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Poles and Jews in the 20th Century. The Persistence of Stereotypes after the Holocaust¹

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The speaker of Parliament addresses a letter to the head of a distant state. *Re:* the entrance fee purportedly to be charged visitors to a museum. The speaker requests the head of state to waive this fee. The speaker's name is Shevach Weiss, the president's Lech Wałęsa. The museum is located at Auschwitz. And the supposedly planned entrance fee had never been envisaged.

This and many other examples clearly show to what an extent everlasting misunderstanding is a constitutive feature of Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israeli relations. The extermination of the Polish Jews by the Nazis was carried out more than fifty years ago, the emigration of the majority of Holocaust survivors took place in the late 1940s, and the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 occurred over a quarter of a century ago. In no other instance has the history of an inter-community relationship in Poland focused so much attention; neither Germans nor Ukrainians or Russians, not to mention Slovaks, Lithuanians or Czechs are present in public opinion in the same manner as Jews. The heritage of almost one thousand years of living side by side is very difficult to assess, a millennium that, in present-day perspective, is compressed into not quite a century of ill will, enmity, and hatred.

I

The Jewish legacy in Poland is generally treated from a highly selective point of view, encompassing but a fraction of common Jewish-Polish history, about one tenth in chronological terms. Yet, this segment of history is laden with exceptional emotional tension. During the 1980s, the notion of 'allo-Semitism' flourished in Polish society: Poles, intellectuals in particular, were made out to be neither anti- nor philo-Semitic. In reality, the theme left no one indifferent.

The historian confronted with such a state of affairs should doubtless plead vehemently for the entire complex of issues involved to be considered globally, and, necessarily, in a de-emotionalized manner. One should, one must... yet the

¹The present contribution was first published in German, in 1993, under the title 'Polen und Juden im 20. Jahrhundert. Zum Fortleben von Stereotypen nach dem Holocaust' in Erwin Oberländer, ed., *Polen nach dem Kommunismus*, pp. 71-79. Franz Steiner Verlag (Stuttgart) kindly granted us permission to publish the present English translation, to which the author added a postscript in November 1999.

outlook is not particularly promising. Polish-Jewish relations are all too eloquent an example of just how little rationality can be expected to achieve.

II

Neither of the two nations has fully surmounted that which occurred between them (or in front of its own eyes) over the past hundred years. 'The Pole', qua eternal anti-Semite, imbibes the hatred of Jews with his mother's milk: an Israeli Prime minister not long ago recurred to this image of his childhood neighbors. 'The Pole', one sometimes hears, assailed Jews before the First World War, properly plagued them before the Second, joyfully lent support the Holocaust under Nazi occupation, organized pogroms after 1945, only to remain thereafter, when all objects of hatred had been effectively eliminated, attached to an 'anti-Semitism without Jews'. So much for Jewish emotions whose casting in black and white can only be understood if the telescoping of historical legacy is taken into account.

Polish stereotypes do no more justice to historical reality. 'The Jew' drew profit from the backwardness of his elected Polish homeland during the 19th century. He eagerly collaborated with the communists after the rebirth of the Polish State, only then to join in 'stabbing in the back' the Second Republic and, ultimately, to enlist as the Soviets' henchmen in imposing people's 'democracy'. Today, Jews are said to manipulate Polish politics as well as the country's economy from behind the scenes, just as they always have done.

We need not stress further how biased both representations are; they prove more interesting as evidence in support of the thesis that neither nation has yet mastered its own history, nor that of their reciprocal relations in the past. How else could one hope to account for the obdurate tenacity of this accumulation of lies and half-truths?

III

In both images, historical reality is an undesired, marginal occurrence, a perturbing factor precisely because it is different and much more complex. I will attempt to illustrate this by briefly summarizing the results of research concerning the so-called inter-war period. Throughout Central Europe, modern anti-Semitism was rooted in the relative success of the Jewish bourgeoisie at the time of the Emancipation. In partitioned Poland, where the percentage of Jews in the urban population was very considerable, one inclined to overlook just how high the corresponding proportion of those who lost out to modernization was: in the eyes of many, all Jews were bankers and lawyers even though the great majority had remained proletarians or beggared members of a quasi-petty-bourgeoisie.

In 1918, the overwhelming majority of Jews found themselves confronted suddenly with a Polish state, which they had expected neither in its actual nor any other form. Polish citizens of Jewish creed did enter Parliament and were, as individuals, placed on a footing of equality with others, yet felt themselves to be disadvantaged, live components of the 'Jewish question'. And this question never found an answer: neither through assimilation nor the claim to a specific identity, neither through emigration nor the communist revolution. None of these partially fulfilled ideas offered a viable resolution of the problem concerning 3 million Polish Jews, which was the object almost incessant debate from 1918 to 1939 among left- and right-wingers, Poles and Jews alike.

We cannot explore this issue here in any detail. Suffice it to appreciate that the portrayal of Jews as a 'mediating minority' with regard to their socio-economic role, was compounded with the recognition of their existence as a culturally autonomous community representing 10% of the entire population. This combination was viewed from all quarters as a potential source of conflict. Reliable historians hardly have an encouraging word to spare about the Polish-Jewish contiguity-without-intimacy of the 1930s. Jews were purged from the civil service and municipal enterprises. Fiscal and economic policy was anti-Jewish. Punch-ups and pogroms took place at universities and market places. A *numerus clausus* obtained in higher education and a *numerus nullus* (referred to in less distinguished terms as the 'Aryan paragraph') was imposed in several associations and professional groups. The state supported the boycott of Jewish trade. All of these factors support the contention that the Polish Second Republic was, during the last two years of its existence, well on the way to demoting its Jewish nationals to second-class citizens. Ezra Mendelson sums up his research concerning these issues in the following terms: as occurred in other countries of the region, a narrow-minded nationalism took hold Poland on the eve of war, which deprived the Jews of any hope of durable cohabitation with the state's core nation. In 1939, Poland was a relatively free, nationalistic and anti-Jewish land. These three factors, namely a general context propitious to a further straining of relations, the exacerbation of nationalism and the challenge of anti-Semitism, would all have led, in different ways, to the emergence of a new policy toward Jews. Indeed, the Jews should have been grateful for this, just as America should have been toward Britain for persecuting the Pilgrims.

Mendelson's ironic conclusion, however bitter, can hardly be rejected as unfair. Poles who do not possess specialist knowledge read such verdicts with surprise to say the least: compared to the situation of Jews in major neighboring countries, that of their Polish brethren was rather enviable. Was not Polish Jewry the heart of the Diaspora? Were not, even in the grim year 1937, 450 books in Yiddish or Hebrew published with a total distribution of 657,000 copies? Was it not in Poland, at the same time, that one in five secondary school graduates and one in seven newly hired academics was Jewish? That 130 Jewish periodicals were issued and 15 theatres played in Yiddish, and Jewish organizations of all descriptions were just as free or hampered in their activities

as Polish ones? And were not doubts founded as to the loyalty of Jews toward the state: some sought to emigrate to Palestine, whereas others formed the hard core of the Polish Communist Party?

Both assessments of the relationship between the Second Polish Republic and its Jewish citizens reflect elementary facts. Each image sketched out has its counter-image. One cannot be understood without the other. This reciprocal determination, this plurality of references and grounds for condemnation rarely comes to the forefront of debate.

The surprise attack of Poland by the Third Reich seemed to deprive this conflict of any relevance insofar as it confronted Poles and Jews with a totally new situation. Today we know that it was indeed incomparable to anything that had occurred before 1939. Yet, contemporaries reacted to this totally new situation as if the hitherto prevailing constellation were to persist.

IV

When Poles and Jews today speak at cross-purposes, this is often due to the fact that the phenomenon of Nazi rule in Poland remains as inscrutable as ever for a normally sensitive person. One attempts to fathom the unexplainable through known and understandable patterns of thought. Put differently, the actual perpetrator is known and his proficiency inconceivable. So one searches for the henchman, the accomplice, because criminal complicity is easier to understand than a perfectly planned genocide.

Under the occupation, Poles and Jews were almost fully segregated. The Poles, under constant threat and victims of mass murders, became witnesses to the Holocaust. The majority did not react. A doubtless restricted minority profited by the death of their Jewish fellow citizens. Another doubtless just as restricted minority put their lives at risk to save Jews. Neither the vast majority nor the two small minorities had a statistically significant influence on the survival chances of Polish Jews. On the one hand, this fact is amply verifiable. On the other, it renders only too manifest the impotence of the historian. When we speak of millions of persons, are four- or five-digit figures indicative of marginal occurrences, indifferent, be it for better or for worse? To individuals who personally experienced Polish co-responsibility in crime or Polish help, this must rightly sound monstrous. Here, the baffled historian can only plead for lenience. For even attempts to depict reality through the analysis of individual destinies ensure little progress in our understanding. The universally known doctor Ludwik Hirszfeld survived with the aid of the Polish Resistance for two-and-a-half years on the 'Aryan side'. During this time, he had to change his hideout several times because he or his hosts felt threatened by dubious neighbors, suspected informants or suspicious happenings. What counts more: the constant fear of being delivered to the Germans by a Pole or the Polish families with which Hirszfeld lived? Abetting Jews carried a mandatory death

penalty in occupied Poland. In case of effective betrayal, any of these families could have been wiped out.

That such a past has indelibly and irremediably marked collective memory on both sides should, at this stage, be clear. Yet, allow me to reiterate this point: the Second World War left the Poles with a feeling of having experienced an exceptional martyrdom. They fought longer than anyone else, and suffered incomparably more than most. Nonetheless, at Yalta, they were simply given up to the Soviets. In this self-representation of the victim, neither the Holocaust nor the Jewish accusation of indifference found room, let alone the reproach of betrayal to the enemy. Firstly, the Jews had demonstrably suffered more than Poles. Secondly, the recriminations of the survivors destroyed the self-image of a 'Nation without a Quisling', and proud to be one, of a Nation that had not brought forth traitors. One third of those persons designated by Israel as 'Righteous Among the Nations' were indeed Poles. Should this not suffice to exonerate the society at large from reproof? Thirdly, it appeared to those incriminated as if, in the shadow of the Cold War, the Jewish victims had 'taken away' the place of the Poles in the eyes of world opinion. This suspicion did not appear unfounded as regarded the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s. Foreign reaction to these grievances was simple: vengeance had been taken by banishing Jewish suffering and, moreover, the entire history of Polish Jewry, from Polish consciousness.

V

If 3.5 million Jews had lived in pre-war France or Italy, if millions of them had been murdered in either of these countries whereas the majority of French or Italians had survived, the Jewish heritage would have been just as difficult to cope with as in Poland. In contrast, France or Italy would have had fifty years to master this past or at least to come to terms with it. In Poland, however, the best part of the post-war years have been squandered in this regard, partially for external reasons, and partially for reasons directly related to our subject

'The Jews and the People's Republic of Poland': This topic was, along with discussion concerning the inter-war period and the Occupation, one of the three major themes of national debate during the 1980s. Anti-Semitism had in many regards survived the war: as a qualm of conscience, as the fear felt by the profiteers of 'Aryanization' that Jewish owners would return, as a traditional, characteristically Catholic prejudice against aliens. The Polish, strongly anti-Semitic Right had experienced just as many losses in its ranks under German and Soviet occupation as other political groups. As opposed to those of other countries, however, Polish Rightists did not collaborate. After 1945, the new ruling apparatus having in part been composed of communists of Jewish origin, Rightists saw this as substantiating their phantasm of a universal Jewish conspiracy. The writings of the anti-communist Resistance circulated during the

immediate post-war period led one to the conclusion that the communist take-over of 1945 was actually a Jewish take-over: communists = Jews, communism = domination of a minority over Poles; consequently: communist rule = Jewish rule over the Poles. Inversely, government propaganda of the late 1940s and 1950s put forward just as simple a sequence: anti-communists = reactionaries, reactionaries = anti-Semites; consequently: anti-communists = anti-Semites. The fact that Politburo members of Jewish origin had long ago split with the Jewish community by joining the Communist Party, that anti-communism at once implied a recognition of basic democratic values, that either equation not only deprecated the identity of the other party, but equally falsified one's own, none of these points, once again, fit into the desired picture.

This prevaricated start was to mark several subsequent decades. Already in 1956 a faction of the Party leadership resorted to latent, veiled anti-Semitism, and barely lost out in its struggle for power. In 1968, another faction of the Polish United Workers' Party leadership played the same card and was almost successful in its bid for power. The so-called 'events of March' 1968 freed the communists of the stigma of not being a 'national' force: they took up the arm of anti-Semitism that had, until then, been used against them and directed it toward any actual or purported opposition. All those who criticized the regime were thrown into the same box and labeled 'Jews and revisionists'. The emigration of some 20,000 to 30,000 persons was the immediate result of this tactic. Even more important, however, was its indirect consequence: after the system had 'proven' by brutalizing 'Jews and revisionists' that, in the latent conflict opposing the State and 'society', it stood on the side of society, the Polish-Jewish relationship could no longer be interpreted according to hitherto prevailing criteria.

The '68ers' came to form the hard core of the inner-Party opposition. Of even greater import, however, was the advent of open debate of historical issues. Ever since the general public could present its views to a wider forum, namely the beginning of the 1980s, we have witnessed the demise of historical representations concocted during the 1950s and 1960. The 'normality' purported to have characterized the pre-war period, the conduct of Poles in the face of the Holocaust and the events of the post-war period have been the object of vehement scientific and public controversy since the mid-1980s. Abroad, cognizance is often taken only those aspects of debate that confirm old convictions regarding Polish anti-Semitism, and not without good reason.

If one is to believe competent observers, the issue of Jewish heritage along the Vistula is much less prominent in Israel than in Poland. In recent years, opinion poles show that almost a third of Poles may be described as strongly to moderately anti-Semitic. A quarter of respondents say that they would refuse a transfusion of 'Jewish blood', and these are probably the same people who are convinced that the Jewish minority counts between 750,000 and 3.4 million members. In reality, Jewish organizations of all types have only about 5,000 members.

VI

Today, in Poland, there is no 'Jewish question'. There is a problem of anti-Semitism, the persistence of which bears out accepted wisdom: anti-Semitism is the problem of the anti-Semites. We know well today that every post-communist society is marked by prejudices against aliens. Jews are not the only people to be rejected as blood donors: 26% of respondents refuse the idea of a transfusion from a Black, 22% from a Chinese, 21% from an Arab; comparable series of figures emerge in response to other test questions. How then does anti-Semitism differ from general xenophobia? Surely in that it is observed more closely in Poland and abroad, be it only because Blacks, Arabs or Chinese are not serviceable *ad libitum* whereas Jews certainly are. In practical terms, this today means that anyone who is successful in Poland must expect to be called a Jew. This applies to a head of state, a minister, an actor, or simply the well-to-do: they are different and hence, for a quarter of their fellow citizens, at least potentially Jewish. I here overlook the fact that the prejudice thus conveyed is a problem that concerns a minority. I overlook the attitude of three-quarters of Poles who, so to speak, act normally. This term seems acceptable to me on the assumption that the unspoken is taken for granted and not worth mentioning.

VII

Anti-Semitism and fixation upon this problem have destroyed much more than Poland's reputation abroad. One can come to terms with the fact that as a Polish contemporary historian presenting a lecture, whatever its topic may be, one will be questioned about anti-Semitism. It is more difficult to accept that striking workers or other protestors express their scorn for politicians by shouting 'all a bunch of Jews!'. Even more difficult to overcome is the obvious meaning of such vociferation: the government, or the political class, does not satisfy the demands of strikers and is therefore bad. Since it is bad - and this is the crux of the matter -, it is alien, and since it is manifestly not composed of Blacks or Chinese, it must be made up of Jews. Associated with this old prejudice is the fear of anything new or unknown, an apparently abstruse recourse to inherited, collective defensive attitudes.

Jewish heritage in Poland today, to sum it up simply, can be described as an irregular triangle. The resurgence of interest in Jewish-Polish relations of proximity has gone largely without notice abroad because it contradicts the current stereotype, but also because such notions as the 'Bermuda triangle Drohobycz-Vitebsk-Góra Kalwaria', to which the New World owes hundreds of its greatest personalities, is neither mentally nor geographically easy to situate. The difficulties encountered by an international advisory board in formulating an adequate as possible inscription for the monument to the victims at Auschwitz-Birkenau attract much more attention. Indeed Auschwitz-Birkenau

is one of the few places in Poland that one can relate to in Stockholm or New York. This question refers back to the stereotype of 'Polish extermination camps', an expression that recently cropped up in the official translation of a speech delivered by the Israeli Prime minister.

Largely hidden behind, indeed sometimes confused with the Auschwitz memorial monument, a so to speak ordinary anti-Semitism vegetates on in Poland. It gives the impression of being the empty shell of its historical predecessor, a more or less obtuse defensive reaction against the dangers of impending modernization, a strongly stratum-related rejection against the intrusion of new patterns of behavior. As a politician in present-day Poland, one is fully aware of this danger, as an historian, one should remain attentive to all of these considerations.

Postscript

In the seven years that have past since 1993, much has changed in the field of Polish-Jewish relations. The contentions made above can be argued even more forcefully today, in the light of recent events. There is proof enough both of the vitality of anti-Semitism without Jews as of the increasing sensitivity and will of public opinion to react to this phenomenon. Let us recall the most outstanding events. Firstly, the endless strife over the Auschwitz cloister, the planned construction of a supermarket there, the conflict concerning the crosses at the 'gravel pit' (*zwirowisko*) and the papal interventions that contributed to the solution of these problems. Secondly, the 1996 commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Kielce pogrom at which the Prime minister in exercise recognized Polish guilt and asked for pardon, whereas Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel just as publicly argued against the crosses. Thirdly, the discovery that one of Solidarity's founding fathers, Father Henryk Jankowski, is a steadfast anti-Semite whom the Church hierarchy finally muzzled but did not revoke. This enumeration shows clearly that, at least as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, Polish-Jewish relations remain a sore issue. The recognition of past faults, as advocated and practiced by certain Church dignitaries, does not yet suit everyone.

Increasing sensitivity toward traditional Polish behavior patterns is also apparent outside the Church. The Polish Republic recently became a member of NATO and thus transferred of its own free will a parcel of sovereignty to the supranational structure of the North-Atlantic Alliance. Acceptance into this club required years of efforts and intensive lobbying in Washington. During that period, it will have become apparent to all elements of the Polish political class that disregard for Jewish susceptibilities and for the special place of the Holocaust in the historical consciousness of the western elite was the surest way to ruin Polish chances of ensuring its national security. Indeed, a broad spectrum of prominent Jews in the United States pleaded in favor of the

accession of the land of their fathers and grand-fathers to the alliance. Entrance into NATO and the silent recognition of the exceptional role of the United States were tied to another aspect of Polish-Jewish relations, namely the property issue. In 1999, the heirs of Polish Jews who had acquired American citizenship after 1945 went to American courts to sue for the restitution of their former assets and possessions. The issue received first-page coverage in the largest Polish daily for weeks. The courts finally turned down the claim, but the case is by no means settled. In October 1999, a number of United States representatives and senators, informed by plaintiffs' lawyers, admonished the Polish government to accelerate the process of re-privatization. In Poland, the restitution of property nationalized by the communists is of course a political issue of a very special kind. It is not perchance that ten years after the fall of communism no re-privatization law has been passed. It is thus safe to assume that this matter will remain high on the political agenda in the coming decade.

Although overshadowed by the debate concerning the revision of Polish-Jewish relations with respect to Church and foreign affairs, phenomena observed in 1993 remained prominent in public life. Just as seven years earlier, anti-Semitic wall scrawls are among the graffiti that mar facades, and anti-Semitic slander by word of mouth was, to the extent that it could be reconstructed through the press, part of the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns. Yet, the impact of such defamation on the outcome of voting appears to have been insignificant since those who disseminated it considered practically all candidates – inasmuch as they were successful politicians – to be 'Jews' anyway. More or less openly anti-Semitic splitter groups did not, however, receive more than 1% of votes.

Finally, mention must be made of the concern with Polish-Jewish relations in academic and cultural circles. The discussion has in no way diminished in intensity, quite to the contrary. We today know much more about our relations than we did seven years ago. The press reports debates between members of the Jewish community of Poland speaking of their understanding of self and (decidedly secular) critics from Israel. In 1998, the 30th anniversary of the 'March campaign' of 1968 set a milestone in the cultural landscape of Warsaw, notably among journalists and historians. Interest concerning bygone Polish Jewry has not dwindled. The never-ending story of catching up on decades of lost opportunities, attempts by persons of good will on both sides to foster dialogue, just as the monologues of the incorrigible in Polish, Hebrew or English, will surely accompany us for decades to come.