To Be A Jewish Teenager in Poland

Overview:
What did it mean to be a Jewish teenager in Poland in the 1930s? Despite the stereotypical view that all Jews in Eastern Europe looked like characters out of "Fiddler on the Roof," there was a much wider variety of experience. Polish Jewish society included Hasidic Jews, non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews, Hebrew-speaking Zionists, Yiddish-speaking Jewish socialists, and Polish-speaking "acculturated" Jews, as well as many other shades of lifestyle and viewpoint. There were newspapers, schools, and youth groups associated with each of these sectors of society. What was it like to be a teenager growing up in that world?

Grade Level:
Middle School to High School—Jewish Day Schools

Goals:
Students will explore the world of Jewish teenagers living in Poland in the 1930s.

Learning Objectives:
Students will:
- learn about pre-Holocaust Polish Jewish society through the political culture of teenagers of that era.
- gain an understanding of the diversity of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before World War II.
- have the opportunity to draw cross-cultural comparisons between their own milieu and that of a peer group living in another country and era.

Suggested Time Frame:
Two 45-minute class periods with optional additional time for presentation of extension projects.

Learning Activities:

#1
Read the PowerPoint presentation "To Be A Jewish Teenager in Poland" (online or as a printout) with the class and discuss.
SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS:

- What were some of the different Jewish youth movements in Poland in the 1930s?
- What were these teenagers responding to in the world they lived in? What visions of the future did each of their groups express?
- Did youth play a different role in Jewish life and society in general than they do today?
- Do you think that Jewish communities in North America are as diverse as Polish Jewish society was? What about American or Canadian society in general?
- Do today’s teenagers belong to larger clubs, movements, and groups that meet and have their own activities, songs, and dances? Would it be accurate to say that a gang, with its own colors, hand signals, slang, and so forth are a kind of social movement?

Extension Activities:

- Pretend you are a Jewish teenager living in Eastern Europe who belongs to one of the youth groups we have explored, and create a fictional identity for yourself. Make a PowerPoint presentation or write a report in which you describe a particular day in your life based on information from the Encyclopedia about schools, youth movements, particular cities, theater, etc.
- Select one of the following movements in the PowerPoint and write a research report. Discuss the movement’s ideology (world view), activities, and history. Does the movement still exist today in the form of political parties or other types of organizations?
  - Revisionist Zionism
  - Religious Zionism
  - Socialist Zionism
  - Jewish socialism
  - Agudas Yisroel (Agudath Israel)

Materials:

**PowerPoint presentation:** To Be a Jewish Teenager in Poland
**Handout:** Excerpts from Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust
Articles in the YIVO Encyclopedia Online:

- Agudas Yisroel
- Betar
- Beys Yankev
- Bund
- Gordonia
- Heder
- Maccabi Movement
- Minorities Treaties
- Mizrahi
- Morgnshtern
- Parties and Ideologies
- Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939
- Shomer, Ha-Tsa'ir, Ha
- Shtern
- Sport
- Tarbut
- Tse'i're Mizrahi
- Tseirey Agudas Yisroel
- Tsukunft
- TSYSHO
- Youth Movements
- Zionism and Zionist Parties

Maps in the YIVO Encyclopedia Online:

- Eastern Europe, 1923
- The Polish Republic in the Interwar Period, ca. 1930s