

Jewish History (2012) 26: 327–342
DOI: 10.1007/s10835-012-9163-5

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Jewish Students and Christian Corpses in Interwar Poland: Playing with the Language of Blood Libel

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Abstract This article focuses on the antisemitic discourse that surrounded the controversy over the provision of cadavers to medical departments in the Second Polish Republic. In the pages of the student press and at student rallies, activists argued that Jewish medical students should be barred from dissecting Christian corpses. They demanded that Jewish communities provide corpses for dissection on a regular basis as a condition for continued training of Jewish doctors. The discourse surrounding the cadaver affair combined nationalist language with religious vocabulary, suggesting that the affair was motivated as much by religious concerns as by nationalist ones. Drawing on notions of Jewish criminality and arrogance, allegations of a Jewish sense of religious superiority and disregard for Christian values, and fears of Jewish exploitation of Christians to fulfill their own collective needs, the cadaver affair played with concepts reminiscent of blood libel.

Keywords Antisemitism · Autopsy · Blood libel · Interwar Poland · Kraków · L'viv · Medical students · *Numerus clausus* · Vilnius · Warsaw

In November 1926, representatives of Catholic student organizations at Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (Wilno, Vilna) gathered at a mass rally inspired primarily by their ongoing conflict with Jewish students in the medical department. Addressing the problem of the shortage of cadavers—an indispensable resource for training future physicians—many speakers condemned Jews for failing to provide Jewish corpses on which students could perform dissection. Speaking on behalf of the academic youth association known as Renaissance (Odrodzenie), Bernard Rusiecki electrified the crowd by casting the issue in terms of the danger posed by Jews to Christian values. He argued that the absence of Jewish cadavers in the dissecting room exemplified Jewish arrogance and demonstrated the profound moral differences between Jews and Christians, and he advocated a firm response: “For us—Christians—a corpse represents the majesty of death. Let the Jews who have no respect for cadavers dissect Jewish cadavers. But hands off Christian cadavers! Christian corpses for the Christians! [*Chrześcijańskie trupy*

dla chrześcijan!]”¹ For this rallying cry, Rusiecki received a standing ovation from hundreds of students gathered in the prestigious assembly hall.

Renaissance and other like-minded student organizations proceeded to step up their pressure on university authorities for an official solution to the so-called cadaver affair, or *afera trupia*.² They framed their request as fair and rational, demanding that Jewish communities must supply cadavers for Jewish medical students to dissect if those students wished to continue their training. Indeed, medical departments complained of the lack of cadavers, which hindered instruction of future physicians in descriptive anatomy. Academic authorities appealed to representatives of local administrations and to hospital boards for help in obtaining corpses for their institutes of anatomy.³ By Polish law at that time, corpses of individuals of all faiths that were not claimed by family members within forty-eight hours of officially being pronounced dead could be transferred to university clinics for use in medical training or research.⁴ However, *halakha*, Jewish religious law, required that Jewish dead be buried undisturbed and regarded dissections and autopsies as desecration.⁵ Therefore, the stipulation that Jewish communities must provide a number of corpses proportionate to the number of Jewish medical students meant in practice that many Jewish students would be excluded from

¹“Protokół wiecu ogólniakademickiego młodzieży polskiej w dniu 12 listopada 1926 r. w Auli Śniadeckich” [Protocol of the general rally of Polish academic youth on November 12, 1926, in Śniadeckich Auditorium], Lietuvos Valstybes Istorijos Archyvas (henceforth LCVA; Lithuanian Central State Archives), F. 175, Ap. 1 I A, B. 171, 13–19, quote on 16.

²According to Ronald Modras, Renaissance was “the one Catholic organization that could be regarded as actively opposing the anti-Semitic nationalism of Endecja.” *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland 1933–1939* (Amsterdam, 1994), 387. However, neither all local branches of Renaissance nor all its activists opposed antisemitic rhetoric.

³See letters from academic authorities in 1936 requesting the assistance of local hospitals and representatives of local administrations in Warsaw, Kraków, L’viv, and Vilnius in Archiwum Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego (henceforth AUJ; Archives of Jagiellonian University), WL II 142, Katedra i zakład anatomii opisowej, Zwłoki ludzkie dla prosektorium. According to Aleksander Rosner of Jagiellonian University, the critical shortage of cadavers was a result of “increased concern of the family with the funeral” and the improved standard of living of the general population in villages. See his secret letter to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education, April 11, 1929, in *ibid.*

⁴Minister of Public Health Witold Hodźko, circular to all *voivodes* (provincial governors), January 29, 1923, no. 5222/23, in AUJ, S II 674, Żydzi studenci na UJ, 655. See also circular from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to *voivodes* in Warsaw, Kraków, L’viv, and Vilnius and to the Commissar of the City of Warsaw, September 5, 1930, Z.H. 3169/30, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 146–47.

⁵*Encyklopedia hilchatit refuit: Ha-rofe, ha-hole ve’ha-refua*, ed. Abraham Steinberg (Jerusalem, 1996), s.v. “nituhei metim.” See also Edward Reichman, “From Maimonides the Physician to the Physician at Maimonides Medical Center: A Brief Glimpse into the History of the Jewish Medical Student throughout the Ages,” *Verapo Yerape: The Journal of Torah and Medicine of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine Synagogue and RIETS* 3 (2011): 1–25.

medical instruction or forced out of medical training programs, a result that would have fit in well with the goals of many right-wing student organizations and political parties in the Second Polish Republic.⁶

Historians of Polish-Jewish relations have typically portrayed the cadaver affair in interwar Poland, and especially the hard-line position, as a case of “practical antisemitism,” a convenient ruse designed effectively to bar Jews from medical departments at Polish universities.⁷ However, analysis of the discourse surrounding the controversy suggests that there was far more at issue than merely the balance of national and cultural hegemony within the nation’s academic and medical establishments. Indeed, this single, foreseeable conflict over a restriction that Jewish law imposed on Jews inspired right-wing Polish students, journalists, and ideologues to portray Jews not only as a menace to the country’s political, economic, and cultural interests but also as a moral threat to Christians in general.⁸ As part of their perceived struggle, the students who defined themselves interchangeably as “Christian” and “Polish” sought to prevent any exposure of “Christian corpses” to Jewish medical students.

The discourse provoked by the cadaver affair may even reveal affinities with the rhetoric of the “blood libel,” a term given collectively to accusations that Jewish rituals made use of blood from Christian victims.⁹ Granted, Jews

⁶See calls for *numerus clausus* (policies imposing quotas on the admission of members of a group) and *numerus nullus* (policies denying admission to members of a group) in *Wytuczne w sprawach żydowskiej, mniejszości słowiańskich, niemieckiej, zasad polityki gospodarczej: Instrukcja wewnętrzna Oddziału Akademickiego OWP* (Warsaw, 1932), 5; Władysław Konopczyński, *Umarli mówią* (Poznań, 1929), 98–119. For the contemporary discussion against *numerus clausus* see Ryszard Ganszyniec, *Sprawa numerus clausus i zasadnicze jej znaczenie: Antysemityzm akademicki jako objaw antysemityzmu społecznego* (Warsaw, 1925).

⁷See Szymon Rudnicki, “From ‘numerus clausus’ to ‘numerus nullus,’” in *From Shtetl to Socialism: Studies from “Polin,”* ed. Antony Polonsky (London, 1993), 359–81; Agnieszka Graboń, *Problematyka żydowska na łamach prasy akademickiej w okresie międzywojennym* (Kraków, 2008), 163–67.

⁸For a general discussion of the Catholic press in the Second Polish Republic and its treatment of the Jews, see Ronald Modras, “The Catholic Press in Interwar Poland on the ‘Jewish Question’: Metaphor and the Developing Rhetoric of Exclusion,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 24, no. 1 (1994): 49–70; Anna Landau-Czajka, “The Jewish Question in Poland: Views Expressed in the Catholic Press between the Two World Wars,” *Polin* 11 (1998): 263–78; Dariusz Libionka, “Obcy, wrodzy, niebezpieczni: Obraz Żydów i ‘kwestii żydowskiej’ w prasie inteligencji katolickiej lat trzydziestych w Polsce,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 203 (2002): 318–38.

⁹On blood libel, see Cecil Roth, ed., *The Ritual Murder Libel and the Jew: The Report by Cardinal Lorenzo Ganganelli (Pope Clement XIV)* (London, 1935); Hillel J. Kieval, “Representation and Knowledge in Medieval and Modern Accounts of Jewish Ritual Murder,” *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s., 1, no. 1 (1994): 52–72, and “Death and the Nation: Ritual Murder as Political Discourse in the Czech Lands,” *Jewish History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 75–91, and “The

in the cadaver affair were not accused of drawing blood from Christian victims in order to reenact the crucifixion, or held responsible for the deaths of those who were brought into the dissecting rooms, yet the widespread Polish attitude appears to have been that the Jewish community profited from dead Christians by training its doctors at the expense of Christian bodies. A further inference for many appears to have been that Jewish medical students and Jews in general derived an undue sense of religious superiority from these denominationally biased dissections, a condition that was perceived to endanger Christian dignity. Thus, wielding the example of the allegedly nefarious activities of Jewish medical students, Polish activists were inspired by economic and social competition. Stirred by the rallying cry “Christian corpses for the Christians!” they combined modern racial science with traditional prejudicial attitudes to argue in essence that any contact between Jews and non-Jews was dangerous, even after death.

Background

In the Second Polish Republic, controversy concerning the provision of Jewish cadavers for dissection appears to have erupted first in Vilnius. In 1921, Polish student activists demanded a contribution of “Jewish corpses” from the Jewish community proportionate to the number of Jewish medical students then attending the recently reopened Stefan Batory University. If the community refused to cooperate, the students threatened to block their Jewish colleagues from participating in anatomy lectures and laboratory classes. Christian student organizations and associations of Polish medical students in Warsaw, Kraków, and L’viv (Lwów, Lemberg) made the same demand and pressured Jewish students to take a hand in procuring Jewish corpses for dissection. These activist students charged that in the face of a persistent shortage of corpses, the Jewish community had unjustly managed to

Importance of Place: Comparative Aspects of the Ritual Murder Trial in Modern Central Europe,” in *Comparing Jewish Societies*, ed. Todd M. Endelman (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997), 135–65; Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York, 2002). On blood libel accusations and trials in Poland, see Mikhail Salman, “On the Question of the Origins and Frequency of Ritual Murder Trials in Poland,” *Journal of the Academic Proceedings of Soviet Jewry* 1, no. 1 (1986): 5–24; Zenon Guldon and Jacek Wijaczka, *Procesy o mordy rytualne w Polsce w XVI–XVIII wieku* (Kielce, 1995), and “The Accusation of Ritual Murder in Poland, 1500–1800,” *Polin* 10 (1997): 99–140; Hanna Węgrzynek, “Czarna legenda” Żydów: *Procesy o rzekome mordy rytualne w dawnej Polsce* (Warsaw, 1995); Magda Teter, *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Jolanta Żyndul, *Kłamstwo krwi: Legenda mordu rytualnego na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX w.* (Warsaw, 2011).

avoid sharing in the responsibility for providing specimens. As they characterized the matter, “Jewish corpses in the dissecting room were completely absent, although the percentage of Jewish students was significant.”¹⁰ Indeed, in the early 1920s roughly 30 percent of medical students at Polish universities were Jews, and in that context the Jewish proscription against interfering with Jewish corpses contributed to the perception of a double standard where dissection was concerned.¹¹

Medical students’ associations, with the support of local associations of Christian doctors and some university faculty members, pressured university rectors and senates to take a stand on the issue. In response to the combination of aggressive lobbying and frequent violent disruptions, both to lectures and to dissecting room procedures, the medical schools in Vilnius, L’viv, Warsaw, and Kraków considered distributing Christian and Jewish cadavers separately in order to preserve the peace and to allow students to complete their coursework. Moreover, Catholic charitable societies that were involved in donating cadavers of the poor who died under their care began stipulating that members of each religious group be allowed to dissect only corpses provided from their own communities.

Despite protests by Jewish medical students, medical associations, and community leaders, as well as the Jewish press, the segregation of both corpses and students had become a social reality in some medical colleges by the second half of the 1920s. In February 1924, the senate of Jan Kazimierz University in L’viv decided that Jewish students ought to use Jewish corpses in their training.¹² In Kraków, Jewish students for some time received corpses only after all the Christian students had been supplied with specimens.¹³ In December 1926, the academic senate of Warsaw University passed a regulation requiring that Jewish students use Jewish specimens for their work in the dissecting room. The senate decided that “students of the Mosaic Faith” would be allowed to participate in classes at the Institutes of Descriptive and Topographic Anatomy and Surgery only “to the extent possible” and “in accordance with the delivery of a Jewish contingent” of

¹⁰“Protokół wieceu ogólnoakademickiego młodzieży polskiej,” 13.

¹¹See Raphael Mahler, “Jews in Public Service and the Liberal Professions in Poland, 1918–39,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 4 (October 1944): 342–46.

¹²See letter from the dean of the medical department in L’viv to the medical department in Warsaw, December 29, 1926, L. 479 ex. 26/27, Archiwum Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego (henceforth AUW; Archives of Warsaw University), RP, WL 2, 56. The documents in the Warsaw University archives pertaining to the cadaver affair in the medical department were deemed “secret.”

¹³See letter from the medical department at Jagiellonian University to the dean of the medical department of Stefan Batory University, November 12, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 181.

corpses.¹⁴ On November 3, 1927, the medical department in Vilnius decided that cadavers were to be “divided proportionately among [medical] students of various denominations and nationalities.”¹⁵ The matter of Jewish corpses resurfaced regularly into the 1930s even after it was settled by individual departments and government agencies.¹⁶

Poles, Jews, and the University Campuses

The cadaver affair was part of a broader campaign in which Catholic media in Poland, with the help of journalists and authors of popular brochures, leaflets, and sermons, as well as the support of students’ associations and local chapters of the Association of Christian Physicians, lobbied for legal measures that would effectively bar Jews from the medical profession by blocking their access to university training.¹⁷ At this time, in fact, Polish universities became what Celia Heller has termed “hotbed[s] of Anti-Semitism,” with radical right-wing student groups implementing the partial or complete exclusion of Jewish youth from student associations and fraternity-run dormitories and

¹⁴The regulation was passed on December 17, 1926; see the copy in AUW, RP, WL 1, 41. The senate repeated the argument that Jews, by not providing corpses, were in practice privileged in the context of a general shortage of corpses. It expressed hope that the ministry would pass a law ordering the provision of corpses from all denominations.

¹⁵Jan Szmurło, dean of the medical department at Stefan Batory University, letter to the academic senate, November 3, 1927, *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Wydziału Lekarskiego 1927–1928*, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 187. The resolution was passed on the following day by the academic senate; see Michał Reicher, letter to Stanisław Pigoń, rector of Stefan Batory University, November 16, 1927, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 118–19.

¹⁶In the fall of 1936, the medical faculty at Jagiellonian University voted in favor of a resolution that “Christian students should be assigned work on Christian cadavers while Jewish students [should work] on Jewish cadavers.” See protocol dated October 23, 1936, l. 1792, in AUJ, WL II 72, *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Wydziału [Lekarskiego] z lat akademickich 1936/37–1938/39*. A year later, the medical department decided “to follow the decision made last year.” See “Sprawa odrabiania prac na żydowskich zwłokach bezpogrzebowych na III r. Ref. Prof. [Tadeusz] Rogalski,” September 24, 1937, l. 961, in *ibid.* On the response of the Jewish medical students and community activists, see Natalia Aleksun, “Christian Corpses for Christians! Dissecting the Anti-Semitism behind the Cadaver Affair of the Second Polish Republic,” *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 10 (2011): 1–17. The Jewish press also reported on the incidents at dissecting rooms: see, e.g., “Sprawa trupów żydowskich,” *Chwila*, January 27, 1924; “Echa zajęć w prosektorium: Deklaracja Centrali Żydowskich Stowarzyszeń Akademickich Środowiska Warszawskiego w sprawie ostatnich zajęć w Prosektorium,” *Nasz Przegląd*, March 15, 1930.

¹⁷See Anna Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu . . . Koncepcje rozwiązania kwestii żydowskiej w publicystyce polskiej lat 1933–1939* (Warsaw, 1998), 217.

campaigning successfully for the introduction of so-called ghetto benches designed to segregate Jewish students.¹⁸ Universities at this time also became sites of physical violence against Jews, and some key incidents took place in and around dissecting rooms—for example, on March 12, 1930, in Warsaw and on November 9–12, 1931, in Vilnius.¹⁹

Contemporary commentators and scholars of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second Polish Republic have, moreover, rightly described universities as spaces in which nationalists could test the popularity of their ideologies and recruit followers.²⁰ Medical colleges played a leading role in their struggle against the supposed Jewish overrepresentation at institutions of higher learning.²¹ Christian doctors' and students' associations and Catholic media, politicians, and medical school faculty decried the disproportionate numbers of Jews in medical schools. As a result of their efforts, medical schools were the first to adopt the policy of *numerus clausus* to limit the number of Jewish students.²² The demand that Jewish students refrain from participating in anatomy lectures unless their communities provided Jewish corpses could be

¹⁸See Celia Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews in Poland between the Two World Wars* (Detroit, 1994), 119.

¹⁹On March 12, 1930, for example, a crowd of students from Warsaw's institutions of higher education attacked Jews at the Institute of Anatomy. They dragged Jewish medical students out of the dissecting room, threw them down the stairs, and forced them out of the building. Several Jewish students suffered serious injuries as a result of the incident, which ended with an anti-Jewish rally. See Kazimierz Orzechowski, *Sprawozdanie z działalności Wydziału Lekarskiego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w roku akademickim 1929/30 (od 1 września 1929 do 31 maja 1930 r.)* (Warsaw, 1930), 13–15; and the unsigned report "Anti-Jewish Outrages in Poland," April 193[?], YIVO Archives, RG 348, f. 137. See also the reconstruction of the events in Vilnius by Aleksander Srebrakowski, "Sprawa Waclawskiego: Przyczynek do historii relacji polsko-żydowskich na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie," *Przegląd Wschodni* 9, no. 3 (2004): 575–601.

²⁰In a 1936 article, Stefan Czarnowski stressed the political use of antisemitic propaganda on Polish campuses; see "Zajścia antysemitki w szkołach wyższych," in *Polska lewica społeczna wobec oświaty w latach 1919–1939 (Wybór materiałów)*, ed. Bronisław Ługowski and Eugeniusz Rudziński (Warsaw, 1960), 342–44. According to Szymon Rudnicki, "A fundamental rallying cry of the nationalist youth, which it used to gain control at the universities, was the campaign against what it believed to be the excessively high level of young Jews entering higher education": "From 'numerus clausus' to 'numerus nullus,'" 360. See also Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction*, 119–25; Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935–1939* (Cincinnati, 1997), 71–80.

²¹J. Zański, "U progu nowego roku akademickiego na medycynie," *Akademik Polski* 9 (October 1930): 2.

²²On the policies of *numerus clausus* in interwar Poland, see Rudnicki, "From 'numerus clausus' to 'numerus nullus'"; Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, "paragraf aryjski": Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Warsaw, 1999); Srebrakowski, "Sprawa Waclawskiego."

seen as yet another attempt to limit the number of Jews completing medical studies.

With the expanding quota system the number of Jewish students at Polish universities, especially in the departments of law and medicine, diminished steadily. Until 1923, Jews could enroll at Polish universities with relative ease. In that year, however, medical departments began to impose unofficial *numerus clausus* limiting the number of new Jewish students. Although in the 1922–23 academic year Jewish students constituted more than 34 percent of all medical students, their proportion had decreased to 18.5 percent by the beginning of the 1930s.²³ The decline continued so precipitously that by the eve of the Second World War their numbers were “rapidly approaching the vanishing point.”²⁴

The Quota System and National Self-Defense

In promoting all these policies, right-wing student groups and their allies referred to arguments about Polish national self-defense and economic competition. The link between the cadaver affair and *numerus clausus* was, however, often tenuous. In fact, several medical departments had imposed *numerus clausus* on Jewish students prior to the affair.²⁵ Moreover, demands for Jewish cadavers were made even where the number of Jewish students enrolled in medical schools was insignificant, as in the case of the medical school at Poznań University.²⁶ In 1936, although the school had hardly any Jewish students, Dean Tadeusz Kurkiewicz warned the local Jewish community that Jews would no longer be accepted to the medical department unless the community “takes care of providing Jewish cadavers for the purpose of studying anatomy proportionately to the number of Jews attending the school

²³See Saul Langnas, *Żydzi a studja akademickie w Polsce w latach 1921–31 (Studjum Statystyczne)* (L'viv, 1933), 34–39.

²⁴Mahler, “Jews in Public Service,” 345. In 1938, no Jew was admitted to the medical or pharmacy departments in Kraków.

²⁵In the fall of 1917, the medical department at Jagiellonian University in Kraków decided to “continue giving preference to Poles ahead of students of Jewish nationality.” See protocol dated November 30, 1917, l. 809, in AUJ, WL II 68, Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Wydziału [Lekarskiego] z lat akademickich 1916/17–1920/21.

²⁶According to Langnas, in the 1930–31 academic year there were only twenty-nine Jewish students at Poznań University; they accounted for 0.7 % of the entire student body. That number would only be lower after 1935. See Langnas, *Żydzi a studja akademickie w Polsce*, 13, 34. See also Mahler, “Jews in Public Service.”

in Poznań and the percentage of cadavers necessary annually for the purposes of the Department of Anatomy.”²⁷

Despite the steadily declining numbers of Jewish students, right-wing student groups and their allies kept up the pressure through arguments that couched economic competition in Poland in terms of a Polish national need for moral self-defense. The 1926 Warsaw University senate resolution requiring the provision of Jewish corpses, for example, based its implicit claim to legitimacy in an appeal to the constitutional equality of all citizens, from which standpoint it was posited that “Jewish society ought to contribute to the possibility of medical studies equally to the Christians in the name of science.”²⁸ By refusing to acknowledge and act on this principle—that is, by sending its youth but not its corpses to medical schools—Jews, as many Christians perceived the matter, achieved a privileged or advantageous position. In November 1927, the medical department and the academic senate in Vilnius both accepted the same line of thinking when they ratified a motion that “all of the population, without regard to denomination—Christian, Jewish, Karaite, and Muslim—ought to provide cadavers to fulfill the needs of the Institute of Anatomy.”²⁹ The motion was never adopted in the form of an enforceable regulation, so it had little effect on Jewish participation at this particular institution. Nonetheless, the faculty of the department hoped that a legal ruling from the Ministry of Religious Affairs would be forthcoming to enforce their expressed position regarding cadavers.³⁰

Some student activists took the civic equality argument even further. Michał Willamowicz, who was active in the right-wing All-Polish Youth (*Młodzież Wszepolska*) in Vilnius, described the struggle for Jewish cadavers as part of the battle for equal rights on the part of Christian students: “The time has passed when Jews fought for equality of rights. Today they go into battle to gain advantage over us. It might seem paradoxical, but the struggle against the Jews is the battle for our equal rights.”³¹ Overall, students who

²⁷The statement was published with the following introduction: “We have recently received a letter from the dean of the medical school at Poznań University that should fill the heart of every medical student with joy. Therefore we take the liberty of publishing it in its entirety.” *Życie Medyczne* 2, no. 5 (February–March 1936): 1.

²⁸“Uchwała Senatu akademickiego w sprawie zwłok żydowskich” [Resolution of the academic senate with regard to Jewish cadavers], November 18, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 173.

²⁹LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 120. In practice, the senate hoped to rely on provisions of homeless corpses of all denominations. It also condemned violent incidents in the dissecting room and authorized the head of the institute to distribute specimens until official regulations were issued by the ministry.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 120–21.

³¹Michał Willamowicz, speech at student rally in Vilnius, November 12, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 1 I A, B. 171, 18.

demanded that their Jewish colleagues' access to the dissecting room be contingent on the provision of Jewish corpses relied on a variety of civic, political, economic, and racial arguments to demonstrate the justice of their cause. Predominantly, however, the claim that all sections of the population should contribute equally to the progress of science and to the training of future doctors was couched in terms of "fairness": students argued that "basic justice [*elementarna słuszość*] requires that equal rights match equal obligations" and that therefore Jewish corpses ought to be provided for the dissecting room to ensure the social equity of the Second Polish Republic.³²

Insult to Students' Religious Feelings

The language of the student rallies, petitions, and newspaper articles drew on what Helmut Walser Smith called the "anti-Semitic imagination," which relied on latent tropes going beyond—or in fact against—the program of emancipation of the Jews as equal citizens.³³ A student of medicine at Warsaw University, Jerzy Zański, admonished his colleagues to campaign for enforcing the provision of Jewish corpses as a nonpartisan matter, linked to their "deeply rooted Catholic separateness."³⁴ B. Jeziorski praised the struggle launched in the capital: "the quiet and peaceful Warsaw dissecting room has recently become the site of strenuous though bloodless struggle. Polish medical youth, indignant over the impudence of medic-Jews who zealously study anatomy on the bodies of Christians while recoiling from providing the cadavers of their co-religionists, decided to force them to do so."³⁵ Tadeusz Bielecki went even further. During a discussion in the Polish Parliament in March 1931, this activist of the All-Polish Youth and member of the National Club (*Klub Narodowy*) argued that in this conflict Christian students "have always, unanimously and without consideration for political convictions, acted against the Jews . . . who consciously . . . block the acquisition of Jewish cadavers."³⁶ Typically, this language of nationalist mobiliza-

³² W. Sawicki and [Heibert?], secretary and chairman of Polonia fraternity, letter to rector of Stefan Batory University, October 25, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 1 I A, B. 171, 34.

³³ Smith, *The Butcher's Tale*, 78.

³⁴ Zański, "U progu nowego roku akademickiego."

³⁵ B. Jeziorski, "Zatarg o trupy żydowskie," *Awangarda* 6, no. 1 (February 1927): 10. *Awangarda* was the academic organ of the radical right-wing Academic Union of All-Polish Youth (*Związek Akademicki Młodzieży Wszechpolskiej*) and had appeared previously under the title of *Akademik*.

³⁶ *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 23 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej z dnia 16 i 17 marca 1931* (RP II/1/23), 164, in *Biblioteka Sejmowa, Parlamentaria z okresu II RP* (ARS01), *Sprawozdania stenograficzne sejmu 1922–1939*.

tion evoked traditional stereotypes. Speakers at student rallies and commentators in right-wing publications reminded Polish students of the fundamental moral inferiority of the Jewish religion, suggesting that other considerations, including stereotypical religious characteristics, played a significant role in the affair.

Articles in the right-wing student press complained of “perfidious Jewish quibbles” (perfidne wykrety żydowskie) that prevented a peaceful solution to the conflict in the dissecting room. While “Jews whined loudly, complaining that they had been (as usual) wronged,” they were themselves the assailants that Polish youth and at least some members of the faculty tried to oppose.³⁷ Thus the struggle to ban Jews from dissecting Christian corpses was an act of self-defense, a moral and national obligation of the medical youth striving to “protect Polishness every step of the way.”³⁸ The right-wing Polish academic press portrayed the Jews—especially Jewish community leaders—as knowingly exploiting Christians in refusing to forgo religious rituals for the bodies of their own dead. As one activist from L’viv noted in 1923, “Jewish youth study almost entirely on Christian corpses, and the Jewish community [*kahał żydowski*] shows an astounding caution in this respect. This saving of Jewish corpses at the expense of Christian ones continues and is the cause of a just bitterness among Polish students.”³⁹ To support their cause, these students employed arguments based on notions of self-defense of Christians against Jews. As representatives of the National Union of Polish Academic Youth argued, “the lack of cooperation on the part of Jewish society in providing corpses to dissecting rooms constitutes an insult to the religious feelings of all Christian students and causes harmful disruption to the course of academic medical training.”⁴⁰ Gentile students argued that by placing the responsibility on the Christian community to supply specimens for autopsies, the Jews were implying a false sense of religious superiority. For example, following the protest rally in Vilnius, medical students signed a resolution stating that the lack of Jewish corpses “gives rise to an impression—insulting to Christian religious feelings—that only Christian corpses can be used in the dissecting room.”⁴¹

Following the outbreak of violence at Warsaw University on March 12, 1930, the dean of the medical school, Kazimierz Orzechowski (1878–1942),

³⁷B. Jeziorski, “Zatarg o trupy żydowskie,” 10. The author also suggested that the Jews might file a complaint with the League of Nations.

³⁸Medyk, “W Kole Medyków,” *Akademik Polski* 3, no. 1 (January 1930): 6.

³⁹“Środowisko żydowskie: Walne zebranie ‘Wzajemnej Pom[ocy] Medyków’ w sprawie żydowskiej,” *Akademik* 2, no. 4 (1923): 82.

⁴⁰See the conclusions of the General Convention of Polish Academic Youth (*Zjazd Ogólny Polskiej Młodzieży Akademickiej*) in Poznań, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 1 I A, B. 171, 79.

⁴¹See “Protokół wiecu ogólnoakademickiego młodzieży polskiej,” 14.

bemoaned “the highly unpleasant incidents [*zajścia*] between Christian students and Jews [*między studentami chrześcijańskimi i żydami*],” which he blamed on the unresolved issue of Jewish cadavers, complaining that the quantity of Jewish corpses still did not match the contingent of Jewish students carrying out anatomical exercises in the first- and second-year courses in medicine.⁴² In the same context, Orzechowski declared that university circles shared the opinion of academic youth in general that the “fanaticism of certain Jewish circles” (*fanatyzm pewnych sfer żydowskich*), which hindered the flow of Jewish cadavers to dissecting rooms, ought to be overcome. Orzechowski decried the position of the “entire Jewish community,” which wanted to have Jewish doctors but did nothing to provide them with specimens for their studies.⁴³

Beyond the traditional derogatory language used to describe the perceived Jewish moral inferiority and religious fanaticism, discussions of Jewish dissections of Christian cadavers frequently alluded to the issue of profanation. When the corpse was viewed as “the seat of the soul” (*siedlisko duszy*), Jewish access to it seemed outright improper.⁴⁴ The senate of Warsaw University argued that by refusing to deliver Jewish cadavers to the university, the Jewish public implied that they themselves saw dissections as profanation or considered “corpses of other denominations as something inferior.”⁴⁵ Advocates for the Christian students’ position, moreover, noted that “the motive for this struggle [by the Jews] is the rejection of the profanation of consecrated corpses,” and they argued that in such a context the Jewish students implicitly tolerated the profanation of Christian corpses.⁴⁶

On that basis, activists in the affair attacked the “Jewish faith,” “Jewish fanaticism,” and “Jewish superstition,” and they appealed to so-called enlightened elements in Jewish society to take charge and stand up for fairness and progress.⁴⁷ For Bielecki, Jewish religious cults could be tolerable

⁴²Orzechowski, *Sprawozdanie z działalności Wydziału Lekarskiego*, 13–15. The dean reported with relief that during the spring semester when the students were supposed to carry out exercises on the brain, he was able to secure some Jewish brains thanks to his cooperation with Dr. Płoński of the Jewish hospital on Czyste Street, and he expressed his “heartfelt gratitude” (*serdeczne podziękowanie*) to Dr. Płoński (*ibid.*, 14).

⁴³*Ibid.*, 14. He also condemned members of progressive Jewish circles, including physicians, who looked to the government to resolve the matter and who appeared to think that burdening Christians with the duty of providing all corpses was “completely natural” (*rzecz zupełnie naturalna*; *ibid.*, 15).

⁴⁴Bernard Rusiecki, speech at the student rally in Vilnius, November 12, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 1 I A, B. 171, 17.

⁴⁵“Resolution of the Academic Senate with regard to Jewish Cadavers,” November 18, 1926, LCVA, F. 175, Ap. 3 IX B, B. 151, 173.

⁴⁶Zański, “U progu nowego roku akademickiego.”

⁴⁷“Protokół wiecu ogólnoakademickiego młodzieży polskiej,” 14.

“within a ghetto.” However, when confronted with the need for Jewish cadavers, they produced “religious prejudice” (przesąd religijny) and revealed the “ignorance of the Jewish masses” (ciemnota mas żydowskich).⁴⁸ In light of these arguments, the demand for Jewish cadavers was portrayed as a defense both of Christian corpses and of the honor of the Christian religion. From a non-Jewish perspective, the cadaver affair may have represented a way of forcing Jews to break with their own religious tradition and hence to become “Christianized” in a sense, or at least more secular and assimilated.

In Defense of Christian Patients

In demanding that Christian cadavers be used to train Jewish medical students, Jews profited from Christian flesh for their own selfish purposes and defiled the vessel of the Christian soul. Organizations protesting against this perceived injustice mobilized in defense of Christian cadavers. Their position was closely connected to their perception of an imminent danger in the treatment of Christian patients by Jewish physicians. Ostensibly, however, it was grounded in a concern for national interests; they also stressed economic considerations, since removing Jews would allow Poles greater access to profitable professions in medicine and law.⁴⁹ The Catholic and right-wing press not only demanded the removal of Jewish influence in the cultural sphere more generally but campaigned in particular for a boycott of Jewish doctors as an act of patriotism.

At the same time, the Catholic press referred to the struggle against the Jewish presence in the medical profession as an essentially religious conflict. Jewish physicians treating Polish patients created an unacceptable power imbalance in which Christians found themselves in the position of clients.⁵⁰ Journalists and student activists therefore reminded their audiences about old papal prohibitions against Jews treating Christian patients. The press argued that these pronouncements remained relevant and valid for Catholics in contemporary Poland.⁵¹ Some authors went so far as to describe Jewish doctors as knowingly harming their Catholic patients, especially priests.⁵² In the journal of the Christian medical students, Teodor Grabecki argued that

⁴⁸ *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 23 posiedzenia Sejmu*, 165.

⁴⁹ See “Animalny antysemityzm,” *Gazeta Warszawska*, December 12, 1931. See also Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu*, 215.

⁵⁰ Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu*, 215.

⁵¹ “Żyd nie może leczyć chrześcijanina: Stare a jednak aktualne wskazania Ojca Św. Grzegorza XIII,” *Mały Dziennik*, no. 189 (1935): 5.

⁵² See Jerzy Bandrowski, “Rozmowy z Żydami,” *Kultura* 33 (1937): 4–5.

the Jewish “worldview, culture, and ethical, moral, and religious rules [are] based on the hatred of all that is Christian, which allows them to reach their goals by all possible means.”⁵³ Hence Christian patients could hardly trust Jews. Furthermore, Grabecki reminded his readers of specific qualities that disqualified Jewish physicians: they were motivated by greed, lacked sympathy, and tended to see only their coreligionists as fellow human beings.⁵⁴ “Doctor Jew lacks the appropriate feeling toward a sick (or healthy) Slav. Used to the hypochondria of the Jews, which he takes as a given, he treats [all complaints] as Jewish hypochondria, for which he has no concern. In other words—when a Jew complains [*stęka*], although he is not in pain, his doctor tries to relieve it. When a non-Jew complains of pain, a Jew physician always claims that he overreacts.”⁵⁵ Medical faculties at times expressed their distrust of the moral values of Jewish physicians. One letter from the medical department at Jagiellonian University in Kraków argued that the “ethical level . . . among the Jewish nationality is decidedly lower on average than it is among the Polish [nationality].”⁵⁶ No wonder, then, that Christians, whether alive or dead, needed protection from Jews who would mercilessly use and abuse them for their own individual and collective benefit.

Conclusion

Both contemporary observers and modern historians have described the cadaver affair as a case of nationalist competition, reflecting a tension stirred up by the visible presence of Jewish medical students and the deficit of Jewish corpses in the dissecting room. They have also construed it as an attempt to introduce *numerus clausus* by other means. A close investigation of the affair reveals, however, that the protests exceeded the medical community’s practical concerns. In particular, it shows that the discourse surrounding the cadaver affair combined nationalist language with religious vocabulary, suggesting that the affair was motivated as much by religious concerns as by nationalist ones. Students presented the conflict in the dissecting room as one of religious mentalities and value systems: it was a manifestation not only of a clash of religious taboos but also of broader religious prejudice.

⁵³Teodor Grabecki, “O polski charakter zawodu lekarskiego,” *Życie medyczne: Organ międzyśrodowiskowy medyków* 2, no. 7 (June 1936): 15.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵J. Bandrowski, “Rozmowy z Aryjczykami,” *Kultura* 36 (1937): 4, cited in Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu*, 217.

⁵⁶This unsigned and undated letter, addressed to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education, was discussed in the meeting of the medical department on March 9, 1923. See AUJ, WL II 404, Wiece i demonstracje studenckie w latach 1913–1946.

The objection of Polish gentiles to the Jewish community's unwillingness to provide cadavers for medical study was not merely a trick to keep Jews away from medical schools: it was also symptomatic of a widespread perception that Jewish-gentile interaction was inherently harmful.

In the nationalist discourse of the Second Polish Republic, national and religious conflict with the Jews represented two sides of a struggle against what was perceived as arrogant Jewish domination. Right-wing student organizations espoused the notion that Catholicism was an essential and indispensable part of the Polish national identity, implying that defenses of Poles and defenses of Christians were identical.⁵⁷ Although right-wing student activists and publicists used the terms "Christian" and "Pole" interchangeably, the religious context that defined corpses as "Christian" and "Jewish" remained conspicuously unchanged in the interwar period. In newspaper articles, pamphlets, and student rallies, these activists relied on their audience's shared traditional knowledge about Jewish religious rituals and mentalities.⁵⁸ Their rhetoric was grounded in notions of collective Jewish criminality and of fundamental differences between Jews and Christians, as well as in fears of Jewish conspiracy and the idea that Jews posed a danger of desecration and "contamination"—even, apparently, to Christians who were no longer alive. While student activists referred to religious rivalry between Judaism and Christianity and to Jewish contempt, these religious motifs were "barely audible echoes of a once-powerful tale [of Jewish ritual murder]."⁵⁹

For some student activists, referring to the Christian struggle against Jewish danger might have served as a rhetorical tool helping to mobilize students from pietistic associations or members of Catholic charitable women's associations. Members of such groups were unlikely to remain indifferent to the alleged danger of Christian corpses being defiled at the hands of Jewish medical students in the public sphere of university campuses.⁶⁰ Even if for some radical student activists and journalists the trope of protecting Christian cadavers and demanding Jewish ones was merely a decoy, they still rightly assumed that it would resonate beyond their immediate ideological milieu.

Polish student associations insisted that in refusing to contribute corpses to medical schools, Jews were motivated by a sense of religious superiority.

⁵⁷See Joanna Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln, NE, 2006).

⁵⁸In his discussion of narrative accounts of ritual murder, Hillel Kieval defines "social knowledge" as "what a group understands and remembers about an event," and he argues that "symbolic elements and internal logical processes [in these accounts] are designed not only to induce credence in their intended audience but also to facilitate replication and transmission"; "Representation and Knowledge," 54.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁰See Zański, "U progu nowego roku akademickiego."

They saw Jews as cynically exploiting Christians by utilizing Christian cadavers to train Jewish physicians. Last but not least, they viewed this practice not only as unfair and demoralizing but also as dangerous from the religious point of view, both for Christians who were already dead and for those who were still living. These issues galvanized students in other eastern and central European countries as well: similar conflicts over the availability of Jewish and Christian corpses for medical study were often present in countries in which ethnic national identity was closely linked with religious identity—with Catholicism in Austria, Hungary, and Lithuania, for example, or with Orthodox Christianity in Romania.⁶¹ Hence the cadaver affair may well represent a broader phenomenon: yet another modern manifestation of blood libel that requires further investigation.

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⁶¹See “Życie akademickie za granicą: Walka o ‘numerus clausus’ w Rumunii,” *Akademik* 2, no. 3 (1923): 73. See also Tadeusz P. Bielecki’s speech to the Polish Parliament concerning the provisions of cadavers for medical colleges, March 17, 1931, in *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 23 posiedzenia Sejmu*, 164.