Debating Birth Control in Interwar Polish-Jewish Contexts

Ewa's Commitment to the Shaping of a Modern Jewish Polish Family Image

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Abstract *In the second half of the 1920s, the changing understanding of the "new", independent, and self-determined woman led to extensive debates and a new understanding of the "family". An example of these interrelations that arose from early health feminist attitudes and the resulting self-empowerment in the interwar period is the Polish-Jewish weekly Ewa, published between 1928 and 1933. It reflected the nationalization of the "family", the negotiation of societal and individual attitudes towards birth control as well as that such attitudes were adapted in a particular way via a Polish-Zionist interpretation. The modern Jewish family should be healthy and prosperous, by being "cultured" and adopting a sophisticated approach to family planning. Ewa thus provided discussion of the challenges and tensions within a society which had only just begun to transform.*

The "black demonstrations" ("czarne protesty") that emerged against the introduction of a conservative law that almost banned abortion in Poland in 2016 have shown that women feel challenged and mobilized when they see threats to their reproductive behavior and health.[2] This example—among many in the

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2 Wiśniewska, Protest, 2017, p. 37–52.

Global North—illustrates the close link between women's (reproductive) health issues and the emerging "health feminism" movement fighting for related individual civil rights, because "health feminism" focusses particularly on problems regarding female sexuality and reproduction. In present times, we can observe particularly in extreme right wing populist discourses, which doubt these rights.[3]

However, this link has been observed since the turn from 19th to 20th century, when birth control became a politicized topic of intensive public discourse intertwined with moral reform and nationalization. In the age of nationalism, it became a means by which female activists could express their stance on the state of their nation and, at the same time, on the family.[4] Since then, birth control was debated not only among politicians but also by women who felt empowered to take a stand. Political debates about women's rights, which can also be interpreted as discourses of democratization, intensified especially in the interwar period. This took place against the backdrop of an increasingly changing attitude toward (female) sexuality and was promoted primarily by left-wing and liberal activists and feminists. In these discourses, sexuality was interpreted not only as a means of human reproduction, but also as a means of satisfying personal needs. Especially in the second half of the 1920s, the understanding of the "new", independent and self-determined woman, influenced by the complete liberalization of abortion in the Soviet Union and the economic crisis in Western Europe, led to extensive debates and, for example, mass demonstrations in the Weimar Republic demanding the liberalization of abortion.[5] The main issue was that women and couples should be able to decide for themselves the size of their families. Since then, "birth control" has become a mobilizing catchphrase for political demands for more female empowerment and social modernization and the use of birth control and the discourse surrounding it became a reflection of changing social (family) values and norms. This is particularly evident in the attitudes of socialist regimes toward birth control: on the one hand, they sought the complete liberation of women through socialism and therefore allowed abortions; on the other hand, there were also pro-natalist movements, for example in the People's Republic of Poland until the mid-1950s, which tried to make up for

3 Nicols, Women's Health, 2000, p. 56–64. DOI: 10.1111/j.1552-6909.2000.tb02756.x, see also: Weisman, Health Care, 1998.

4 See Articles in: Hein-Kircher, Hiemer, National Challenge, 2023, p. 3.

5 Usborne, Politics, 1992, Grossmann, Reforming Sex, 1995.

the population losses of the Second World War. Hence, a historical perspective on the discourses around reproductive behavior helps us to understand the agency of the main actors and the shaping of the image of the family. Such analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of social and value changes in societies[6] and, thus, of transforming family values and images.[7]

A very characteristic example of these interrelations that arose from early health feminist attitudes and the resulting self-empowerment in the interwar period is seen in the Polish-Jewish weekly *Ewa*, published between 1928 and 1933. This periodical reflected both the nationalization of the "family" and the negotiation of societal and individual attitudes towards birth control. It shows that attitudes were not just copied but adapted in a particular way via a Polish-Zionist interpretation. Thus, it clearly reflects the challenges of modern life within a socially and culturally changing community which was still under a strong religious influence.

For my argument, it is first necessary to provide context by examining the emerging Polish debates on birth control in the late 1920s; these debates have been topic of several scholarly publications but without a focus on customs and value changes.[8] Although *Ewa* has been explored in several smaller studies about the Polish-Jewish milieu,[9] there remains a gap with regard to its impact on shaping modern values and family images. Therefore, I discuss *Ewa*'s attitudes towards birth control based on a small number of representative articles in order to outline its contribution to value change and shifting family image.

The Emerging Debates on Birth Control in late-1920s Poland

By 1914, birth control was practiced by broad sections of the population,[10] while a fertility decline reflected a mental modernization of society, brought about by industrialization, urbanization and modern life.[11] The public negotiation of birth control and its individual and social consequences had been discussed intensively by politicians and activists. It was trans-nationally intertwined with

6 Hein-Kircher, Hiemer, Nešťaková, Norms, 2025.

7 Hein-Kircher, Werte- und Normenwandel, 2023, p. 60–74.

8 Latest study, with a social historical approach: Zielińska, Family 2022, p. 273–287.

9 For an overview of current research: Hein-Kircher, Werte- und Normenwandel, 2023. See also Hein-Kircher, National Challenge, 2023, p. 278–292.

10 Dienel, Kinderzahl, 1995, p. 55.

11 See Ciechanowski, "Is marriage so sacred?" in this volume.

eugenic and, later in the 1920s, "racial-hygienic" considerations through which reproductive behavior was becoming increasingly rationalized. Yet, as a result of rising nationalism, the "family" was seen as the basis of the nation and the nucleus of the state. The discourses that were triggered particularly by the radical German sexual reform-movement focused on abortion, which was for most women the only means of birth control, since only affluent women had access to modern contraceptives.

Although these trans-European discourses mooted birth control in a similar way, their specificities were acquired through the interweaving of national arguments. In Western Europe, abortion was already debated publicly in the decade before World War I. Under the conditions of partitioned Poland, a moral reform movement emerged, led by women activists. Their discourses were intertwined with abolitionist discourses against prostitution and the hygiene movement, in which the trafficking of (mostly Jewish) women and girls was seen as one of the most pressing moral problems. The moral reform movement contended with national destiny if marriage and family were not "pure" ("czyste") and viewed sobriety within marriage as the only means of birth control. Within this movement, Polish women felt mobilized to take a stance for their nation. This did not change until the late 1920s, when Jewish women also felt sufficiently empowered to advocate birth control.[12]

The main incentives came from outside the community. Across Europe, since 1918 the "new woman" had represented the dawn of democratic modernity in which traditional social orders such as marriage and, with it, the "duty to bear children", were being revised. The ideal of the "new woman" already represented social norms and value change, but particularly debates about birth control brought together the three key concepts of that epoch, "new", "freedom" and "sexuality". Hence, discourses on birth control brought mothers' freedom of choice—for whatever reason—increasingly into focus, not least since revolutionary Russia had legalized abortions.

In Poland, discourses on birth control and its synonym "conscious motherhood" ("świadome macierzyństwo") emerged only in the late 1920s and reflected the societal secularization and modernization of customs in a very specific way. In particular, during the six years from 1928 to 1934, debates on a new national law on marriage and abortion provided the basis for debates on "conscious motherhood", so that under the conditions of the authoritarian Sanacja

12 See Spielvogel, "The Jewish Women's League of Breslau" in this volume.

regime, the importance of birth control for Polish society were debated.[13] This was at a time when an economic crisis threatened society and anti-Semitism was on the rise. Only now, about 30 years later than in Western Europe, neo-Malthusian and eugenic arguments were woven into Polish debates beyond moral reform. As Elisa-Maria Hiemer points out in this volume,[14] the issue became a national one, as women were seen as having an important responsibility towards the new Polish state. Thus, birth control became a topic of strident political discourse because its acceptance and promotion were characterized as left-wing and liberal. The press, in particular, provided an arena in which it was part of intertwined discourses on women's emancipation, on the new marriage law and on sex education. Although birth control was intensively debated, in general Polish women's magazines did not devote much coverage and commentary to it.[15] The medical doctor and publicist Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński had fueled the debate with articles in *Wiadomości Literackie* (*Literary News*) and his feuilletons such as *Women's Hell*.[16] In this journalistic and ideological struggle, the Polish-Jewish weekly *Ewa* became a very specific resonance chamber for social and value change among Polish Jews, because of the extent to which debates about new family values and family planning were transculturally perceived and nationally adapted.

A Modern Stance Toward Jewish Family Conception

Ewa was published by Paulina Appenszlakowa between 1928 and 1933, at the height of Polish debates about birth control in the interwar period. Hence, it could be considered one of the main incentives for publishing the journal. *Ewa* referred to Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's numerous publications but adapted their content to suit its own audience. It also frequently published opinions of expert activists like the gynecologist Herman Rubinraut. It is characteristic of the time that these and other men were presented as "experts" while women

13 For the harsh rejection of "conscious motherhood" by the Catholic press, See Marcin Wilk, "From Girls into Women, from Boys into Men" in this volume.

14 See Elisa-Maria Hiemer, "Divergent Narratives on Family Planning in Interwar Poland" in this volume.

15 Sierakowska, Elementy, 2004, p. 365–380.

16 Boy-Żeleński, Piekło kobiet, 1930. See Małgorzata Radkiewicz, "Single mothers and the issue of motherhood" in this volume.

writers were presented as activists and, in the case of Róża Melcerowa, a former Zionist deputy in the Sejm (1922–1927), as politicians.

Ewa reported extensively on the international women's movement in the USA, England and France, and especially in Weimar Germany, where the birth control movement reached its peak in the early 1930s.[17] In doing so, it held up mirrors to Jewish women and demonstrated to them the inherent force of such movements. For example, Melcerowa explained her attitude towards birth control by referring to her experience at the International Workers' Congress in 1926, quoting a German participant who asked her to tell their comrades in the East not to bring so many children into the world.[18]

Ewa devoted considerable space to contributing to the emergence of Zionist women.[19] It was particularly explicit about the connection between (Jewish) feminism and Zionism, combining secular, intellectual, emancipatory feminist and Zionist attitudes.[20] *Ewa* saw itself as an integral part of the developing Jewish nationalism[21] and was published primarily for middle-class and "cultured"[22] (i.e., modern and acculturated) Jewish women, who interacted with the publication through surveys and letters to the editor. It wanted to mobilize its audience for a "national and social-feminist emancipation".[23] The main editor Paulina Appenszlakowa's voice awarded the modern Jewish housewife a key influential role nationally, changing from the women's role of guardian of Jewish traditions such as *kashrut* and *nida* to custodians of the nation.[24] This highlights that the negotiation of new family values and norms, and thus of reproductive behavior, was combined with anti-religious instincts.[25] It reflected the specific experiences of modernity which challenged Jewish women to fulfill a conservative function as keepers of traditions and as mothers, while at the same time redefining their role in the face of fundamental general and also internal Jewish changes.[26]

17 See footnote 5.
18 Ewa, April 22, 1928.
19 Mickutė, Zionist Women, 2013, p. 151.
20 Leszczawski-Schwerk: Opieki społecznej, 2021, p. 396.
21 Plach, Feminism, 2005, p. 243.
22 Ewa, May 8, 1931.
23 Ewa, December 9, 1928.
24 Ewa, October 25, 1931.
25 Hein-Kircher, Werte- und Normenwandel, 2023, p. 69.
26 Steffen, Jüdische Polonität, 2004.

This tension was quite clear, e.g., in the assessment of pre-marital health examinations which were argued for on eugenic grounds. For example, *Ewa* regularly published pieces written by Melcerowa which echoed the discourses of the Weimar Republic, noting in November 1930 that pre-marital examinations were a "colossal benefit" both for the bride and groom and "for society as a whole".[27] One of her articles also pointed to the influence of eugenics, as she hoped that the battle against a "degenerate race" (as she characterized the poor, uneducated and "backward" Jews of the lower social strata) would be more successful through marriage certificates.[28] Like Melcerowa, Samuel Hirszhorn, a journalist working for the daily *Nasz Przegląd* (*Our Review*; edited by Appenszlakowa's husband),[29] considered birth control to be important for the Jewish nation, since he believed that the fewer children a family had, the more prosperous it would be.[30] Both authors therefore saw birth control as a tool for the renewal of the Jewish nation and the elevation of its culture to a modern one. Hirszhorn's opinion makes clear that discourses on birth control were rooted in and intertwined with those on societal modernization. By publishing such opinions, *Ewa* justified and linked attitudes towards birth control to a Zionist worldview.[31] Therefore, *E*wa's task first and foremost was to "take care of the education of mothers in order to awaken and to use their strength and energy [...] for the realization of the national, social and natural ideal".[32]

As she provided the quote in German, she implied what sort of educated audience she was addressing. Melcerowa thus contrasted the Eastern (i.e., Polish) living conditions of Jewish working-class families with those in Western Europe and ultimately provided a critique of the former.[33] She came to the conclusion that only children should be born if they were the explicit wish of their parents, because "no woman" wants a third, let alone a fourth or fifth child, and fewer children are loved all the more. Melcerowa thus combined modern ideas of the family with the Zionist need to create a "healthy" Jewish people. Overall, through such reports and columns, *Ewa* provided its audience with alternatives to the traditional understanding of the woman's role. We can there-

27 Ewa, November 16, 1930.

28 Ewa, November 16, 1930.

29 Similarly, this daily publication propagated an image of modern Jews: Szablowska-Zaremba, Wizerunek kobiety, 2016, p. 115–129.

30 Ewa, April 1, 1928.

31 Szabłowska-Zaremba, Portret, 2015, p. 545–560.

32 Ewa, December 9, 1928.

33 Ewa, April 22, 1928.

fore conclude that part of *Ewa*'s aims were to educate Jewish women according to an (imagined) ideal like that of (West) European women without deviating from the goal of making them Zionist women. According to Rafał Lemkin, one of the most distinguished jurists in the interwar period, the woman's "battle is double: for national and societal-feministic equalization".[34]

Under this premise, birth control was seen as the main tool for the making of a modern Jewish family. In an article in June 1928, *Ewa* asked (rhetorically) whether it was a national duty, and stated that birth control should be adapted to a family's economic, social and hygienic conditions. It also pointed out that Western societies were more advanced,[35] showing that they (especially Germany) were the point of reference and that birth control was a common practice in "all cultural nations".[36] *Ewa* thus concluded that having a large number of children was the result of a lack of (sex) education. This leads to the inference that *Ewa* not only saw sex education as important to avoid unwanted pregnancies, but also as a core part of "being cultured", since "a responsible cultured person must decide in favor of limiting offspring".[37]

Ewa's plea for sex education to prevent pregnancy was modified and combined with neo-Malthusian and eugenic arguments. One example of such an article was published by Melcerowa in April 1928. Since she supported Jewish orphanages and was familiar with poverty's consequences for Jewish family life, she argued that too many births threatened the health of the mother and of the new baby. Hence, she concluded that only as many children should be born as the parents wanted (and could afford). However, Melcerowa was aware that the majority of Jews in Poland lived in precarious conditions and that abortion by gynecologists could only be afforded by wealthy women. Therefore, "even the strictest religious prohibitions, threats and punishments from the legislature can prevent women from intervening in an unwanted pregnancy. […] Such a heroic act can [ultimately] only be performed by a wealthy woman".[38] "Heroic act" implies a performance that goes beyond the individual and thus leads to the conclusion that Melcerowa also valued abortion as a deed that benefits the community. Her contribution thus exemplifies how activists-writers were well aware of the challenges and impact of the debates on birth control for Jewish

34 Ewa 4 March 1928.
35 Ewa 17 June 1928.
36 Ibid.
37 Ewa.
38 Ewa 22 April 1928.

women and could help to redefine Jewish women's consciousness with regard to the concepts of family and nation.

Conclusion

Contemporary debates on birth control reflected prevailing social and economic problems and processes, changing values in all national groups, and, as Katrin Steffen pointed out, difference too.[39] If Poland during the interwar period as a whole can be seen as a laboratory for the development of Jewish life in the modern era, the Polish-Jewish women's magazine *Ewa* contributed to it in a special way.[40] The example of *Ewa* shows that the discourses associated with family planning or the individual right to self-determined birth control were perceived transnationally. *Ewa* incorporated a Zionist orientation which stood up for bearing fewer but more healthy offspring for the benefit of the Jewish nation. The modern Jewish family should be healthy and prosperous, by being "cultured" and adopting a sophisticated approach to family planning. *Ewa* thus provided discussion of the challenges and tensions within a society which had only just begun to transform. Although *Ewa's* position was "Jewish-Zionist", its stance is ultimately analogous to contemporary debates in Christian societies: birth control was no longer understood as a private and (in the case of the Jewish family) a religious matter, but it concerned now the future well-being and strength of the nation. Although most of the arguments were similar in different societies, *Ewa's* were "tailored" to the respective needs of Jews and rendered appropriate for national (Zionist) identification. Consequently, the discourses on "conscious motherhood" could be characterized as the epitome of more general problems that also affected Jewish life in Poland. In line with Polish-Jewish attitudes that followed a specific interpretation and variation of Zionism, *Ewa* propagated the need to promote the prosperity and strength of the Jewish nation through "conscious motherhood". In doing so, it contributed to the emerging shape of the modern family image among the Polish Jewry of the interwar period.

39 Steffen, Polishness 2018.

40 Kassow, Jewish Street, 2014.

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