

“THE JEWISH PROBLEM”
AS A POLISH PROBLEM

Note

This essay is a survey of the issues in Polish history in which there exist clearly diverging views among average Jews and average Poles. The very first version of the essay, meant for the Polish intelligentsia, was published, under my penname Abel Kainer, in an underground periodical “Spotkania” 29/30 (1985), pp. 32-64. A version close to the present one was published in Catholic monthly “Więź” in 1992, and the English version in 1998 in a special issue of “Więź” entitled Under One Heaven. Poles and Jews., pp. 60-81, together with an addendum, omitted here. Many footnotes explaining Polish history are by William Brand, who added them for “Więź”.

Jews continue to be important in Poland as an issue, an issue that is significant for everyone, and an obsession for some (in fact, for surprisingly many). Jews are now important only as an issue, although many Poles imagine that the Jews are numerous and influential. In the meantime, the Jews hardly exist in Poland as a group. There are, of course, individuals here and there, although the Jews who are important and visible in various fields are usually the people to whom the term “Poles of Jewish origin” is most appropriate. It is hard to say what a given person feels, yet it is easy to ascertain that almost none of the better-known individuals belong to any Jewish institutions, religious or secular, and that they do not meet other Jews in any specifically Jewish forum.

Jews are hardly numerous in Poland, but the attitudes toward Jews are far from indifferent, almost as it was before the war, when the Jews constituted a minority of over three million. One no longer encounters “the Jewish problem” on the street, but this does not mean that it has been

consigned to history. Obviously, the “problem” is not as pronounced and in any case, certainly not only associated with the presence of Jews, but also with the attitude to Jews. In this sense, it has been and continues to be a Polish problem.

Antipathies and resentments dominate relations between Poles and Jews. This is mutual. They lead to harmful stereotypes on both sides. It is difficult, however, to treat them as fully symmetrical. One can cite prejudices or point out false judgments on either side – a point here, a point there – but the actual consequences differ. It was Jews who suffered because of Polish attitudes, and not the other way around. Furthermore, although each deserves censure, antisemitism and antipolonism are different by nature. The roots of European antisemitism are incomparably deeper and stronger. They include the beginnings of the Church, the place of Jews in Christian Europe and afterwards in the Europe of nation-states, and also embrace the psychological need for a personification of evil. The psychological needs are similar among Jews. Antipolonism, however, does not result from an overall vision, but rather from a generalization of the Jewish experience in twentieth-century Poland and from the complexity of Jewish history in the Polish lands, where fate – or God – once assembled such a numerous Jewish people.

It is difficult to avoid a certain simplification that appears at once in the very terminology, including that employed by me. Namely, speaking of “Poles and Jews” suggests two separate groups standing beside each other, or even in opposition to each other. This is partially true, but in reality there existed – and still exist – many spheres of interpenetration: Polonized Jews who are active in Polish life and among the Polish émigré community, as well as Poles who live and work with Jews. At times, a division between “Christians and Jews” would be far more accurate: we would then have Christian Poles and Jewish Poles or, as people once preferred to say, Poles of the Jewish faith. I belong to this last category.

1. Poland: Paradise or Hell for Jews?

Asked if the Jews had it good in Poland, the average Jew gives an answer precisely opposite to the answer given by the average Pole. Foreign Jews usually see a dark image full of raging antisemitism, discrimination, and dangers to the peace and even life. Poles, on the other hand, generally suppose that the Jews lived well in Poland, exercised great influence, were wealthy, and so on. This opinion sometimes becomes a conviction that the Jews had it too good in Poland.

Heaven or hell? It is necessary to distinguish between past centuries and our own. The definition “Jewish paradise” applies to the period of the First Republic¹. Applying it literally or even worse figuratively, to later times is an abuse. Nevertheless, the universally dark stereotype common among Jews is just as inaccurate as the image of an idyllic Jewish life, not to speak of a vision of Jewish domination. The richness and creativity of Jewish life in this Polish land deserves to be appreciated by those Jews for whom the experience of the twentieth century overshadows more distant history. This is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was thinking of

¹ The “First Republic” was the centuries-old, multi ethnic state that declined in power, efficiency and purpose for more than one hundred years before vanishing from the map of Europe in 1795, when Austria, Prussia, and Russia performed the last of the three last partitions of its territory and King Stanisław August Poniatowski abdicated. Until the mass slaughter of Jews and Poles during the Cossack uprising initiated by Chmielnicki in 1648, in what is now Ukraine, the Polish state had seen a steady growth in Jewish settlement under conditions that, all things considered, were actually advantageous to a degree not found elsewhere in Christian Europe, particularly after the mass expulsions and persecutions of Jews in other countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

when, in New York after World War II, he spoke of a golden age in the history of the Jews.

Jews gradually arrived within the borders of the First Republic, until the great majority of the Jews of Europe were gathered here. The Jews had, after all, been expelled from various countries in the West, while in Poland the worst that happened was their expulsion from some cities. Benefiting from Polish tolerance, the Jews were able to develop more of an autonomous life than elsewhere, although they could not, obviously, go beyond the forms accepted in that epoch. The inferior status of the Jews was due in part to the same principles that covered all non-nobles. They were at additional risk as non-Christians, guilty in general opinion of the death of Jesus and subsequent intransigence, as well as such misdeeds as the profanation of the host and ritual murder. The stable position of the Jews depended mainly on the attitudes of the great and lesser feudal lords. Jews were necessary: they functioned as intermediaries between the nobility and the market, and between the nobility and the peasants. This led to the Jewish-noble symbiosis so characteristic of old Poland.

The opportunities for the ennoblement of converts to Christianity are sometimes adduced to show how good the Jews had it in old Poland. From the Jewish point of view, this is no cause for celebration. Inducements to conversion, whether they are physical or economic coercion or such emoluments as ennoblement, appear as threats. The goal, after all, is to remain Jewish despite the natural course of things, despite history, the dominant nations, and religion. The most general definition of antisemitism as Jews understand it is this: to prevent Jews from living as Jews. Conversions to Catholicism were not, in fact common, and occurred on a wide scale only in the case of the seventeenth-century Frankist sect. The king himself stood as godfather to Jakub Frank, the founder of the sect.

Several generations later, Frankist descent began to be stigmatized here and there as a source of “foreignness.” Before the epoch of emancipation in the nineteenth century, however, religion was the only criterion of Jewishness. Baptisms, signifying to both sides a definitive break with Judaism, brought full acceptance. Although the situation later grew complicated, the religious criterion was officially applied until the end of the Second Republic², especially by the Church. Nevertheless, the criterion of descent became more widespread. A dramatic expression of the difference of approaches was the public slapping of Father Tadeusz Puder, Jewish by descent, in his Warsaw church in 1936. For present-day antisemites, the religious criterion has lost all significance: during the 1990 presidential campaign, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and his Catholic intellectual associates were attacked by some supporters of Lech Wałęsa as untrustworthy Jews on account of their actual or supposed Jewish forebears.

All the time, Poland was a center of rabbinical orthodoxy and mystical Hasidism, as well as the Yiddish press, literature and theatre, the revival of Hebrew, modern political parties-socialist and nationalist, with Zionist parties and sports clubs. Such groups enjoyed representation in the parliament of the Second Republic. They all developed unhampered thanks to the wide range of freedom that sharply differentiated Poland from its neighbors during

² The “Second Republic”, a Polish nation-state with Jewish and Ukrainian minorities each comprising about ten percent of the population, was formed after 1918 on the territories had previously annexed by the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires. This state lasted until September, 1939, when it was invaded and partitioned along a pre-arranged line between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

³ In 1989, Tadeusz Mazowiecki led the first non-communist government since the occupation of Poland by the Soviet Army in 1944, when communist rule under Soviet direction was established.

the 1930s. Jews also participated, of course, in various non-denominational spheres of national life. They were Polonized to a greater or lesser degree, and those who held important positions in the state or the military were as a rule converts, sometimes in the previous generation – in other words, they or their forebears had in principle broken with Jewish circles. The lack of baptism made even a university career difficult. To an increasing number of Poles, Jewish participation in national life meant that Jews “had it too good.” This was expressed in slogans about Jews “controlling” various fields, about certain professions being “in Jewish hands,” about culture being “Jew-infested,” and so on.

Despite anti-Jewish attitudes, then, there was room for coexistence and even symbiosis, for the Jews of Poland were an inseparable part of Poland. So it had been from time immemorial. Critics of the Jews defined them as parasites. Today, young Poles frequently idealize the pre-war situation and think that there was no antisemitism then. In this view, there was only economic competition, and competition in the professions and culture, because the very numbers of Jews – greater, after all, than anywhere else in the world – caused tension and rivalry. They also stress that anti-Jewish ideas, imported from Tsarist Russia and later from Germany, ran counter to the true nature of Poles. All these circumstances had great significance indeed, yet blaming antisemitism on them is clearly a defensive manoeuvre which irritates Jews and puts them off. On the other hand, they can be taken as a sign that it is currently fashionable to distance oneself from antisemitism – verbally, at least.

2. Antisemitic Generalizations

Antisemitism is obviously not a specifically Polish phenomenon, nor did it originate in that country. A certain attitude towards Jews, it always expressed itself in the form of accusations. These accusations are contradictory. The Jews are thus accused of excessively isolating themselves and of being excessively intrusive, of being offensively different and of making themselves similar to others, of radical traditionalism and unbridled rebelliousness, of economic expansion and of passively vegetating. Furthermore, the Jews of Poland were accused of a lack of patriotism and indifference to the struggle for independence while on the other hand they were also accused even of provoking the January Rising⁴. Antisemitism is the common denominator of these accusations in the form of generalized opinions. This is not to say that they have nothing to do with reality. There were plainly cases in which they were formulated in good faith. It is, after all, true that some Jews were very traditional, that some were pious while others flaunted religion, and so on. The main thing was that they were antago-

⁴ The unsuccessful January, 1863 Uprising, concentrated in the Polish lands governed by Russia, broke out after several years of unrest. During the preparatory period and the actual fighting, there was significant Polish-Jewish cooperation in propaganda, mass demonstrations and rallies, logistics, finance and clandestine operations. The Jews also suffered disproportionately harsh reprisals after the defeat, including numerous cases of exile to Siberia. Like the other major insurrections of 1794 and 1830, which also failed to win Polish independence despite the shedding of much blood and great sacrifices, the January Rising was afterwards the occasion for profound soul-searching, recriminations, and bitter disputes on the sense of history and the independence struggle.

nistic towards each other. Only in fantasies about an all-embracing Jewish conspiracy did a Jewish banker and a Jewish anarchist report to the same boss. The harmonious integration of contradictory accusations against Jews in general is possible only within a vision in which Jews act in unison against others, and in which their varied involvements are only a mask that enables them to act on different fronts, but always to the same end: domination over the “goy.” This is the antisemitic vision. In reality, Jews were engaged on both sides of most conflicts. This is still the case. In Poland, some Jews supported the government, and some supported Solidarity, in the days of contention between the two forces. Jewish solidarity is a cornerstone of Jewish tradition, but the reality consists of divisions and quarrels. A sense of a shared fate may exist, but, at best, true solidarity emerges only in the face of a common danger. At best – since, for example, cooperation between Bundists and Zionists ran into massive difficulties even during World War II, in the Warsaw Ghetto, in the face of the most extreme danger.

The deeper basis of antisemitism is most clearly brought out in the most radical of the charges against the Jews: the accusation of ritual murder. It is almost shameful to mention such slander, but to this day there are people who remain convinced that there is

⁵ The “Solidarity” trade union movement arose after strikes in 1980 and grew into a political force boasting millions of members around the country. Its first chairman was Lech Wałęsa. The original “Solidarity” structure was repressed after the communist authorities declared Martial Law on December 13, 1981, and the union was officially disbanded in 1982. Afterwards, “Solidarity” referred to clandestine union structures, and also to the wide social movement which continued in opposition to the communist regime until the fall of the latter in 1989. After the fall of communism Solidarity has functioned as a regular trade union, increasingly right-wing. To me, as to many others, it has nothing to do with the initial Solidarity we participated in.

a secret Jewish ritual for which Christian blood must be found to make matzo. Recent ethnographic research in the Polish countryside found a majority inclined to believe this. In the past, the result could be mortally dangerous. So it was even after the war: the crowd that murdered the Jews in Kielce in 1946 had been incited to the attack by rumours that a boy had been kidnapped to make matzo. The belief in ritual murder had different, tragic consequences during the war for the family of a certain Jewish child who was being sheltered by valiant Catholics. After the war, they refused to return the child to his Jewish relatives - in fear that they would kill him to make matzo.

Other accusations against the Jews may from time to time have something in common with reality. However, the facts are often not so much the source of prejudice, but rather a convenient illustration of it. Jews were once accused of greed, exploitation and dishonest dealing. This charge echoed the old aristocratic contempt for trade and merchants, which only today is being undermined by the sudden acceptance of the businessman as a positive model. Another type of accusation against the Jews had to do with immorality and the propagation of nihilism, promiscuity and all sorts of decadent vices. Instances confirming these charges may be found, but the point is that pre-war publications – of a type again being disseminated in Poland today – presented lifestyles at variance with traditional precepts as the result of a deliberate program to undermine the morals of Christians. This is absurd. The Rabbis were no less opposed to promiscuity, secularization and novel lifestyles than were the priests who criticized Jews on these very grounds. Jews leaving the traditional community were involved in shaping all modern tendencies in economics, culture and science. A spotlight was cast on Jewish criminals out of the belief that Jews are evil and, furthermore, that evil exists because of the Jews. In today's Poland, we have had a taste of such

generalizations: Polish tourists have suffered from the generalized opprobrium stemming from the acts of Polish thieves and hooligans in Germany or Denmark.

Today, Jews are seldom accused of dishonesty or immorality. Such charges no longer sound convincing, since everyone can see that dishonesty and immorality have not disappeared, even though there are no longer many Jews in Poland. The accusation of disloyalty is a different story: even today, Polish politicians of Jewish ancestry are accused by their opponents of acting “against the interests of the nation.”

3. Jews and Poland

Jews are accused of lack of patriotism and of assimilating to the culture of the powers that partitioned Poland. It is obvious that, while some Jews became Polonized, many chose cultural Germanization or Russification. Many others remained firmly within Jewish culture and had no plans to assimilate. From a Jewish, rather than a Polish, perspective, this is hardly an accusation. Rather, it is the normal course of things. Even the Polish point of view, however, must include circumstances that call into question any unequivocal accusation about a lack of patriotism. In the first place, the accusation is frequently formulated as if all non-Jews were patriotically engaged in the struggle for Poland. In reality, neither the aristocrats nor the magnates (not to speak of the kings!) were any less cosmopolitan than the Jews. Among the peasantry, a national consciousness independent of loyalty to the local landowner and the reigning monarch took root only gradually, and generally not before the nineteenth century. (As late as twenty years ago, one could find old highlanders who, speaking in the dialect of the

mountains, identified themselves as “Austrians.”) It is indeed a fact that Kościuszko⁶ found adherents among the peasants, but it is true as well that he also found supporters among the Jews, whom he addressed in the Krakow synagogue. Actually, it must be said that a relatively large number of Jews took part in the Polish fight for independence. This was principally the case at the time of the January Rising and somewhat earlier. A part of the religious leadership was also involved, as symbolized by the head rabbi of Warsaw at the time, Ber Meisels. In general, however, many centuries of experience had left the Jews, and particularly Jewish leaders, inclined towards loyalty to the authorities: all unrest could lead to violence against the Jews, and only the protection of the authorities offered any assurance of security and a stable life.

Roman Dmowski⁷ stressed such Jewish loyalism and its incompatibility with Polish interests. There is also frequent mention of the

⁶ Tadeusz Kościuszko, a hero of the American War of Independence, initiated an Uprising in March, 1794, in a last-ditch effort to avert the absorption of Poland by Austria, Prussia and Russia. Beginning his movement in Krakow, Kościuszko deliberately appealed to the Jews, as well as to the Polish peasants, who had previously not been included in political life.

⁷ Founder in 1893 of the National Democracy (endecja, endek) movement, Dmowski remained through the 1930s the ideologue of a narrowly nationalistic conception of the Polish state – as opposed to his great antagonist, Józef Piłsudski, who appealed to the expansionist, multi-ethnic traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian “Commonwealth” (which experienced its golden age in the sixteenth century). Both men made great contributions to the recovery of Polish independence at the end of the First World War. Perhaps fortuitously, it was Piłsudski who was hailed as the father of the Second Polish Republic. (After leading the 1926 coup against parliamentary government, Piłsudski ran the country from behind the scenes until his death in 1935; he and especially the “Colonels” who governed afterwards seemed in practice to pursue policies quite similar to those advocated by Dmowski.) The view that the Jews pose an economic and political threat to the Polish state has persistently been associated with Dmowski’s views and the “Endecja” became virulently antisemitic before the Second World War.

“Litwak” issue—the Jews from the Russian interior who settled in the Congress Kingdom of Poland⁸ in the late nineteenth century. Criticism of their Russifying influence misses the point that they lent dynamism to the Polish economy and enabled it to penetrate the internal Russian market. Their children, in any case, became Polonized. Finally, and this is the third point, the loyalist tendencies turned into support for the Polish state authorities after the recovery of independence. The conservative, Orthodox Aguda party supported each successive government in exchange for the preservation of broadly understood religious autonomy for the Jews. Furthermore, secondary and university education favoured the process of cultural Polonization in the second Republic. The fundamentally pro-state interests of the Jews were emphasized by some politicians from the camp aligned with Piłsudski. Dmowski’s supporters, however, attacked the Jews even more vociferously than before – now, they regarded precisely their Polonization as dangerous. Given such an approach, nothing that the Jews could have done would have been satisfactory. This is just the place where antisemitism becomes apparent: loyalism and submission to the dominant culture are highlighted to the degree that they can be treated as accusations, and passed over in silence where they deserve praise.

⁸ The part of the Polish lands, including Warsaw, which was under Russian rule until the First World War. In 1795, Poland was partitioned into Russian, Prussian and Austrian parts.

⁹ Lwów or Lemberg, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia and Lodomeria until 1918; included in the Soviet Union after World War II; now the city of Lviv in independent Ukraine. Long an important Jewish cultural center, a cradle of Zionism from the 1880s onward, Lwów was until 1939 a Polish provincial capital, a city with a population approximately balanced among Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian communities, and the scene of fruitful inter-ethnic coexistence as well as tensions.

The dilemmas of loyalism are well illustrated by the incidents in Lwów⁹ in 1918. The Jews, fearing that support for either side would provoke reprisals from the other, decided to remain neutral while the Poles and the Ukrainians fought for the city. A Jewish militia guarded municipal institutions and food shops that served the whole population, and defended the Jews against looting. The looters included convicts who had been released from prison in order to join the defense of the city. Reports that Jews had fired on Polish defenders of Lwów became the impulse for a brutal pogrom on the day that a Polish relief force took possession of Lwów. The Polish command delayed taking countermeasures while Polish civilians and soldiers burned, looted and profaned the synagogues. More than a score of people died and many more were wounded. In Polish memory, this episode is an unfamiliar footnote to the joyous and almost legendary image of the victorious taking of the city, which had previously been heroically defended by the “fledgling eagles of Lwów.” The pogrom is explained as a reprisal against the Jews for supporting the Ukrainians. Some authors still repeat this version today. It is inaccurate, although some Zionist groupings did in fact support Ukrainian aspirations¹⁰, on the principle that they should be consistent in applying the principle that “everyone has the right to a separate national identity.” What made the pogrom possible was the potential, destructive anti-Jewish energy that already existed previously.

Few Poles know today about the atmosphere engendered before the war by that hatred propagated against the Jews and the efforts made to complicate their lives, limit their opportunities, and simply push them out of the country. Jews remember that atmosphere all too well; too well because it fosters a one-sided, negative image,

¹⁰ Thus Jabotinsky features in recent Ukrainian historiography as a proponent of that country's statehood.

especially among people who do not know the real Poland. It is, nevertheless, true that antisemitism was a widely accepted political platform in Poland before the war. Otherwise respectable politicians and journalists planned ways of limiting Jewish rights or abolishing those rights altogether. "Aryan clauses" were adopted by many associations, and the emigration of the Jews was proposed as a remedy for unemployment. In January, 1939, 117 parliamentary delegates from the OZN (National Unification Camp, or the ruling party) tabled a motion on "radically reducing the number of Jews in Poland" as a way of "Polonizing" commerce. They also proposed "eliminating Jewish influences from Polish cultural and community life." In response, the prime minister stated that "the proposition that Jewish emigration from Poland should be intensified is advanced in unison by all of Polish public opinion." In the meantime, while the pressure on and readiness of Jews to emigrate increased, their actual opportunities for doing so dwindled. There was not the slightest support in Western Europe or the Western hemisphere for admitting larger numbers of Jews; in Palestine, the British introduced even more stringent limitations. The slogan "Jews to Madagascar," once heard in Poland, was as unrealistic as it was insulting. It deepened the frustration and encouraged Jews to think that no-one wanted them.

4. The War

Wartime produced remarkably divergent stereotypes among Poles on the one hand, and Jews around the world on the other. Everyone knows that it was hell for the Jews. The dominant Polish opinion, however, holds that it was likewise hell for the Poles, and furthermore that Poles sympathized with the Jews being murdered by the invader and offered as much help as they could, often sacrificing their lives in the process. The dominant opinion among

Jews, on the other hand, is that the Poles greeted the murder of the Jews with approval, and sometimes joined in.

Each of these opinions is extraordinarily one-sided, even though a plethora of examples can be adduced in support of each. Everyone who has the slightest concept of what went on during the war understands the magnitude of Polish losses¹¹. Outside Poland, however, most people remain unaware that the Germans assigned the Poles to the role of slaves whose culture was to be destroyed. Not even full knowledge about the fate of the Poles, however, can change the fact that, from the point of view of the burning Warsaw ghetto, life on the other side of the wall seemed incredibly normal. Shops and restaurants were opened and a merry-go-round¹² even operated: paradise next door to hell. It is, nonetheless,

¹¹ According to estimates up to three million non-Jewish Poles (a tenth of the population) died, many of whom in camps or in exile as a result of German and Soviet repression and persecutions; almost forty percent of the country's economic base was destroyed.

¹² The merry-go-round on Krasiński Square, noted in many memoirs, provided a powerful symbol in the wartime poem “Campo di Fiori,” by the 1980 Nobel Prize laureate Czesław Miłosz. In turn, the literary scholar Jan Błoński used Miłosz's poem as the starting point for a 1987 essay in the Catholic intellectual weekly “Tygodnik Powszechny” on the question of the degree to which witnesses and bystanders bear guilt for the Shoah. A lively public debate ensued, on a Polish and international scale. Błoński's articles on the subject were collected in a volume bearing the same title as the original essay, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na ghetto” (*Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*, Krakow, 1994).

¹³ The Warsaw Uprising began on the orders of the Polish Underground on August 1, 1944, as the Red Army raced westward towards the occupied Polish capital. The intention had been to wrest control from the Germans just before the entry of the Soviets. The Red Army halted east of the city and waited on the opposite bank of the Vistula, not crossing the river in force until the beginning of the final drive to Berlin in January, 1945. The insurgents succeeded in gaining initial control over large areas of the city; the Soviets and Poland's other allies did practically nothing; the Germans had a free hand systematically to assault, bomb, and burn the city until the last insurgents surrendered on September 10. During

also a fact that Krakow seemed indecently normal to the inhabitants of Warsaw during the 1944 Uprising¹³ in the capital – or that life in the ghetto seemed indecently normal to those who managed to escape from the first transports to Treblinka. It is therefore inaccurate to identify the dichotomy “tragedy-normalcy” with the dichotomy “Jews-Poles.” Nevertheless, it is still false to equate Jewish and Polish fates. The Poles were decimated, while the great majority of Jews from Poland were murdered. What is more, only the Jews died without any reason apart from who they were. Only Jewish children were automatically doomed. It was for the Jews that the Nazis built the death camps¹⁴. These may seem

those six weeks, the Germans suffered considerable casualties while killing 22,000 Polish combatants and more than 100,000 civilians; the rest of the population driven from the city, which was left practically uninhabited, with 80% of its buildings destroyed, when the Soviets finally entered unopposed. The 1944 Uprising is routinely, and inexcusably, confused with the much smaller 1943 Ghetto Uprising by many foreigners, including visiting German presidents.

¹⁴The German concentration camps were based on the principle of working the prisoners to death in an effort to extract some economic advantage. Concentration camp prisoners were routinely shot and some concentration camps, most notably Auschwitz, had gas chambers where Jewish prisoners were killed immediately upon arrival. Even among the Jewish transports to Auschwitz, however, it was common for the Germans to “select” a proportion of the arrivals to be worked to death. (See also, Chapter 1 above). The death camps – Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, form a distinct category. They had no labor function; they consisted only of crematoria and burial pits. No prisoners were selected for labor (except small bands employed in the manual labor of genocide, who were systematically killed off and replaced). While the concentration camps contained prisoners from nearly every ethnic group in Europe, the death camps were reserved for the killing of Jews. Built as part of “Operation Reinhard,” these camps operated in 1942 and 1943. This is where most of the Jewish population of Poland died. When Operation Reinhard concluded, the camps were demolished and an effort made to obliterate all trace of them. Only a few prisoners survived; a group succeeded in escaping from Sobibor after a mutiny; apparently only two inmates survived Belzec. Otherwise, there were no survivors.

like obvious truths, yet Poles sometimes deny them as if fearing that their own sufferings might be diminished. This leads to the phenomenon that Henryk Grynberg has called the “theft of the Holocaust”: Jews killed for being Jews have their deaths appropriated. Along the way, victims are posthumously declared to have been Polish even if, during their lifetimes, any claims they made to that status were loudly shouted down.

The attitudes of Poles to Jews during the war were hardly uniform. Kindness and a desire to offer help appeared even among pre-war antisemites, especially priests. The Church offered no official declarations. Many religious communities, especially female ones, nevertheless sheltered “non-Aryans.” Orphanages run by nuns harboured Jewish children. The Jews in hiding often needed help. The aid offered either by individuals or by the organizations that made up the *Żegota* Jewish Aid Council (connected to the London government-in-exile) therefore had immense significance: it gave them a chance to survive. Such a chance was always minimal. Helping was not easy. Fugitives from the ghettos or the transports sometimes had no alternative to going back to the ghetto. Some tried to survive in the forests. This was not easy, especially since partisan units tended not to accept Jews. Even in cities, it was quite difficult for Jews to join the Home Army resistance movement¹⁵. This was not official policy from headquarters. Rather, it reflected either mistrust or awareness that, in the underground, Jews were a foreign element with a fate of their own. Going into

¹⁵ The largest armed Polish resistance movement, formally established under the London government-in-exile in 1942, operating on a nationwide scale with a Supreme Commander in Poland. All legitimate Polish underground soldiers were part of the Home Army (or AK), except for the communist People’s Guard (later, People’s Army) and the extreme right-wing National Armed Forces (later, partially incorporated into the AK).

hiding was unimaginably difficult, despite the fact that there were people ready to help at the right price, and others good enough never to mention money. They, however, were not the ones who defined the atmosphere in which Jews hid. The Jews were terrorized by “bounty hunters,” blackmailers who extorted money under threat of informing the Gestapo. According to recent research, blackmail became the source of income, a usual business of that period, for thousands of mostly normal Poles. Fugitives from the ghetto could die at the hands of these blackmailers, or at the hands of partisans or bandits who saw them as easy pickings.

Poles in general, of course, took no part in the killing. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that Poles in general offered aid to the Jews. There is nothing strange about this in view of how hard it was to do so in the circumstances of terror under German occupation-or how risky it was. Each act of aid was punishable by death. Those who lost their lives in this way deserve to be remembered with all the more gratitude. It can be said that the help was not forgotten: trees are planted in honour of the “righteous among the nations” at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Among 20757 so honoured, 5874 Poles constitute the largest group. Many more, however, remain unknown.

I am sure that the world knows too little about Polish help to Jews. One of the reasons is that Poles themselves have not been keen to learn the facts. It is amazing that in Poland until recently almost nothing was known about two Polish heroes who rescued Jews during World War II. Ms. Irena Sendler worked for the health department of the city of Warsaw and was among the few Christians allowed to enter the ghetto. She helped to smuggle 2500 Jewish children out of the ghetto and place them in hiding. Many of them survived, either in private homes or in convents and monasteries. On a similar scale was the action of a Polish diplomat Henryk Sławik, sometimes called “the Polish Wallenberg”. He

served in Budapest when Hungary was still semi-independent, and there he help provide false “Aryan” documents to several thousand Polish Jews who were then in Hungary. This enabled them to pass and avoid the transports to Auschwitz organized by the Fascist Hungary. When the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944, Sławik was arrested and killed in Mauthausen. Despite torture he did not disclose his collaborators. A few years ago, Shevach Weiss, the former speaker of the Knesset and the Israeli ambassador to Poland, said that if Poland had had better PR, Raoul Wallenberg would have been called “the Swedish Sławik.”

The German terror unquestionably justified passivity. However, it did not rule out sympathy. Sympathy, nevertheless, was not at all the rule. Time after time, Jews in hiding confronted indifference stemming from the assumption: “the war between the Jews and the Germans does not concern us.” They met with unfriendliness, and at times also with expressions of satisfaction about the one good thing that Hitler was doing—he was freeing Poland of the Jews. The heroic aid extended to Jews by Poles took place not only in opposition to the Germans. The fact that it took place in opposition to other Poles was one of the reasons that it was so difficult and risky. It is a fact that, even after the war, some people feared to admit that they had helped the Jews. When Michał Borwicz began collecting and publishing accounts of aid, in which he gave the names of the benefactors, some of them began complaining that they had encountered “unpleasantness,” and in some cases even “reprisals.” This attests to the atmosphere of those times. Poles today have no idea of what it was like. Yet that atmosphere was the source of the experiences that serve as a pretext for antipolonism. The controversy over blame and merit is, to a large degree, a controversy over who represents Poland – the noblest, the basest, or the average people? The Polish government-in-exile in London conveyed information and acted as intermediary in passing money

from the West to the ghettos. It sounded the alarm, and the world did nothing. These are indisputable merits. It is true, however, that the government-in-exile's statements to the Allies sounded different from its statements to the domestic Polish population. When Sikorski¹⁶ proclaimed during a 1942 meeting in London that Jews would receive equal rights after the war, such remarks were edited out of a radio broadcast to Poland. The death sentences passed against "bounty hunters" indicate the attitude of the Home Army leadership. At the same time, Jewish resistance activists felt that the leaders of Underground Poland did not feel responsible for their Jewish citizens. Their operational plans did not take them into account and there were no Jewish representatives in the clandestine domestic leadership (as opposed to the London government).

5. After the War

The war changed the situation, but it brought no radical change to attitudes towards Jews. The image of Jews as not only alien and harmful, but as downright hostile, remained in place. Attitudes towards Jews outlived the Jews themselves, as shown by a statement in "Walka" (The Fight) an underground right-wing newspaper from July, 1943 – after the liquidation of most Jewish population centres and after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Stating that the percentage of Jews in the Polish population had been reduced to the level of the percentage of Jews in Germany before the war, the author averred that "we regard the Jewish question as almost resolved. When Jewish capital and Jewish intrigues took

¹⁶ General Władysław Sikorski, head of the Polish government-in-exile in London, died in a plane crash off Gibraltar on July 4, 1943.

control of Germany after the last war, the problem was not viewed with complacency!” Of course, other newspapers wrote differently. The socialist and communist newspapers stressed the importance of community. The moderate clandestine press, like the official Home Army’s “Biuletyn Informacyjny” (Information Bulletin), presented the fate of the Jews honestly and with sympathy. Some pre-war antisemites now aided Jews. This was not, however, the rule. Voices such as that quoted above were not isolated. Yet they did not indicate any participation in the destruction. While the Holocaust may not have transformed Polish thinking about the Jews, nevertheless, Polish antisemitism had nothing in common with the Nazi campaign to murder all Jews. I believe that the German extermination machine would have done its work even if all Poles had loved Jews.

For Polish pride, perhaps the most difficult to understand and accept is the fact of the murder of Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne and several other Polish towns by their neighbours in 1941. This happened in formerly Soviet-occupied areas, immediately after the German conquest. It was done under German supervision but without direct German participation; the pretext used was the presence of Jews in the Soviet ruling apparatus, responsible for repression and deportations. Yet, Jews were among both those who were deported and those organising the deportations. The large-scale pogroms were by no means unique to Poland. They were stimulated by German occupiers in many Eastern countries, often on a much larger scale. In Poland, as elsewhere, for decades the events were never discussed. And only in Poland, since 2000, has a very serious discussion resulted. Everywhere, in occupied Poland Polish Christians witnessed the murder of Jews. In most places they got used to it. Some provided help to the occupiers. In a few places the Christian neighbours killed by themselves. This does pose a very serious moral challenge. This challenge is rec-

ognized nowadays by perhaps half of Poles. The fact remains, though, that the numbers of Jews killed is just a minute fraction of those murdered by the Nazi Germany death machinery. Let me repeat that even if all Poles had loved Jews in the reality of that time the result would have been largely the same. A few hundred thousand more Jews would have survived but millions would have been murdered anyway. The opposite opinion is more frequently held by Jews who are incapable of believing that the situation was hopeless, and who draw, from Polish attitudes to Jews before and immediately after the war, conclusions that are too far-reaching. War-time murders of Jews were committed by Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Romanians, and others. The fact that Jews were killed in Poland in the years 1945-1946 had almost no parallel in Europe. One factor was the struggle against “Jewish communism.”¹⁷ More than one underground unit treated Jews and communists as identical. Obviously, Jews were not the only ones to be shot at, and many people lost their lives and freedom. Seldom do people in the West know anything about this. Another danger factor for Jewish survivors was the fact that the people who had taken over Jewish homes and businesses had no intention of giving them up. As early as 1943, a report from circles associated with the

¹⁷ Even in the nineteenth century, Jews were associated in Polish literature with revolution and anarchy. The myth of “Jewish communism” (“Żydokomuna”, a repulsively pejorative term in Polish, somewhat like “Jewcommies”) fueled by the Russian Revolution and the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, holds that communism (illogically said to be supported by Jewish financiers), is simply a part of the world-wide (and invariably “anti-Polish”) “Jewish conspiracy”.

¹⁸ The Delegatura, under the leadership of a Plenipotentiary appointed from the government-in-exile in London, was in effect the civil administrative arm of the Polish Underground State; it had a central bureaucracy and a local structure down to the municipal level.

government-in-exile’s Delegation¹⁸ in Poland recommended that the emigration of the surviving Jews be carried out after the war because the population would treat the return of the Jews to their homes as an “invasion.” The post-war danger to the Jews resulted from many sources. During the bloodiest of the pogroms, which claimed 42 dead and many injured in Kielce, in July 1946, police and soldiers from the Polish People’s Army were active among the crowd.

The last anti-Jewish campaign in Poland to be organized officially and on a large scale was the one that reached its peak in March, 1968¹⁹. Even Jews who were completely Polonized, as well as people suspected of Jewish origins, were dismissed from their jobs

¹⁹ In a complex intra-Party factional dispute in the late 1960s, a “Partisan” clique of former communist Resistance fighters and an ambitious group of younger apparatchiks combined to attack the entrenched party establishment, many of whom were of Jewish origin. The Soviet-led diplomatic offensive against Israel after the Six-Day War provided the pretext for using “anti-Zionism” as the key slogan when this local Polish purge (used instead of a non-existing election mechanism) broke out in March, 1968 (in an atmosphere made tense by student protests and Dubcek’s short-lived reforms in neighboring Czechoslovakia). At the time and for many years later, few Poles outside the Party elite knew (or cared, probably) about the real issues. Nevertheless, an “anti-Zionist” campaign filled the media, including speeches by First Secretary Gomułka to factory audiences obediently holding the appropriate signs and banners. Right down to the grass-roots, party-cell level, “Zionists” were publicly denounced and expelled, and the press enthusiastically published the details. Excluding mistakes and exceptions, only Jews, of course, could be accused of “Zionism,” and every Jew was accused. The obsession spread to the arts, publishing, and industrial management; in effect, every professionally active person of Jewish origin was pressured to leave the country. Considering the atmosphere, many did so enthusiastically; others left under duress. As in the case of the Kielce Pogrom of 1946, the world could only wonder how such a thing could happen in post-Shoah Europe. As Rafael Scharf has remarked, the most telling thing is that, for all those years, tabs were kept on exactly who was of Jewish descent.

and harassed in order to encourage them to emigrate. This campaign was organized at the highest levels of authority and was part of an intra-party power struggle. It did not originate at the grass-roots level. For outside observers, however, it cast a shadow on the image of Poland. Its nature and dimensions remain unique in post-war Europe.

The struggle against “Jewish communism” is a characteristic theme on the Polish political scene. It was there before the war and during the war. It was present in a certain sense after the war, and it is still warmed up from time to time even now. The accusations intensified in the years 1939-1941 as a result of the participation by Jews in the authorities created in the Polish eastern lands after they were seized by the Red Army. It is a fact that many Jews, like other minorities in the same territories, spent little time mourning the passing of a Polish state in which they felt like second-class citizens. They looked on the change in power with a certain hope, and in some cases with enthusiasm – positions that they could never have dreamed about in Poland, in administration or the military, for instance, now became accessible to them. For Poles, this was treason. Yet Polish public opinion was blind to the fact that there were Jewish politicians, like the Bund leaders Henryk Ehrlich and Wiktor Alter²⁰, who remained entirely loyal to the vanquished Polish state. Furthermore, Jews shared the woes of the time: they constituted 30% of the Polish citizens deported eastward into the Russian interior. Some Jews were happy to be out of Hitler’s reach. Yet it is also a fact of which Poles are unaware that thousands of Jews refused to accept Soviet passports early in the war

²⁰ These anti-communist leaders of the Bund, or Jewish Socialist Party, the most powerful Jewish political group before the war, were members of the Socialist International executive. They were killed by the Soviet NKVD in December, 1941, although the Soviets refused until 1943 to reveal their fate.

and asked permission to return to the territory occupied by the Germans. Many such people were deported eastward rather than being allowed to travel west. The journey east, although undertaken against their will, saved their lives. It might be said that deportation was fortunate for them – a paradox that did not form part of the Polish experience. Poles still argue today over which occupation was worse, German or Soviet. For Jews, the question is not open to discussion.

Once the war had ended, the accusation about “Jewish communism” took on substance as a result of the widespread participation by Jews in the newly-created system of rule that had been imposed on the country. Polish public opinion failed to note two key facts. First, the majority of the Jews, whether they had survived in Poland or returned from the Soviet Union, tried to leave Poland as quickly as possible. Second, the reasons that people joined the communists had nothing to do with their origins. Jews did not participate in authority as a group, but rather as individuals, and not as Jews, but as communists. During the Stalinist period, the Jews were subject to the same restrictions as everyone else. No anti-communist Jewish institutions had any hope of surviving. Stalin’s antisemitism was well known in the West and provided the viewpoint from which Poland was observed. The concept of “Jewish secret policeman” became a symbol that was widely current in Polish public opinion; the West is rather more familiar with the Kielce pogrom.

From the start, there was no shortage of Jewish victims of communist oppression. However, this did not determine the atmosphere in Poland; rather, the populace remembered the frequency with which they encountered Jewish officers, party confidants, and fanatical Marxists. Such people usually did not want to be Jewish. They tried to keep their distance from Jewish organizations and Jewish concerns. As a rule, they opted for total assimilation and

the rejection of the distinction between Jews and Poles. They were often Polonized, and even more often attempted to conceal their origins. This made them all the more conspicuous.

Can the argument about “Jews in the UB”²¹ be used against Jews, including those from the West? Today’s Poles have had a taste of such accusations. In the 1990s, the Polish minority in Lithuania was often unenthusiastic about Lithuanian independence, and some Polish leaders there proposed a Polish autonomous region connected with Moscow. How can Poles be pro-Soviet? Such behaviour results not from their nature, but rather from their situation as a minority and their fear of the triumphant nationalism of the majority.

6. Acceptance

Although less known around the world, pro-Jewish attitudes have always been present in Poland. For many generations, Jews were accepted as a natural ingredient in the country, different but familiar, fulfilling necessary functions. Modern nationalism, however, emphasized that the presence of Jews is harmful. Stressing their differences with the Jews was one way of awakening the national consciousness of the common people. The identification of Poles with Catholicism was intended to lead to national purity. Piłsudski and his followers, with their vision of a multi-ethnic Poland as a

²¹ The UB (*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* – the Security Bureau) was the communist political police in the Stalinist period (1944-1956). It used methods of terror and provocation in an effort to crush non-communist and anti-communist social structures, including the Catholic Church. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet occupation of Poland (1944-1945), the UB functioned openly as an auxiliary to the Soviet Secret Police.

successor to the Polish state that had been wiped off the map in the eighteenth century, represented a different approach. Piłsudski himself had no time for antisemitism, and the right wing accused his governments of excessive liberalism towards the Jews. It is a fact that, despite increasing emigration, the majority of Jews saw their future in Poland. While the Zionists advocated emigration, they were opposed by both the Orthodox traditionalists and the Socialists in the Bund, and thus by the majority. In 1928, the Yiddish author Szalom Asz wrote, “Fate has linked us to the Polish nation for eternity.” Some Jews from Poland were proud of their Polishness. One example is Artur Rubinstein, the famous pianist. Many Poles are also proud of such Jews and their accomplishments.

There is universal recognition in Poland of the Jewish contribution, by artists, writers, scientists and industrialists, to the country’s culture. The pithy remark attributed to a pre-World War II provincial governor of Lwów reflects this: “Jews? Emigrate? Hell, stay here and make Polish culture!” The presence of traditional Jews, with their customs, folklore and cooking, gave Polish life an additional dimension. That world has passed irrevocably into history. Some Poles do not even know the source of the challah bread, matzo or “Jewish-style carp.” Many others sense how the country has been impoverished. As the poet Zbigniew Herbert put it, “Poland without Jews (and other minorities) is not Poland.”

That bygone Poland sometimes crops up in unexpected places. The folk image of the Jew combines such negative traits as dirtiness and collusion with the devil, with positive ones like wisdom and healing powers. It was not only Jews who sought the advice of the tzaddik, the charismatic Hasidic leader, the Rebbe. Long after the war, non-Jews were still going to the grave of a tzaddik, in some abandoned or even devastated cemetery, to ask for interces-

sion.

Jewish culture reached its greatest development among the landscapes, folklore and even the historical events of old Poland, and that culture is therefore Polish in a certain sense. This is best illustrated by Stanisław Vincenz,²² who recorded that world of rich complexity. A Hasid told him how he was studying Russian and Polish literature: Russian literature is Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, human affairs, while Polish literature is religious affairs: the Great Magid, the words of the Baal Shem-Tov, Mendel of Witebsk, Nachman of Bratslav and the others. Through the legacy of such writers, something of old Poland survives today in the wider world.

Polish consciousness contains instances where Polish-Jewish cooperation took on a form so profound that it has become symbolic: Berek Joselewicz formed Jewish units that fought in Kościuszko's 1794 Uprising; Michał Landy took the cross from a wounded Catholic during an anti-Tsarist demonstration in 1861 and was himself shot dead; Ber Meisels, as chief rabbi of Warsaw, supported actions against the Russian partitioning power.²³ Meisels even remarked in a sermon that Moses Isserles, the great Talmudic authority and sixteenth-century rabbi of Krakow, "indicated to us that we should love the Polish nation above all other nations, for the Poles have been our brothers for centuries." This is striking testimony to a pro-Polish attitude that contemporary Jews may find

²² Author of epic, quasi-mythical accounts of the multi-ethnic world of his homeland in the Eastern Carpathians (now Ukraine), an area associated with the rise of the Hasidim, many of whose tales Vincenz collected. After World War II, he lived near the Alps.

²³ Particularly among those who favored cultural assimilation or proclaimed themselves "Poles of Jewish origin" or "Poles of the Mosaic faith," these historical figures were, before the war, icons of Jewish commitment to Polish independence, and therefore of Jewish loyalty to the Polish state.

unimaginable.

Jankiel, in Adam Mickiewicz’s epic poem “Pan Tadeusz”,²⁴ is an extraordinary figure who may have no parallel in other literatures. This “honest Jew,” who “loved Poland like a Pole,” is a mainstay of patriotism. And this is hardly the only example of Mickiewicz’s philosemitism. His idea of forming a “Jewish Legion” may have led nowhere, but his injunction to honour and accord equal rights to “Israel, the older brother” set an important pro-Jewish precedent. Even when the tide later turned, Mickiewicz remained such an important architect of the Polish national vision that his precepts retained some currency. People unfamiliar with Polish culture and the role that the poet-prophet plays in it can have no idea of his importance. Every Polish child learns about Jankiel.

Jankiel was a traditional Jew. The nineteenth century brought assimilation and the appearance of new types of Jews, and thus of Poles. The novelist Józef Ignacy Kraszewski wrote to his father that the financier Leopold Kronenberg,²⁵ recently baptized, “is no worse a Pole than we are.” Polonization may be treated as testimony to the attractiveness of Polish culture, and this helps account for the sympathy shown by Polish intellectuals. Assimilation found disfavour, however, among followers of the Jewish national movements. It was not always accompanied by baptism. In the first census held in independent Poland, in 1922, one-fourth of the people who were Jewish by religious denomination declared themselves to be of Polish nationality.

²⁴ One of the main works by Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), the foremost Polish Romantic poet, and still a major influence on Polish culture.

²⁶ An industrialist, financier and philanthropist, Leopold Kronenberg (1812-1878) provided substantial funding for the 1863 Uprising.

7. Opportunities

Is a Poland without antisemitism possible? Can good Polish-Jewish relations be achieved? There can be no doubt that relations with Jews have always rather divided than united Poles. The affirmation of Polishness need not be connected with antisemitism, just as the affirmation of Jewishness need not involve an aversion to Poland. It remains a fact that, while some Poles have always been friendly to Jews, they have seldom set the prevailing tone.

True Polish-Jewish contacts belong to the past. With the possible exception of the problem of the restitution of property, which involves nothing specifically Jewish, there are no longer any real Polish-Jewish conflicts, only controversies over symbols and the interpretation of the past. The controversy over the convent at Auschwitz could be perceived as another exception.²⁶ Yet it, too, was concerned with the sphere of symbols. Around the world, Auschwitz has become a symbol of the destruction of the Jews; in Poland, it is also a symbol of the sufferings of the Poles. The controversy represented an opportunity for the two sides to understand each other better. So far, however – apart from numerous exceptions on both sides – a lack of understanding is dominant. The Jews wanted Poles to acknowledge their guilt towards the Jews. The Poles wanted Jews to stop treating Poland as an antisemitic nation and admit that they had reasons for gratitude to the Poles.

To give an example, the negative stereotype can be detected in the relatively widespread use of the phrase “Polish concentration

²⁶ For more details, see above Chapter 1, 3.1.

camp” by the Western media. While it often refers to the geographical location, the adjective “Polish” suggests Polish guilt. In many countries Polish complicity has become an obvious association. This is unjust, even though Poles have not passed the test with which the Holocaust faced the nation. However, despite the anti-Jewish attitudes and activities of many Polish Christians, Poles were only among the inmates of Nazi camps, which were planned and run by Germans and Austrians, with many Ukrainian guards, never Polish ones. That is why the phrase “Polish camps” is offensive to us, especially in view of the virtual lack of the proper attribution of the creators and managers of the Nazi camps, the Germans. The proper phrase in connection with Auschwitz and other death camps may be “Nazi-German camp in Poland” or “Nazi camp in German-occupied Poland”. This point was forcefully made in a public statement of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), released in February 2005 by its executive director, David Harris. I am glad that in this way a major American Jewish organization has joined the efforts of Polish institutions.

The above example is an exception rather than the rule. The less understanding from the other side, the greater the wall dividing “insensitive Poles” from “ungrateful Jews”; can that wall ever be torn down?

Among the Polish intelligentsia, there has been growing interest for more than two decades in Jewish culture, the history of the Jews in Poland, and Judaism. The sources run deep. First, it is an effort to reach all the wellsprings of Polishness. Second, it results from a reorientation of Church teachings, which now acknowledge the permanent values of Jews and Judaism. Some religious young Poles go even further than the official Church position. They regard it as obvious that no attempt should be made to convert Jews; that Jews should be Jews in a religious sense. There is also some interest in the state of Israel, which has overturned many of the old stereotypes about Jews. There are as well more and

more valuable attempts at Christian-Jewish dialogue in Poland²⁷, although the numerical disproportion between the two faiths is greater in Poland than in other countries active in the dialogue. Polish historians are cooperating with their Western and Israeli colleagues in studying the history of the Jews in Poland. To mention another recent initiative, the Forum for Dialogue among Nations has been running exchange programs of Polish and American Jewish groups, with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, and in partnership with the American Jewish Committee. All these efforts have an elitist nature, although it is the elite which finally shapes popular thinking.

The elites, however, are not unanimous. Respect for Judaism may be taught in one church while the notorious antisemitic forgery “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” is sold in another; one church may preach tolerance while another enjoins the faithful to vote only for “true Poles.” Poets shape the way Poles think, but Mickiewicz, Norwid²⁸ and Miłosz are not the only poets. For the majority of Poles, the image of the Jews is symbolized not so much by Jankiel as by the sinister figure of Pankracy, the “convert” who leads a destructive revolution in Krasiński’s “Un-Divine Comedy”²⁹.

The most important factor is the atmosphere created by the public authorities and the silent majority. The pro-Nazi graffiti on the walls of Polish cities or the broken windows in Jewish institutions are the work of a minority. Yet they will remain an accepted, “normal” part of Polish life unless they are loudly condemned by the authorities, the Church, moral authorities and passers-by.

²⁷ See Chapters 7 and 8 below.

²⁸ Cyprian Norwid, an important nineteenth-century Polish poet who lived in Paris, and became well-known only in the twentieth century.

²⁹ This is another major literary work of an important nineteenth-century Romantic poet.

For a long time, criticism of traditional antisemitism in post-war Poland was difficult. Not all truths could be spoken aloud; taboos prevailed in the history of Polish antisemitic attitudes of the 1940s. Public criticism of communist antisemitism was practically unthinkable until the rise of “Solidarity,” which also represented a turning point in the discussion of Jewish affairs. Then, however, it also turned out that the post-1968 emigration of most of the Jews or people of Jewish origin had not eliminated the false charge that the high number of Jews in the country lay behind unpopular attitudes, distortions of the truth and hostile acts.

Too many Jews? Before the war, the finger was pointed at a minority of more than three million, and at the role of Jews in the economy and culture. Even those who held that the Jews made a positive contribution had to admit that those three million were indeed present in Poland. After the war there were only a few hundred thousand to point at, and most of them were in the process of emigrating. Yet the Jewish communists were still there, occupying high posts in the power structure, including the secret police. Even those who believed that they were acting as communists and not as Jews had to admit that they were indeed present. Later, in the 1960s, the Party pointed the finger at the Marxist revisionists of Jewish descent and their children among the rebellious students. Even those who, like the majority of the intelligentsia, held that those revisionists were working for the good of the country and that it was better for Stalinists to become anti-Stalinists than vice-versa, still had to admit that they were indeed present. Later, the finger was pointed at KOR³⁰ and at the advisers to “Solidarity.”

³⁰ “Komitet Obrony Robotników” – the Committee for the Defense of the Workers, the first overt structure of the Polish democratic opposition, was founded after the 1976 suppression by the communist authorities of striking industrial workers. Its activists have been active, and in some cases prominent, in Polish politics since 1989.

After 1981, it was pointed at the Rakowski government and the anti-communist political underground. Then it was pointed at the Mazowiecki government, and serious politicians warned that if the government adopted policies unfavourable to peasants, “then we will have antisemitism.” Finally, it was pointed at President Kwaśniewski and other pro-European Union politicians. There has always been someone to point the finger at!

According to surveys made in 1992 and 2002³¹, asked the question about the number of Jews in Poland, 27% in 2002 (23% in 1992) said “many”, and 45% said “few” in 2002 (37% in 1992). Asked to check a number, 2.5% showed “several million” (!) (in 1992, 3.5%), and 9% “hundreds of thousands” (13.6% in 1992). And the real number is dozens of thousands.³² All of this clearly shows that antisemites do not care about the number of Jews. Some sort of magical process occurs. The presence of Jews, real or imagined, is more important than the arguments. So it is when a mythical national purity and a closed, homogenous faith become the overriding goals. Explaining evil by way of Jewish influences is a sickness that endangers democracy. How can Poland ever attain normality?

Jews, who as a rule are now Jews only by reason of descent, are engaged on various sides in many conflicts. Yet antisemites only point the finger at their opponents. After 1989, the Star of David is added to many election posters in order to discredit the candidate. Similarly, the Jewishness of people accused of crimes is noted, like the head of a post-war camp where under the command of Solomon Morel – who has recently escaped to Israel – prisoners were

³¹ Data taken from: Ireneusz Krzemiński (ed.) *Antysemityzm w Polsce i na Ukrainie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2004.

³² More about the difficult problem of establishing the number of Jews currently living in Poland is said in Chapter 6.

tortured, not infrequently to death; or the crooks who escaped to Israel in the 1990s to avoid prosecution for fraud. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine anyone publicly mentioning the Jews on his own side of the political barrier in a matter-of-fact way, let alone doing so with pride. Doing so would mean displeasing both the antisemites and the people who wish to conceal their own Jewish ancestors. Yet why not do so? Only when this becomes conceivable and ultimately natural – not to say obligatory – will antisemitism have been vanquished.

