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Cheders in the system of traditional Jewish education in Galicia, 1772–1918

DOI <https://doi.org/10.15633/pch.16115>

Abstract

This article examines Jewish education in Galicia through the lens of the most numerous and widespread elementary religious schools: cheders. These schools operated in the region throughout the period of the partitions of Poland. Their functioning in Galicia was restricted by the Austrian state authorities, which sought to eliminate them. Nevertheless, the long-standing popularity of cheders, rooted in a tradition several centuries old, meant that the Jewish population was reluctant to enrol children in state public schools. As a result, a very large number of Jewish children received their education in cheders. These schools were attended mainly by boys and were established in towns inhabited by Jews. In some towns, several, and sometimes even several dozen cheders operated simultaneously. Their strongest supporters were the Hasidim.

Keywords

Galicia, Jews, cheders, religious schools, elementary education

Jews began arriving in Poland in the Middle Ages and settled mainly in cities. Their numbers increased steadily. They organised themselves into their own ethno-religious communities, known as *kahals*, or communes, in which they maintained laws, customs, and traditions distinct from those of Christians. In this way, Jewish communities protected themselves from the influence of other religions and nations, thereby limiting the adoption of external cultural patterns. These attitudes had a fundamental effect on both the Jewish way of life and relations with other national groups living in Poland.

The partitions of the Polish state brought major changes for this population. In the lands incorporated into Austria (Galicia) as a result of the First Partition in 1772, Jews constituted the third-largest national group. At that time, they numbered approximately 200,000, accounting for almost 10% of the total population of the province (Bałaban 1916, 7–9; Półćwiartek 1991, 150–152; Opas 1994, 74). During the nineteenth century, the Jewish population increased systematically. In 1910, almost 900,000 Jews lived in Galicia, representing about 11% of the total population (Rędziński 2000, 11). Among Galician Jews, three main groups may be distinguished: the Orthodox, the Hasidim, and the reformers (*maskilim*) (Rędziński 2000, 13–19, 61; Łapot 2016, 41–43; Łapot 2019, 34).

In Galicia, Jews lived mainly in cities, with their largest concentration in Lviv. As in earlier periods, they formed communities that continued to maintain a degree of isolation from the rest of Galician society (Opas 1994, 74). For this reason, the Austrian authorities sought to assimilate Jews with other national groups and, at the same time, to Germanise them (Półćwiartek 1991, 151; Opas 1994, 74). It was only in 1867–1868 that the state authorities introduced equal rights for Jews in the province. Nevertheless, traditional precepts and rules of socio-religious life continued to be scrupulously observed in the *kahals*, where they were guarded in particular by the Hasidism (Hoff 1992, 108–110).

In 1774, a school law was issued in Austria that applied to the entire monarchy, including Galicia. It contained provisions concerning, among other matters, the organisational structure of elementary education for the plebeian population, known as folk education. The law provided for three types of schools: trivial, main, and normal schools. Control over folk education was assumed by the state administration. Jews were permitted to open their own public folk schools, known as German-Jewish schools, and were ordered to send their children to them.

In this way, the authorities sought to break the previous monopoly of denominational education among Jews (Świeboda 1994, 87–88; Półćwiartek 1991, 156). Jewish communities, however, considered state public schools superfluous or even harmful and regarded them as the first step towards religious apostasy (Pelczar 1998, 247–248; Łapot 2016, 81–82). Consequently, the *kehillas* avoided establishing such schools. Moreover, they tolerated the failure to send Jewish children to state schools, which meant that very few of them attended these institutions (Bałaban 1920, 194–195). As a result, the establishment of public schools for Jews in Galicia did not achieve the intended effect and instead provoked resistance and distrust. Jews remained fully satisfied with their own traditional religious schools (Łapot 2014, 498).

1. Religious and cultural determinants of cheder functioning

In Jewish culture, education and schooling were regarded as a moral virtue, a social imperative, a primary value for family life, and the object of the highest parental aspirations. Particular importance was attached to the education of boys (Cukras-Stelągowska 2009, 122). For them, elementary education was an extremely important stage on the path to adolescence. It shaped their subsequent educational and professional trajectories and prepared them for full participation in community life (Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 187).

Traditional Jewish schools had an ethno-religious character, and their organisational structure had already been formed in earlier centuries. Initially, all boys attended private fee-paying cheders (*chaydorim*) or Talmud Torah schools; that is, free schools maintained by the *kahal*. The most talented pupils then continued their religious education at a higher level in *yeshivas* (Pelczar 1998, 247–248). For Jews, attendance at their own religious school was treated as a religious obligation. This position was represented especially by the *Hasidim* (Łapot 2014, 496), who regarded cheders as the only schools capable of providing young people with proper religious education and, at the same time, as a mainstay of Judaism (Bujak 1908, 105, 107).

Cheders therefore enjoyed considerable popularity. They were organised in every *kahal*, in varying numbers, and were usually located in cramped, makeshift premises. Cheders were divided into three categories. The first was attended by children of both sexes aged approximately 3–7 years. These schools were the most numerous and sometimes also functioned as childcare

institutions, since parents occupied with paid work often had no opportunity to supervise their children (Łapot 2016, 83). The second category of cheders was attended by children aged about 6–12 years. The third type, intended for older boys, was regarded as a school providing Talmudic education (Munk 1869, 258–260).

2. The attitude of state authorities towards cheders

During the partition period, the central and Galician Austrian authorities undertook various measures to abolish the existing monopoly of Jewish religious schools (Łapot 2014, 499). In the Education Act for Galicia of 2 May 1873, the authorities created the legal conditions for their closure or reorganisation. This aim was to be achieved by a decree of the Ministry of Religion and Enlightenment of 14 June 1874, which stated that attendance at cheders did not fulfil the obligation to attend school. It was stipulated that new cheders could be established only with the permission of the political authorities and that persons applying for a licence to maintain them had to submit to the district office a certificate of pedagogical competence issued by the relevant kehillah.

Only religion and the Talmud were permitted to be taught in cheders, while children studying in them also had to attend public or private folk schools. Cheders that additionally taught general subjects from the folk-school curriculum had to comply with the State Education Act of 14 May 1869. With reference to the ministerial decree mentioned above, the Lviv Governorate issued a decree on 31 August 1874 defining the rules for the functioning of cheders (Łapot 2014, 499). It ordered starosts to keep a register of such schools, inspect them frequently, and restrict the issuing of licences to run them (Rędziński 2000, 55; Łapot 2016, 95; Łapot 2019, 47).

The Galician National School Board also repeatedly drew attention to the fact that Jewish children avoided public schools by choosing cheders (“Okólnik L. 9.491 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 24 listopada 1874 r.” 1888, 96–97). It also issued detailed orders concerning their activities (“Okólnik L. 13.410 ex 1882 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 24 stycznia 1883 r.” 1888, 214–215). In practice, however, the orders of the central and provincial administrations were not obeyed by Jewish communities (Łapot 2014, 499; Hoff 1994, 79–80). As a result, the National School Board had to sanction the existence of cheders. It succeeded only partially in implementing the requirement that a teacher (melamed)

wishing to run a cheder obtain the relevant certificate of pedagogical competence (Landes 1875, 122).

In addition, in some towns, overcrowding in public schools became an obstacle to limiting the educational role of cheders, as some Jewish children were unable to enrol. Consequently, the state authorities were forced to accept the fact that young people were also educated in cheders. The competent district school boards were required only to ensure that these schools met certain sanitary conditions and that teachers gradually improved their pedagogical qualifications (Rędziński 2000, 55).

Already in the early years of Galician autonomy, cheders were criticised not only by the political and educational authorities but also by Jewish maskilic circles (Rędziński 2000, 54–55; Landes 1869, 104–106; Landes 1875, 121–122; Munk 1869, 258–260).

3. Cheder network

Despite various efforts by the state authorities to encourage Jews to send their children to public folk schools, cheders remained very popular in Galicia. In the early partition period, there were hundreds of them. In Lviv alone, there were 52 cheders in 1782 and 85 in 1795, attended by 1,574 children (Świeboda 1994, 87). In addition to 85 teachers (melameds), these schools employed 183 assistants (belfers). Consequently, only a small proportion of Jewish youth attended state folk schools in Lviv (Rędziński 2000, 47). A similar situation prevailed in other urban Jewish centres.

During the period of Galician autonomy, the consequence of the state decrees mentioned above, especially those concerning the possession of the relevant permits to run such schools, was initially a decrease in the number of licensed cheders. This is indicated by data for 1881–1898 from ten selected towns in Galicia (Table 1).

The data in Table 1 indicate that usually between a few and a dozen cheders operated in a town. The largest numbers at that time were in Brody, Kraków, and Lviv. In each of the analysed years, however, their number in individual towns fluctuated, with an overall downward trend. In 1881, there were 168 licensed establishments, whereas in 1898 there were only 125. The towns listed were located mostly in eastern Galicia, where the Jewish population was very large and sometimes even outnumbered all other groups. The only towns from western

Galicia included in the table were Kraków and Chrzanów, both important centres of Jewish life.

Table 1. Licensed cheders in Galicia between 1881 and 1898 (selected towns)

City	1881			1890			1895			1898		
	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.	No.	pupils	avg.
Boryslav	6	113	18.8	10	138	13.8	9	104	11.6	7	90	12.9
Brody	39	534	13.7	21	678	32.3	22	448	20.4	11	380	34.5
Chrzanów	9	143	15.9	11	128	11.6	12	289	24.1	12	314	26.2
Drohobych	11	214	19.5	17	332	19.5	9	154	17.1	9	158	17.6
Kolomyia	18	235	13.1	11	204	18.5	19	300	15.8	16	204	12.8
Kraków	35	849	24.3	21	382	18.2	18	442	24.6	23	1036	45.0
Lviv	15	494	32.9	26	479	18.4	17	321	18.9	22	343	15.6
Ternopil	12	351	29.2	8	131	16.4	7	240	34.3	8	246	30.8
Stanisławów	18	343	19.1	19	361	19.0	10	292	29.2	14	350	25.0
Stryi	5	79	15.8	2	22	11.0	3	58	19.3	3	58	19.3
Total	168	3355	20.0	146	2855	19.6	126	2648	21.0	125	3179	25.4

Source: Rędziński 2000, 56.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, once the statutory requirements had been met, the number of cheders in Galicia began to increase again. For example, in the 1899/1900 school year there were 256 such schools, with 386 melameds, while in 1902/1903 there were 339, with 473 melameds (Rędziński 2000, 55). The table also shows considerable variation in the number of cheders in particular towns. Their functioning was sometimes only episodic. One reason for the closure of schools was an insufficient number of pupils, probably related to the low popularity of particular teachers in the local community (Łapot 2014, 512).

One condition for obtaining a licence to run a cheder was the possession of suitable teaching premises and the provision of proper sanitary and technical conditions for pupils. Schools that failed to meet these requirements were

ordered by the administrative authorities to close (Adamczyk 1998, 49). In practice, only some melameds complied with administrative orders. The rest continued to teach illegally. As a result, alongside licensed cheders, there were also clandestine cheders, which the administrative authorities attempted to close once they had been discovered (Łapot 2019, 66). In the late 1880s, the Galician National Parliament even passed a law to nationalise cheders. The Galician National Department, however, had not found the funds to implement it by the end of the period under discussion, and cheders were therefore still allowed to operate (Świeboda 1994, 102).

4. Teachers and students

Cheders were organised and taught by melameds; that is, private teachers (Pelczar 1998, 248; Bałaban 1920, 191; Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 188). Compared with teachers in state folk schools, they had no formal general professional training, and their pedagogical competence was not systematically verified. Most often, they came from among the former assistants of melameds, known as belfers (Łapot 2016, 82).

Young people living in Galicia were subject to compulsory state education, which required attendance at public folk schools. In the case of Jewish children, however, the vast majority were educated in their own religious schools, especially in cheders. Jews believed that learning in cheders satisfied their educational needs and that public schooling was unnecessary. Consequently, efforts were made to mislead the state authorities regarding the fulfilment of compulsory schooling by Jewish children, especially boys (Świeboda 1994, 102). As a result, a large number of Jewish children attended cheders. Their numbers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century are shown in Table 1, which contains detailed data on children studying in licensed cheders in ten selected towns in Galicia. In 1881, a total of 3,355 children studied in these schools (168 schools); in 1890, 2,855 (146 schools); in 1895, 2,648 (126 schools); and in 1898, 3,179 (125 schools). The data show a fluctuating trend in pupil numbers. The average number of children per cheder also varied: in 1881 there were 20 pupils per school, in 1890 more than 19, in 1895, 21, and in 1898 more than 25.

The attendance of Jewish children in cheders at the turn of the twentieth century may be analysed using the example of Lviv (Table 2). In 1889, there were 48 schools, with varying numbers of pupils. The largest had more than

30 children, whereas the smallest had only a few (Łapot 2016, 98–99). The largest group of schools had between a dozen and twenty pupils (43.7%). In 1913, by contrast, only 26 cheders were in operation. Most were attended by between a dozen and twenty pupils, and only a few schools had more than 20 pupils (Łapot 2016, 102–103).

Table 2. Number of pupils in cheders in Lviv in 1889 and 1913

Number of pupils per cheder	Number of cheders	
	1889	1913
up to 10	10	1
11–20	21	18
21–30	11	6
over 30	6	1
Total	48	26

Source: Łapot 2016, 98–99, 102–103.

In Lviv, the influence of cheders on the Jewish community gradually declined during the period of autonomy. This was reflected in the decreasing number of schools and pupils and in the increasing number of children attending public folk schools (Łapot 2014, 511).

5. The teaching and learning process

In cheders, the principle of unity between instruction and religious education was implemented. Most often, only Hebrew, the reading of the Bible in Hebrew (with translation into Yiddish), the recitation of prayers in Hebrew, the study of the Talmud, and the writing of Hebrew letters were taught. Some cheders also taught arithmetic and German (Bałaban 1920, 192; Rędziński 2000, 54). During lessons, texts were read, recited, and translated from Hebrew. Teaching was based on memorisation. Passages were repeated by children until they had been learned by heart. For some pupils, the effects of such teaching were very limited, since it developed mainly mechanical memory.

Teaching methods were dominated by verbalism. Melameds often failed to select teaching content according to the age of their pupils or their level

of understanding. They also did not explain grammatical rules or apply the principle of graded difficulty. Considerable attention was devoted to the meticulous study of ancient regulations for priests, rules of ritual slaughter, and places mentioned in the Torah, while basic modern knowledge useful in everyday life was ignored. Discipline during lessons was maintained by punishments such as beating children or making them kneel on sand in a corner of the room. Classrooms were usually located in the dwellings of melameds, sometimes in their rooms or kitchens, and were stuffy. Cheders sometimes lacked basic teaching equipment, such as desks and tables. Classes were held jointly, even though pupils differed in age and in their level of school skills and knowledge. Lessons began early in the morning and lasted, with a lunch break, sometimes until 9 p.m. (Łapot 2014, 497–498; Łapot 2016, 84). Despite the modest knowledge acquired in cheders, Jews generally considered it sufficient (Świeboda 1994, 87).

According to the decree of the Governorate of 31 August 1874, during the period of Galician autonomy education in cheders was to be limited exclusively to religious instruction and the explanation of the Talmud. School owners were not allowed to teach general subjects unless they obtained a licence from the National School Board to run a public school (Łapot 2014, 499).

In some cheders, however, general subjects taught in folk schools were offered illegally in addition to Talmudic instruction. According to state statistics, in 1884 there were about 1,000 registered cheders in Galicia. Of this group, only ten schools officially taught additional general subjects (German, Polish, and arithmetic). According to the National School Board, there were in fact many more such schools at the time. They operated illegally, without the permission of the state and educational authorities (“Okólnik L. 13.442 do rad szkolnych okręgowych z 5 listopada 1885 r.” 1888, 268–269).

The teaching methods used in cheders and the poor condition of their premises became the subject of criticism by state educational authorities and Jewish maskilic circles (Łapot 2014, 497–499).

Conclusions

Cheders in Galicia functioned throughout the partition period. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the state authorities attempted to limit their activity by introducing public German-Jewish folk schools for Jews. After some

time, however, because of the lack of interest among the Jewish population, the authorities were forced to close these schools. Cheders, by contrast, remained highly popular, since followers of Judaism regarded them as the only schools capable of providing their children with proper religious education. Their principal defenders were the Hasidim, and they were used by Jewish communities attached to their religious tradition. Despite their many shortcomings, cheders contributed significantly to the reduction of illiteracy among the Jewish population. These schools also formed the foundation of Jewish education in the other partitions (Cukras-Stelągowska 2009, 126). This demonstrates that, despite attempts at reform, the Jewish system of religious elementary education continued to function effectively (Hoff 1994, 80). At the same time, Jewish reformers regarded cheders as synonymous with the social and cultural backwardness of their nation (Cukras-Stelągowska 2017, 191).

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