



# On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War

*Bernard Wasserstein*

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***On the Eve* is the portrait of a world on the eve of its destruction. Bernard Wasserstein's original and provocative book presents a new and disturbing interpretation of the collapse of European Jewish civilization even before the Nazi onslaught.**

*On the Eve* is the portrait of a world on the brink of annihilation. In this provocative book, Bernard Wasserstein presents a new and disturbing interpretation of the collapse of European Jewish civilization even before the Nazi onslaught.

In the 1930s, as Europe spiraled toward the Second World War, the continent's Jews faced an existential crisis. The harsh realities of the age—anti-Semitic persecution, economic discrimination, and an ominous climate of violence—devastated Jewish communities and shattered the lives of individuals.

The Jewish crisis was as much the result of internal decay as of external attack. Demographic collapse, social disintegration, and cultural dissolution were all taking their toll. The problem was not just Nazism: In the summer of 1939 more Jews were behind barbed wire outside the Third Reich than within it, and not only in police states but even in the liberal democracies of the West. The greater part of Europe was being transformed into a giant concentration

camp for Jews. Unlike most previous accounts, *On the Eve* focuses not on the anti-Semites but on the Jews. Wasserstein refutes the common misconception that they were unaware of the gathering forces of their enemies. He demonstrates that there was a growing and widespread recognition among Jews that they stood on the edge of an abyss.

*On the Eve* recaptures the agonizing sorrows and the effervescent cultural glories of this last phase in the history of the European Jews. It explores their hopes, anxieties, and ambitions, their family ties, social relations, and intellectual creativity—everything that made life meaningful and bearable for them.

Wasserstein introduces a diverse array of characters: holy men and hucksters, beggars and bankers, politicians and poets, housewives and harlots, and, in an especially poignant chapter, children without a future. The geographical range also is vast: from Vilna (the "Jerusalem of the North") to Amsterdam, Vienna, Warsaw, and Paris, from the Judeo-Espagnol-speaking stevedores of Salonica to the Yiddish-language collective farms of Soviet Ukraine and Crimea.

Wasserstein's aim is to "breathe life into dry bones." Based on comprehensive research, rendered with compassion and empathy, and brought alive by telling anecdotes and dry wit, *On the Eve* offers a vivid and enlightening picture of the European Jews in their final hour.

## On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War Details

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Bernard Wasserstein**

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# From Reader Review On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War for online ebook

## Ruth Rolle says

I think it helps if you're Jewish - check.  
Living in Europe - check.

It's a very intense book, as it should be.

It's not a book for the casual reader, but even if you're as well-versed in the events leading up to the Shoah (as I've tried to be), there are plenty of surprises.

The sheer weight and detail of information - not just about the great & good, but also about the average Jew on the strasse, is like being smacked over the head.

This book tells you about individuals and the difference those individuals made.  
And the gap in European society which was left, after they were murdered.

Imagine the US without Afro-Americans.  
Approximately 10% of Poland's population was Jewish.  
Approximately 12% of the US population is Afro-American.  
Check it out here if you don't believe me:  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html>my link text  
After I read it, I felt the gap in Europe, without the Jews that should have been there.  
And I felt an ache that will always be in my *nefesh* .

Someone on an English messageboard, suggested that European Jews would have assimilated themselves out of existence.

There's no answer to that - except that I doubt it.  
But I can't face getting into an alternate history, about a subject which is so close to me.

Anyway, if you're Jewish and reading this, Chag sameach.  
If you celebrating Easter - enjoy your festival.

Thank you for reading this .

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## Patrick Cook says

Thorough without sacrificing readability.

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## Stacie says

This book is an amazingly multi-dimensional historical treat. Wasserstein is not only masterful in detailing the complexities between various countries, populations and political movements, he simultaneously personalizes events by referencing individual situations. It is a powerful format.

Wasserstein also sees the historical and social relevance of including overlooked areas, like cinema, theatre, linguistics, business and education. This book sets a new bar for other historical works. I cannot wait to read it again.

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## **Lewis Weinstein says**

... the Jews of Europe tried to confront the threats facing them ... they tried to leave but emigration exits were blocked ... they tried persuasion, but few listened ... politically they were weightless ... any hints of violent resistance were met with overwhelming force ... they were wholly defenseless, largely friendless, and more and more hopeless ... in the end, the European Jews waited for the barbarians

This is a sad book, describing in great detail the struggle of European Jews to come to grips with a fate they proved unable to avoid.

Here are some items among the many that stood out to me ...

\*\*\* German Jews (under Weimar) looked forward to the consolidation of more than a century of progress toward legal equality and social acceptance

\*\*\* the British 1939 White Paper on Palestine ... Jewish immigration to be limited to 75,000 over the next 5 years ... Jewish land purchases prohibited or severely restricted in large areas of Palestine ... creation of state that would be neither wholly Jewish nor wholly Arab ... marked the end of the Anglo-Zionist alliance ... regarded by Zionists as a betrayal in their darkest hour ... enforced rigorously ... after promising to support the creation of a Jewish homeland, the British cravenly reneged.

\*\*\* Jewish politics in the 1930s was a quest for self-respect in a world where the word Jew was to many an insult and degradation

\*\*\* Zionists organized farm training schools in Germany and elsewhere to prepare young men and women for a life in Palestine ... German government encouraged this in hopes of stimulating Jewish emigration ... by 1938, 20 farms were training more than 5000 in Germany

\*\*\* in 1938, Marc Chagall painted the White Crucifixion in which a Jew, with a loincloth like a tallis, is martyred on the cross, while around him are scenes of pogrom, arson and sacrilege ... apparently this is now Pope Francis' favorite painting

\*\*\* antisemitism was a European-wide phenomenon in the interwar period ... causes: Christian indoctrination fused with nationalism, rural-urban antagonism, traditional superstition, propaganda ... the problem was not just Germany ... antisemitism almost everywhere on the European continent had risen to unprecedented heights ... a Europe-wide phenomenon of stigmatization, expropriation, extrusion and bloodshed ... Even before the outbreak of WWII, the Jew was treated as a subhuman, not only in those areas of Europe directly ruled by the Nazis, but over the greater part of the continent

\*\*\* foreign diplomats and journalists from the democracies reported on Kristallnacht in detail

\*\*\* 11 days after the Anschluss (1938), FDR called for an international conference to address the refugee crisis ... despite the urgency, it took 3 months to organize ... convened on July 6, 1938 at the French resort of Evian-les-Bains on Lake Geneva ... the conference created an Inter-Governmental Committee of Refugees to negotiate with Germany an orderly exodus of Jews from the Reich ... over the next year, the committee produced a mountain of memoranda but no effective action ... the British insisted that immigration to Palestine not be raised .. The U.S. maintained its existing quotas

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## **Lewis Weinstein says**

Another excellent resource ... among my many notes ...

... antisemitism was a European-wide phenomenon in the interwar period ... causes: Christian indoctrination fused with nationalism, rural-urban antagonism, traditional superstition, propaganda

... in Poland (and elsewhere in east-central Europe) ... a lack of strong institutions between the government and its citizens ... except for the army and church ... both hostile to Jews

... the observance of orthodox Judaism began to fray in interwar Poland ... Shabbos observance was no longer universal ... plays were scheduled (and attended) on Shabbos or holidays ... a profound change

... Marc Chagall ... designed sets for Yiddish theater ... in 1935 visited Vilna to attend a conference of YIVO ... met Yiddish poets and drew the Great Synagogue ...

... Dr. Viktor Kellner ... Chajes school ... last graduation ceremony in 1938 ... Kellner: "I don't know what the future holds for you, But I can assure you of one thing. The world will hear the Shema Yisroel longer than Heil Hitler."

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## **Rosalyn says**

There are many great reviews on this site for "On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before The Second World War." Like the majority of review writers, I recommend this book to those who wish to understand the Holocaust, and how a people across so many nations became the target and victims of the anti-Semitism, malice and inhumanity of Nazism on such a scale.

I note that some reviewers question the need for the author to present such a "dry and dusty" tome. The very subject matter of the book compels Bernard Wasserstein to present the facts and figures as he found them in his amazing research.

However if one wishes to understand the effects of the Nazi regime on a single community of people, then I recommend, "There Once Was A World - A 900 year Chronicle of the Shtetl Of Eishyshok" by Yaffa Eliach. Indeed I would like to see these two books being presented as companion reading material for all serious

students of Jewish History.

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### **cameron says**

A finely written and unique take on the fate of the Jews in WW2. The very title, knowing the history, gave me chills the minute I picked it up. Many of the chapters describe life for many Jews years before the war and the incredulity of many German Jews that their government could actually want them tortured and dead. I imagined how hard it would be for me to believe the same from my own country's officials. "This will pass....we can survive this....politics will change....we have friends and neighbors who will never let this happen". I would believe it too. This is an important and revealing book.

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### **Socraticgadfly says**

Fascinating, tragic story about the history and culture of Jews across Europe in the interwar era. Due to numbers, much of the book focused on the prewar Tsarist Pale of Settlement.

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### **Lorri says**

On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War, by Bernard Wasserstein, is a compelling and intense study of the European Jews before their massive obliteration during World War II.

The non-fictional account spans every corner of Jewry, from the basic beggar to the wealthy, from the Orthodox to the non-practicing, from the intermarriages to the pure marriages, and from the varied social structures, both eastern and western. Jews are defined in every aspect, and defined in every location in Europe and Eastern Europe.

Ignorance is presented to be otherwise, according to Wasserstein's extensive research and documentation. Many Jews did have an inkling as to what was occurring under their noses. They did understand the seriousness of the events unfolding in the social stratum of their lives.

But, understanding and removing one's self from precarious and dangerous situations are not necessarily possible. Social structures, religious beliefs, family ties, homelands, separations, financial aspects, and the forces imposed on the Jews by the Nazis don't always allow for escape. The influences were more than immense.

Wasserstein is brilliant in depicting the lives of the Jews, their family ties, friendships, joys, lows, fears, and all of their daily living arrangements. The revelations are intense and filled with sorrow and, yet, a sense of meaningfulness and purpose of life unfolds within the pages.

You may ask "Why". But, before you do, try to consider the adverse and horrific situations thrust on the Jews. Try to analyze things with an open mind, not rose-colored lenses. It is not as simple as many try to make it. Knowing and leaving are two different issues. Knowing doesn't necessarily give you the tools to move forward. In fact, knowing can make it more difficult for a person. They might choose to deal with it by suppressing their knowledge, and by trying to live life with what they have and with what is not foreign to

them.

No stone is left unturned within the harrowing accounts presented by Wasserstein in *On the Eve*. It is almost 500 pages long, and not an easy read. Yet, the impressions, presentations and word visuals are told with sensitivity to the situations and even with a bit of humor here and there. He is not harsh toward the Jews in his revelations, but, in my opinion, tries to state the truth, the facts, with clarifying seriousness. He writes with an awareness of others, and his responses reflect prose that demonstrates his insight. The historical factor is incredible, and opened this reader's eyes to varying degrees on the perspectives focused on.

Wasserstein is brilliant in his prose, his magnificent rendering of the European Jews is masterful in so many aspects. We, who have had ancestors from Europe will gain insight into the mindsets of those who encountered the horrific events of pre World War II and the Holocaust. The book is a work of humaneness and a work of art. It is a work of historical necessity.

I highly recommend *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War*, by Bernard Wasserstein to every one. I feel it belongs in every library, whether public, university, high school or personal library. It is a book with extreme historical value.

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### **Nancy Stringer says**

Bernard Wasserstein's evocative account of Jewish life before the second world war is nothing less than a marvel. Nothing escapes his gaze, from folk songs and nursery rhymes to mental asylums, classical concerts, youth groups and birth control. As he shows, Jewish society had a cultural richness and diversity to match any in Europe.

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### **Laura Daly says**

Well researched informative sad and a reminder.

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### **Daniel1974nlgmail.com says**

Gives a good description of the period between the 2 World Wars and the situation of the European Jews. It, not only gives many examples of the high cultural contributions made by Jews, the condition and status of the Jewish communities in many different countries in that time, but also of its decline. A decline that does not seem to have been initiated by the Nazi's but rather speeded up as in many countries, long before the Nazi's came to power, Anti-Semitism was already a rife problem. What I liked about this book is that it was written from the Jewish side rather than from the German or Nazi side. Most of the information, details, and descriptions presented in this book are also discussed in other works about the rise of the Third Reich, the Holocaust, etc. Usually in this works the topic of this book are integrated and part of a bigger whole. As such, I found it illuminating that this book was only about the fate of the European Jews.

The book, though very detailed and scholarly is very well written and reads very easy. Though I have to say that I started it, put it away for a while and then completed in a few days. Recommended for people interested in Jewish History, the Interbellum, WW2, the Holocaust, Nazi Germany, etc.



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## Jan Peczkis says

### **Interwar Danzig (Gdansk) Jews Backed Nazi Germany Against Poland. The Much-Criticized Polish Cardinal August Hlond (1936) Was Very Right About Jewish Atheism**

The Jewish communities of both eastern and western Europe underwent many changes in the decades leading up to WWII, but the Holocaust has overshadowed them. Wasserstein helps the reader understand what the Jewish communities were like.

This work features an assortment of seldom-mentioned information. Thus, historian Emmanuel Ringelblum was a member of Poalei Zion Left. (p. 61). There was significant Jew-on-Jew violence in Poland, notably that caused by political disagreements. (p. 77). Benjamin Mond, though converted to Christianity, was the only Jewish general in the Polish Army. (p. 201). Quite a few Italian Jews had been Fascists (p. 384) and, until 1938, Jews were welcome in Italy's fascist youth movement. (p. 331).

#### **JEWS AND THE EARLY NAZI MOVEMENT**

In his section on Jewish Nazis (pp. 216-217), Wasserstein describes German Jews who were perfectly comfortable with the chauvinistic premises of Nazism, without of course its anti-Semitism (excepting the vehement hostility to the Ostjuden). This included Max Naumann, who argued unsuccessfully that Jews were in fact part of the German VOLK. His organization, VERBAND NATIONALDETSCHER JUDEN, once had a membership of 3,500 mostly Berlin-area Jews. Hans Joachim Schoeps led a similar movement, the DEUTSCHER VORTRUP.

#### **JEWISH DISLOYALTY TO POLAND: WHY JEWS COMMONLY BACKED POLAND'S ENEMIES**

The author alludes to the tendency of Jews to identify with the stronger, (quote) A telling sign of the acculturation of Jews in the Soviet Union was the fact that Jews preferred to acculturate to Russian rather than to the majority languages of union republics such as Ukrainian or Byelorussian. In this, they followed the practice of Jews throughout history, from Byzantium to the Habsburg dominions to British India, who had found it wiser to adopt the language of the imperial power than that of their colonized neighbors. (unquote). (p. 233). Although Wasserstein does not mention this, it illuminates the fact that, a century earlier, erstwhile Polish Jews had tended to identify with the Partitioning powers rather than the restoration of Poland (as manifested, for instance, by the Litvak (Litwak) problem and the ensuing Endek reaction against Jews.)

#### **WHEN JEWS ACTIVELY SIDED WITH NAZIS**

More recently, between WWI and WWII, (quote) The mainly German-speaking Jews of Danzig [Gdansk] had always supported German as against Polish interests there. But that availed them nothing after 1933. (unquote). (p. 420).

#### **JEWISH SEPARATISM IN PRE-WWII POLAND**

Wasserstein points out that Poland's pre-WWII Jews lived in self-imposed apartheid (my term), "...Polish Jews were to a considerable degree isolated from the rest of the population, religiously, socioeconomically,

and politically. They had their own residential areas, political parties, newspapers, theaters, labor unions, and professional organizations, often operating in their own language, Yiddish. Together these formed the scaffolding of a largely self-contained world within which it was possible, if one chose, to live almost without venturing into broader society." (p. 7). Even on the eve of WWII, at the time of the ghetto benches, social contacts between Poles and Jews were commonly minimal. (p. 330).

The Agudas Yisroel [Agudat Yisrael], an Orthodox Jewish political party in pre-WWII Poland that eschewed Jews as a nationality, and limited its politics to religious matters. Some commentators have contended that its Pole-conciliatory manner was no more fruitful than the separatist and confrontational approach of other Jewish political parties. Wasserstein, in contrast, implicitly disagrees, and provides examples of concessions that it got from the Polish government. (p. 55).

## UNDERSTANDING POLISH CARDINAL HLOND'S MUCH-MALIGNED STATEMENT ABOUT JEWS

In countless works, including this one (p. 31), Polish Cardinal August Hlond is censured for his 1936 sermon in which he characterized Jews (though admittedly not all Jews) as: Freethinkers, vanguards of Bolshevism, purveyors of white slavery (prostitution), and an overall bad influence on the morals of youth. Although this book is not about Cardinal Hlond, it raises many issues that enable to reader to see where Hlond was coming from. Each of these issues is considered, in turn, in successive paragraphs.

Consider Jewish freethought. To begin with, Jewish religiosity declined, and, when practiced, often owed less to religious conviction than culture. (p. 85). Jewish entertainment, sports, and commerce, to the chagrin of devout Jews, commonly took place on the Sabbath. (pp. 86-87; 126). In addition, (quote) The decade after 1914 therefore led to a sense of crisis in east European orthodoxy. Not only orthodox leaders but ordinary Jews with no axe to grind saw religion as in rapid retreat. 'The only ones who pray are the middle class, the poor, and the aged' wrote an observer in Lodz in 1928. (unquote). (p. 126). In Poland, the Agudists sometimes obtained covert government support for blocking antireligious Jews from the electoral lists of local elections. (p. 77). The mainstream Bund played a significant role in the atheization of Poland's Jews. Its Warsaw newspaper, FOLKS-TSAYTUNG often appeared with slogans such as "Down with clericalism." (p. 250). The Bund-sponsored TSYSHO, the third largest Jewish school system in Poland, obstinately refused to offer any form of religious instruction, and even eschewed teaching the Bible and Talmud. (p. 323).

The political aspects of the Zydokomuna (Bolshevized Judaism) in Poland have commonly but incorrectly been marginalized as a phenomenon of the fringes of Judaism, and only membership in the Communist Party itself. In actuality, Jewish Communists [who, in any case, remained Jews] had varying degrees of affiliations with Judaism. (p. 63). Not only the CP itself (to say nothing of its several-fold outnumbering fellow travelers), but also mainstream Jewish political parties were infected with Communism to a significant extent. Among Zionists, the Left Poalei Zion joined the Comintern, and, according to Wasserstein, walked a fine line between Communism and democratic socialism. (p. 59). (The Jewish youth movement, Hashomer Hatsair [Hatzair] was, in Wasserstein's words, Marxist-Zionist). (p. 317, 332). As for the anti-Zionist Bund, the author comments, (quote) Rejecting integration into the Polish Socialist Party, the Bund sought cultural autonomy for the Jews in Poland, and in particular, separate schools and the right to use Yiddish in official business. (unquote)(p. 69). Considering the large size of the Bund, it is astonishing to learn that, in the 1930's, fully 40% of the membership of the Bund, in the words of Wasserstein, "was in constant danger of being sliced off by the Communists." (p. 70).

As for prostitution, official figures showed Polish Jews underrepresented as prostitutes (p. 169), but strongly over-represented as pimps (p. 176), the latter of whom even had their own Jewish argot. (pp. 241-242). However, owing to the unregistered and clandestine nature of this vice, official Polish figures likely

understated the problem. (p. 169). Internationally organized pimping and prostitution involving Jews was serious, as evidenced by the international conferences attempting to deal with "the danger represented by Jewish prostitution." (p. 169, 472).

Other factors that may have prompted Hlond to see Jews as a bad moral influence on Polish youth may have included the rapidly increasing Jewish divorce rate (p. 156), then virtually unknown among Poles. In addition, many of the luftmenshn ("men living on air"--Jews lacking a definite occupation) included idlers, charlatans, smugglers, denizens of the criminal underworld, tramps, etc. (p. 171). According to Polish criminal records, Jews outnumbered non-Jews in fraud, vagabondage, avoidance of military service, etc. (p. 176).

## JEWISH PARALLELS TO CARDINAL HLOND'S ATTITUDES ABOUT JEWISH ATHEISM

Finally, Cardinal Hlond's moralisms fit the context of his times, which included comparable ones among Jews. Hafets Hayim, the revered Torah sage, decried the emigration of Jews to the USA, which he called "a den of modern iniquities." (p. 127). Rebbe Hayim Eleazar Shapira, even after visiting Palestine, denounced Zionism as Satanic. (p. 130). Shapira also denounced admixtures of secular learning in Jewish schools, citing the "defiling of children's minds and hearts with foolishness that leads to levity and heresy." (p. 56). Rabbi M. Rabinowitz of Szydlow, writing on behalf of parents and the Jewish community, requested assistance from the Polish authorities in dealing with "the impudence of the young" and the "corruption of the youth" by Hehalutz (Labor Zionist Movement)(p. 331, 485).

Nor were such attitudes limited to "backwards" eastern Europe. A 1936 Belgian Agudist publication excoriated the custom of young Jews moving to the big cities, as this allows "their lowest instincts to dominate them" and to "throw away their few years of youth on the momentary gleam of over-extended `pleasure'". (p. 88). Many Orthodox Jews, including in Germany, the birthplace of Reform Judaism, opposed all but the most superficial manifestations of modernity. (pp. 128-129).

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## Plonys says

Informative survey, but little narrative pull and somewhat disjointed. Many fascinating details and anecdotes about intracommunal affairs (e.g. the clash between the Munkatsch and Belzer rebbes; circulation trends for Yiddish newspapers; the growth of the Birobidzhan autonomous region, and many more).

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## Matthew Griffiths says

This made for an interesting read on the realities of Jewish Europe prior to the Second World War. It certainly achieved what it set out to do, of this there can be no doubt although for me personally the format left something to be desired. The book focusses on several key areas in Europe with major Jewish populations and for me a better format could have been achieved if the author had focussed on each area in turn and examined the area in its entirety before moving on to another rather than jumping between the areas discussed and splitting the content according to topic. This was certainly worth a read for anyone interested in Jewish history but the format made what was otherwise an excellent work feel quite disjointed at times.

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