, through terror, repressions of Jews and the first acts of killing, to their mass exterminations, with special regard to the forced labour camp in Zasław. The aim of this work was not to deliver a detailed coverage of the life of Jews during the war period in the investigated area, as it was in the case of the interwar period, but to present its most important aspects, as this matter requires a comprehensive presentation. However, the author considered the inclusion of this chapter as an important element for the overall reflection, which show the end of the centuries-old existence of Jews in the investigated territory.

The analyses of the issues presented in this work leads the author to formulate the fundamental thesis, that despite increasing economic downturn during the interwar period, revealed by the impoverishment of the Jewish population, Jews continued to participate actively in the social-economic life. This was evidenced by multiple forms of this activity, such as the functioning of a diversity of organizations. Against the background of the Jewish community of the Lviv voivodeship, Jews living in Bieszczady were distinguished by some characteristics with regard to the demographic structure, professional and social activity as well as the nature of economic, political, social and cultural-educational organizations established by them. This was due to the local social-economic conditions as well as the characteristic of the ethnical diversity of this region, where Jews were the third-largest group, after Ukrainians and Poles, but the socially and culturally most active one. The history of the Jewish community in the Bieszczady mountains and its intellectual and economic output in this region constitute integral parts also of the Polish and Ukrainian history and culture, complementing with its uniqueness the common history of these nations in the region, out of which the existence of Jews has been definitively cast out.