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POLISH JEWS: MEMORY AND HERITAGE

by Jan Zaborowski

Jan Zaborowski (Roman Catholic) is a Warsaw journalist and editor. He is a member of the Christian Social Association and is on the editorial board of the C.S.A. Information Bulletin and Studia i dokumenty Ekumeniczne. He has done research on Holocaust-related issues and lectured on Polish-Jewish relations to Jews and Christians the U.S.A.

1. Jews made up the oldest—next to the native Poles—ethnic group in the Polish society since its constitution in the 10th-11th century. A rapid growth of the Jewish population in the Middle Ages, paired with favorable conditions for development, led to the establishment of a numerous and stable Jewish community which survived the time of Austrian, Prussian, and Russian rule in Poland (1795-1918) and, in the inter-war period, reached about 3.5 million people. In 1939, this was one tenth of Poland's population and one third of the total number of Jews in Europe.

2. The development of such a strong Jewish community in Poland was due to the persecution of Jews in, and their expulsion from, Western Europe and Russia; Poland let them in and created conditions for their cultural and religious growth.

3. The Polish Jews enjoyed till 1795 far-reaching religious, cultural, social, and legal autonomy. It was due both to their number and their economic role (craftsmen and merchants in towns), and to the Polish legal and social tolerance. The interpenetration of the two cultures—the Jewish minority and the Polish majority—was a natural phenomenon in the several hundred years of their coexistence; it did not, however, distort the individual character of the Jewish community. On the contrary, it enriched both sides.

4. The autonomous, uninterrupted (and at times even flourishing) development of the Jewish culture, in particular as regards cult and religious studies, made the Jewish community in Poland a repository of authentic "Jewishness" for the whole Jewish world population. Moreover, Poland became the place of birth (or rebirth) of certain forms of Jewish culture and religiousness that gave new impulses and enriched the Jewry as a whole.

5. Poland's economic deterioration, beginning mid-17th century, caused deterioration of the economic situation of its population (gentry and peasantry) and the resulting growing poverty among the Jewish population in towns and townships. As early as the 18th century, this gave rise to the "Jewish question"—first, a social and
religious issue inside the Jewish community; second, a national dilemma of Jewish poverty that had to be included in the program of reforms initiated in the second half of the 18th century. The reforms were interrupted by the partitions of Poland, and the Jewish people, together with the whole Polish society, entered the stage of domination by hostile foreign powers that was to last through the whole of the 19th century and terminated in 1918.

6. The times of foreign rule in Poland (1795-1918) were particularly difficult for the Jewish population. First, the three foreign ruling countries pursued in full consciousness the policy of flaring-up, or else instigating, social, national, and religious divergences and conflicts. This only added to a deterioration of the link between the Jewish minority and the Polish majority (cf. also between Jews and Ukrainians on the southeast territories), and weakened the attitudes of social solidarity among the Jews. The lack of a common, Polish, national link undermined the loyalty of all minorities (thus, e.g., Polish Jews being formally "Russian Jews," "Austrian Jews," or "Prussian Jews"), which must have influenced their attitudes towards the Polish majority—the latter being a hostile "minority" for the occupying powers. This state of affairs certainly facilitated the execution of the policy of divide et impera. In addition, the integrity of the Jewish population, as well as the Polish-Jewish solidarity under the Russian rule, were impaired by "litvaks"—Russian Jews resettled on to the pale of settlement in former Polish territories—who were strongly Russianized and eager to cooperate with the Russian authorities.

7. The second half of the 19th century brought along the rise of Polish anti-Semitism in connection with the social developments of that era, namely the slow yet advancing industrial and social changes and, in particular, a simultaneous impoverishment of the Polish village (the effect of a delayed and misconducted enfranchisement of the peasants on territories under Austrian and Russian rule) led to a strong migration of Polish people to towns. Among them were also impoverished members of the gentry. In towns and townships, the Polish newcomers met stable and solidary Jewish communities (in smaller towns constituting up to 100 percent of all inhabitants) and reacted to this with anti-Semitism. In contrast to Western Europe, this was "social" anti-Semitism with almost no religious or "racial" elements. Moreover, even its "ideological-political" foundation was derivative, that is, made up by politicians trying to capitalize on nationalistic sentiments among the Polish people that in the 19th century were fed by other, more serious, reasons. In this way, a whole array of factors: the policy of foreign rulers, the problems of the "litvaks" and the rise of Polish anti-Semitism in the face of
economic competition, considerably deteriorated the position of Polish Jews, who had long suffered from poverty and its concomitants, the economic underdevelopment and social divisions.

These are all very difficult problems in need of further exploration. It is most crucial, however, to analyze the identity of Polish anti-Semitism: its specifics and its effects. It was certainly different from the German-Austrian anti-Semitism, heavily marked by an inferiority complex, or some forms of West European anti-Semitism, which carried more hostility (historical "enemies of Christ") than contempt. On the other hand, Polish anti-Semitism, even in its rural version, had in it a lot of nobleman's disdain and disrespect ("my poor little Jew"). That is why in the time of war, many Polish anti-Semites protected "our Jews" like a part of their own patrimony. This is obviously only an example; yet it illustrates well the psychological complexities underlying the anti-Polish resentments among the Jews. Incidentally, such resentments against the "Polish lords and masters" could be observed in many of our neighbors. Once, a similar inferiority complex was not an unusual phenomenon in Prussia! Being patted on the shoulder may hurt more than being hit. Therefore, a friendly attitude of a Pole towards a Jew still meets with mistrust—out of the Jewish fear to be patronized.

8. The above developments in the internal and external conditions of the Jewish population in Poland resulted in serious political transformations within that community. The impact of leftist ideas reached not only the Jewish proletariat (and sub-proletariat) but also large cities of the intelligentsia and even the bourgeoisie. This caused a strong influx of Jews into the Polish workers' movement; many leftist leaders were recruited from among Jewish activists. This, in turn, increased tensions and inner partitions within the Polish Left, arising, on the one hand, from tendencies to one-sided internationalism ("luxemburgism"), popular among Jewish activists, and, on the other hand, from tendencies to combine social liberation with national liberation, prevailing among socialist leaders of Polish descent. Such partitions and tensions were to persist till the sixties of this century.

9. The ideology of Zionism, most readily accepted by Jews in other countries, did not, however, enjoy much popularity among Polish Jews. Its proliferation in Poland found a powerful obstacle in Jewish folk religiousness inspired by hassidism. This kind of religiousness of mystical-eschatological character grew in the 18th century among the poorest strata of Polish Jewry out of a special interpretation of the messianic philosophy; it protested the preoccupation with temporal activities and thus opposed the use of force to combat evil. Consequently, it had to affect the way in which Polish Jews reacted to
Zionism and later to the persecution and extermination under the
German occupation.

10. Poland regained its independence in 1918, yet this did not
change the main dilemmas that had evolved in the past. The "Jewish
question" remained the key issue: multi-million masses of poor and
impoverished Jews who could not help themselves, nor could they await
assistance from the poor Polish state. The short inter-war period
(1918-1939) brought up a wide array of problems and activities both
within the Jewish community and on the side of the Polish state.
Scarcely attempts at adopting anti-Semitic solutions could be found
mainly among postulates of the rightist political opposition; if
materialized at all, they were usually confined to mere propaganda and
had no relation whatsoever to the intensity of anti-Semitic feelings
in the then Western Europe and the Danubian basin. At the same time
there were some governmental endeavors to propagate Zionism, to train
in secret militants of the Haganah and Irgun and to seek resettlement
territories for the Jews. None of these, however, had an essential
impact on the fate of Polish Jews:

11. During World War II, Jews were separated from the rest of
the society (the first ghettos in the history of Poland) and gradually
exterminated—first through devastating work and living conditions in
the ghettos, secondly in "mobile" operations of Einsatzgruppen east of
the Bug river in 1941, and lastly in "stationary" killing operations
in gas chambers at Auschwitz and at special camps of Globocnik and
Greiser. On the Jewish side, those tragic times brought to the fore
all the main elements in their tradition, the elements that were once
absorbed in the West and consolidated under the Russian persecution:
the convictions that resistance to persecutors multiplies losses, and
that violence should not be reciprocated with violence for religious
reasons (hassidism). This tradition finally included also the milita-
tant spirit of the Polish Jews: a tradition that was marginal, yet
persistent (since the 17th century) and gained strength with partici-
pation of the Jews in the Polish struggle for independence in the 19th
and 20th centuries. On the Polish side, the period under considera-
tion meant aid, private and official (organized by the Polish under-
ground), that was given in conditions much more difficult than any-
where else in Europe. Yet, it also meant subdued reactions by the
Polish society to the extermination of the Jews due to its own annihi-
lation and its almost total separation from the Jews (Jews were dying
behind the walls). Finally it meant the problem of informers and
blackmailers (shmaltzovniki), who were often successfully eliminated
by the Polish underground.

In the post-war period the problem of the leading role of Polish
Jews (including their bourgeoisie) in the Polish workers movement
culminated. The taking over of political leadership in Poland in 1944-45 by the Communist movement produced a highly significant role of the Jews in the state apparatus of repression and in key positions in propaganda and management. This phenomenon resulted in the tragic revival of Polish anti-Semitism, and, finally, in the Jewish emigration from Poland to Israel, USA, and Western Europe (including West Germany) that took place at the end of the 1940s. Let us add at this point that the emigration in question had a much more complex and weighty character than those after 1956 and 1968. Its examination would require, for example, the knowledge as to where and how the people involved spent the war (in Poland or abroad), and what they did on return to Poland and before the decision to emigrate. On the other hand, the problems of 1968 (and of 1956!)—developments at home and then the attitudes of emigrants—have been often formulated in a distorted way. These issues are, first of all, part of the history of the Polish workers' movement and they do not necessarily enter the domain of historical Polish-Jewish relations. They exceed the sphere of the Polish-Jewish relations being also an important element in the post-war relations between the government and the society in Poland (above all until 1956) and in the relations inside the Polish workers' movement (till the end of the 1960s).

13. Today, the Jewish problem—as a home issue—remains first of all a matter of national memory. Polish Jews are no longer an essential component of our national reality. What remains are relics: a few thousand old people, some Poles of Jewish descent, cemeteries and synagogues, the Jewish Historical Institute, and the Yiddish Theatre. The history of Polish Jews is a closed chapter. Their annihilation changed the composition of the Polish society which had gained its shape for nearly a thousand years. At the same time, it altered the image—and future—of the whole world Jewry. What will the Jews be in Israel and in the galut without the Galician _stetl_? It seems doubtful to me that present-day Jews—whether in America or in Israel—would remain the Jews of the Old Testament. It is to be asked whether the extermination of Polish Jews does not mean in the long run the annihilation of "prophetic Jewishness"? Does it not signify the end of the specific moral and cultural contribution of the Jews to the world civilization? What will happen in the future—not to say what is already happening—with the eternal Jewish aspiration to be "the light for the _goy-im_"? This is one of the reasons why the salvage of the heritage of Polish Jews and the cultivation of their memory are tasks important not only for the national memory of the Poles, but also for the world's "international memory." Accordingly, they are tasks crucial for the Jews themselves, no matter where they live today.
Endnotes

1 Including Austria, Bohemia, and Silesia. In the middle of the 18th century, Poland was also receiving Russian Jews—victims of persecutions and resettlements. These were, above all, inhabitants of those of Poland's eastern provinces which had been annexed by Russia in the 16th and 17th centuries. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, following the total liquidation of the Polish state, Poland's eastern and central parts were incorporated into a pale of settlement for the Jews expelled from Russia proper ("Muscovy").

2 The jocular saying "Wir stammen alle mehr oder weniger aus Galizien" (we all come more or less from Galicia) has factually a deep cultural and religious rationale.

3 Jewish-Ukrainian (Ruthenian) conflicts had a social character and dated back to the middle of the 17th century. Sometimes they assumed the form of violent excesses by Ukrainian peasants against Jews and Polish gentry.

4 For centuries the Polish society had been accustomed not only to the Jewish minority (paradisus Hebraeorum), but also to Tartars, Armenians, and Karaites.