Bourbon and Vodka: A Comparison of the Southern-Black and Polish-Jewish Questions

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BOURBON AND VODKA: A COMPARISON OF THE SOUTHERN-BLACK AND POLISH-JEWISH QUESTIONS

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"Poland is a beautiful, heart-wrenching, soul-split country which in many ways ... resembles or conjures up images of the American South--or at least the South of other, not-so-distant times ... tormented into its shape like that of the Old South out of adversity, penury, and defeat," writes William Styron in his best-selling novel Sophie's Choice. These two intriguing societies do indeed "conjure up images" which are hauntingly rich in lore and attract ample sympathizers and detractors. The following essay will compare some aspects of the recent history of anti-Black racism in the American South to anti-Semitism in Poland.

Comparative racism is, however, only a means to an end. The primary objective of this essay is to compare racism in these two societies in order to provide insight into the Polish national character. This must be done by avoiding simplistic stereotypes and by stressing the complexities of the racial issue.

A preliminary note of caution must be put forth, not as a disclaimer since racism existed and exists in both places, but to remind the reader that racism is not the sum total of either society and that this discussion is not a condemnation of either Southerners or Poles. This is an emotional and sensitive issue which often unnecessarily pushes debate to the extremes. Frequently, for example, discussants of anti-Semitism in Poland are subject to the nationalist wrath of the offended. It should be clearly understood that this essay is not calling all Poles anti-Semitic, nor does it suggest that anti-Semitism is the most important element required to understand present-day Poland. Finally, at the risk of being simplistic, the author is not singling out these two societies as the only places where overt racism has been an important social factor.

A suitable starting point would be Styron's seminal observation that Poland, "despoiled and exploited like the South, and like it, a
poverty-ridden, agrarian, feudal society, has shared with the Old South one bulwark against its immemorial humiliation, and that is pride. Pride and recollection of vanished glories. . . . In defeat both Poland and the American South bred a frenzied nationalism. 4 Southerners and Poles felt the need to soften the pain of their inglorious defeats and nurture an "indwelling heart" with the aid of bourbon or vodka, traditional values, and the preservation of a unique way of life. Styron notes that the Old South and Poland developed a passion for horseflesh and military titles, domination over women . . . , a tradition of storytelling, addiction to the blessings of firewater. There is [also] a sinister zone of likeness. . . . In Poland and the South the abiding presence of race has created at the same instant cruelty and compassion, bigotry and understanding, enmity and fellowship, exploitation and sacrifice, searing hatred and hopeless love. . . . If Poles by the thousands have sheltered Jews, hidden Jews, laid down their lives for Jews, they have also at times, in the agony of their conjugal discord, persecuted them with undeviating savagery. 5

No one familiar with the history of Poles and Jews during the darkened years of Nazi occupation is able to balance completely and satisfactorily Jewish anti-Semitism with the numerous acts of heroism displayed by the Poles who saved Jews from death camps. 6 The complicated patterns comprising the "Polish spirit" are woven from the strong fibers of Catholicism and national pride. These two forces have long served to soothe the damaged and uneasy Polish psyche. This uneasiness was the result of powerful centrifugal forces that have at times separated Poles from political control over the territory on which they have lived. Their pride suffered an especially "inglorious" and humiliating blow by the partitioning of their nation at the end of the eighteenth century and two unsuccessful revolts against Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century. In this century their nation was trampled by the Nazis and then incorporated into Pax Sovietica. These are all seen as examples of foreign control over their land and their nation. The principal elements of damage control have been the unifying powers of a shared religion as well as a fierce belief in the enduring qualities of their nationality.

The importance of nationalism, or perhaps "folk-ness," and a common religion were especially important when Poland was partitioned and denied statehood—when there were Poles, but no Poland. 7 To be Polish it was imperative that one speak Polish, have Polish parents, and be Catholic. Polak i Katolik is a very closeknit marriage. Pre-war Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and especially Jews, were not included in the "Polish family." 8 The reasons for this marriage are easily
discernible given the importance of Catholicism to the Polish people who were without a state from the late 18th to the early 20th century. Like many successful marriages there are powerful but biased bonds that unite the marriage partners and their offspring. This particular marriage of Poles and Catholicism was perceived as a symbol of their endurance as a separate nationality by generations of Poles. This union also instilled negative, xenophobic attitudes toward such non-Poles and non-Catholics as Jews in the minds of its offspring.

The question is more profound than the dislike of Jews by many Poles. There has been a conscious and successful effort to portray Jews as fundamentally different. There could be wealthy, intelligent, "decent," and good Jewish individuals, but in the abstract aggregate, they were seen as intrinsically inferior. Jews were perceived as comprising a separate caste, and "The rigidity of the social line between Poles and Jews came very close to that of the color line in the United States," since Poles could readily identify a Jew. Some feel that "Jewish visibility in Poland came close to Negro visibility in the United States." The unfortunate experiences faced by Southern Blacks and Polish Jews in the past, and to some extent still confronting them today, have many common elements. However, the most revealing comparisons surface when one views their respective contemporary positions as a by-product of recent changes in both "larger" societies. There can be no attempt to diminish the ugliness and immorality of slavery or anti-Semitism, yet they are not, by themselves, the core of this discussion. Instead the area of concern is the degree of change and the relationship of this change to an open and thorough airing of these injustices. Jan Jozef Lipski in writing about the problems connected with Poland's nationalistic chauvinism stated that "it is morally corrupt not to acknowledge the existence of moral problems just because it is more convenient not to."12

Inconvenience can sometimes be a valid reason for silence, but not if the consequences of that silence are smoldering, lingering doubts and the inability to establish an agenda aimed at rectifying past injustices. The American South has had the advantage of a cathartic airing of the wounds of racism. Polish anti-Semitism, on the other hand, has not undergone a similar examination, and the stigma of anti-Semitism has not been weakened. The residue of racism also remains in the American South but there have been real improvements over the last forty years. In the mid-1960s the Governor of Alabama denied a black man entrance to a state university. In 1984, this same governor supported a black man for president of the United States. Is this only superficial symbolism or clever politics? While rejecting
such cynicism, one cannot reasonably claim that racism in the South, or more generally in the United States, has been eliminated. Nonetheless, some of the problems connected with racism in the South have been substantially reduced.

Obviously the Southern ethos involves much more than racism. Thus while there has been measurable change in regard to several aspects of Southern life, it does not mean that the culture of the South is "disappearing as a distinctive variation in the basic American theme."13 In fact, "New Southerners" who are more cosmopolitan and have greater contact with non-Southerners, more strongly identify themselves as Southerners than those people one most frequently considered to be traditionally Southern.14 Yet, "regional differences are decreasing and may indeed be disappearing. Many aspects of Southern culture have reflected a rural economy and society, poor education and little of it, and isolation from the outside world...."15

Farming no longer enjoys the dominance it once had in the South and the engine of change is the impact of the new high tech and service industries being developed in the region. The New South has lost some of its uniquely colorful rural traditions. The columned plantation houses, hunting parties, and moonshine whiskey are giving way to condominiums, golf, and suburban cocktail parties. The cultural traditions of the South, including racism, were tied to the plantation economy, but now the Southern life-style seems to be in a period of transition. If the loss of some Southern traditions is the price for reducing racism, the cost is not too high.

The evolution of racist Southern attitudes took place without the removal of blacks from the area. This is not the case in Poland. If there is a reduction of anti-Semitism in present-day Poland, it has only been because of the virtual elimination of Jews from Poland. Most of the more than three million Jews in pre-war Poland were brutally killed in German concentration camps. In 1968, only 50,000 Jews lived in Poland and today there are less than 8,000. Most Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust and the war did not stay and assimilate; instead they emigrated. Those that remained in Poland have no economic nor political power, yet charges of "Zionism" from the authorities still surface. This has given rise to the concept of anti-Semitism without Jews.16

Conversely, blacks in the American South are an important economic and political force and as such play a central role in the process of change penetrating all corners of the region. Since the 1960s Southern blacks have taken greater control of their own destinies, while Polish Jews have left their country. Both societies have undergone great change since World War II, but the South's dynamics were
driven predominantly by economic developments, while Poland's change was primarily political and secondarily economic and social.

It may seem odd that Poland, a Marxist state, is primarily driven by political, and only secondarily by economic, factors. But Poland has not developed along the guidelines envisioned in classical Marxist literature. It has a centrally directed economy with near complete state ownership and control of the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy, but three-quarters of its farmland is privately owned. It is a one-party state directed by an atheistic ideology, but has a Catholic university and a devoutly Catholic populace.

These apparent contradictions are in part the result of the presence of a political ideology which was forced upon the people. Socialism had some domestic support in pre-war Poland, but Soviet-style Communism came with the liberating Soviet armies who imposed their political economic model on Poland. Thus it is seen as a foreign ideology, which has been nonetheless modified by the distinctiveness of Poland and the Poles. By 1956, agricultural collectives and the excessively heavy-handed political and economic controls connected with Stalinism were either reduced or abolished.

There has been substantial progress constructed out of ashes of the last war. The Polish economy moved forward vigorously in the 1950s, and in the first half of the 1970s it was given an artificial boost, which turned out to be a near fatal shock, with the injection of loans from Westerners whose pockets were crammed full of petrodollars. However, in the last decade the Polish economy has hit rock bottom. One of the consequences of the present poor economic conditions is that the leadership is denied full legitimacy by the people. The leaders are seen, with some justification, as the uninvited helmsmen of a defective economy.

A pre-war grain exporting nation is now a net agricultural importer. Meat is rationed, apartments for newly-married couples are phantoms, the air and water are polluted, labor productivity is low, and new investments are scarce. This stagnating economy causes Poles to look back on the past with rose-colored nostalgia. When awakened from their daydreaming, many blame their economic woes on the present political leadership and argue that the shortages are the result of the Communist ideology, the system, and its functionaries. There is understandable dissatisfaction and the common perception is that new economic measures are needed but that they can only come about with a new format for political decision-making. In sum, one essential difference between the New South and Poland is the abundance of smoked Virginia hams on the one hand, and "nie ma szynki" on the other.

The comparison of the South and Poland goes much deeper than their present economic situations. Styron again proves to be a
trustworthy guide by noting that both lands were "despoiled and exploited." However, the South's defeat in the Civil War was an internal matter and its victors were not foreigners. Antebellum America was neither willing nor able to perpetuate the existence of a permanently disabled section of its own country. An economically weak section within the borders of the United States was correctly seen as a drain on the material wealth of the aggregate nation.

Poland, on the other hand, has been repeatedly overwhelmed by non-Poles. While these non-Polish rulers (Prussia/Germany, Austria and Russia) did not by design purposely drive their Polish subjects to abject poverty, their first obligation was the stability and economic well-being of their "own" people. Poverty in the Polish sections of their empires could be tolerated as long as it did not prove to be disruptive or an undue economic strain. While Poles living under German rule experienced advances in their essentially agrarian economy, and Russian Poland benefited from the presence of the Russian market for their textiles and the relatively advantageous terms of the 1861 Emancipation vis-a-vis the Russian serfs, the well-being of the Poles living in the various foreign empires was not a high priority. If Poles were not always maltreated, they and their nationality were held prisoner by non-Polish rulers.

These foreign powers who partitioned and eliminated the Polish state unwittingly intensified a deep sense of national pride and an inbred sense of "folkishness" which characterizes the Polish spirit. This perplexing spirit is as pleasing and comfortable as it is distasteful and disarming. In many ways Poles have inherited a schizophrenic national character. They are intelligent, thoughtful, and cultured people, yet the brunt of "dumb" jokes. Many individual Poles saved Jews from Hitler, yet they and their religious leaders also helped eliminate them. They are strategically an important nation in a no-man's land between Germany(ies) and Russia/Soviet Union and owe their presently secure borders to the Soviet Union, yet they harbor deep hatred for their "protectors." They are excellent theoreticians, but often poor practitioners. This duality was not solely the result of their own cultural traditions. Part of their schizophrenia comes from being one of the Eastern-most outposts of Western civilization and culture, and in part from the post-1945 realities of global power politics. But for whatever the reason, they are tolerant-racist, joyful-sad, "idealist-realists," proud-humble, and hospitable-xenophobic people who defy generalizations.

This schizophrenic national spirit is reflected in Polish attitudes and actions towards Jews. Religious tolerance and anti-Semitism both have antecedents in pre-war Poland. Until the latter half of the previous century, one would not label Poland more anti-Semitic than
any other nation in Eastern or Western Europe. During World War II the number of Poles who collaborated with the Gestapo in exterminating Jews was very small and certainly not representative. Furthermore, saving Jews from the Gestapo was a supreme act of courage; there are few records of Poles who were caught hiding Jews because they did not often live to record their deeds. This should be compared to the situation in Western Europe where there was no death penalty for saving or hiding Jews. This is not mentioned to absolve the Poles of persistent anti-Semitism, only to discourage emotional over-reactions when investigating Polish anti-Semitism and to suggest that there were powerful determinants, some internal and others external, in the making of the schizophrenic "Polish mind."

Arguments as to the source and the degree of Polish anti-Semitism cannot be answered in this essay. However, attempts to deny its existence are sad and rather silly. Polish folklore is saturated with anti-Jewish sayings, and in the years between the world wars anti-Semitism was given unofficial and official sanction by both the church and the state. Boycotts of Jewish businesses were given the blessings of the Catholic Church, even when by 1936 it was clear that boycotts were not simply passive affairs, but included anti-Jewish violence. This same type of violence was widespread at Polish universities between 1935 and 1937. In October 1937, separate "ghetto benches" were established for Jewish students and the number of Jews allowed to enroll in law and medical schools was restricted. The government passed laws which discriminated against Jewish workers and businessmen attempting to observe their Sabbath.

Anti-Semitism is an inescapable part of Polish history. Its intensity and scope were accelerated by the depression of the 1930s, but it did not have to be invented. The fact that the leadership of the Communist Party used anti-Semitism in an attempt to gain some degree of acceptance for its positions in the late 1940s, in 1968, and even in 1981 means that they have reason to believe that this tactic would strike a responsive chord in the populace. The anti-Semitism of Poles today is both eerie and muted by their lack of contact with Jews, and as Andrzej Szczypiorski notes, "anti-Semitism without Jews denotes a kind of schizophrenia."

Racism in Poland and the American South is ugly, but cannot be separated from the larger picture. It can neither be cosmetically transformed into an acceptable light, nor is it the sum total of Southern or Polish culture. Both of these societies have numerous other attractive features and both are much more complex than their detractors would have us believe.
Concluding Thoughts on Poland

What is a non-Pole to make of the Polish spirit, character, or mind? Can, or should, a non-Pole pass judgments on the Polish character? I think that this is not only possible, but a healthy development. Yet judgments should be shunned and the focus placed on evaluations. Nonetheless, an outsider must confront the limitations of not having internalized the contradictions and the enduring strengths of Poland's history, traditions, and values. However, the most stubborn, and to date insurmountable, obstacle to a full and complete discussion of the Polish character remains the lack of introspection on the part of the political leadership, and consequently the Polish people themselves. The failure to confront forthrightly the issue of anti-Semitism has deprived the nation of a valuable cathartic exercise. The avoidance of examining the linked pasts of Poles and Jews is not an historiographic footnote to today's Poland. It is an important missing element in contemporary Polish society and mentalité.

This avoidance has not always been the wish of the Polish people. The Communist leadership of post-war Poland has not permitted this debate to take place. Instead the issue of anti-Semitism has been manipulated to the advantage of the ruling elites in a continuous and ongoing effort to obtain legitimacy. Thus instead of a therapeutic investigation, Poland has been denied the finality associated with an assessment of both its "inglorious" failures and its proud successes. Poland experienced anti-Semitic riots in Kielce in 1946 and the nearly total evacuation of Jews from its "family" in 1968. Some scholars, like Michael Checinski, contend that in both cases Poland's Communist Party elite were well served.

Families are close and often exclusionary, but they must be capable of admitting their errors and allowing for change. The Polak i Katolik dyad is a two-edged sword which has cut a path rotating from exclusion to fraternalism, from hatred to marriage. However, this sword may have found a third way to effect reality—a Polish way. It has been stored in a closet and some day might fall from its hooks and clobber someone.

Some say that, given enough time, this sword hanging in the closet will crumble and the issue will become moot. Perhaps. But others feel the supporting hooks will crumble first, causing the sword to tumble out in the open. Maybe, but this is not the issue. Something more important is at stake.

Upon his release from jail in 1984, Solidarity leader Jan Rulewski said, "for forty years we have been living covered with the rust of a foreign ideology, so that the search for self is very important." I, like Mr. Rulewski, want Poles to have their past, in its entirety, returned to them. They are strong and capable adults, not
children in need of having their psyches protected. They have many times in the past, and again in 1980-1981, demonstrated their thoughtfulness, courage, and bravery. The idea that the ugly side of a nation's history should not be given public scrutiny is inherently unhealthy.

However, there seems to be a political motive for this lack of disclosure; one cannot control the present or the future without controlling the past. Solidarnosc was a movement of nearly ten million independent men and women who exhibited a love of Poland, Catholicism, and a desire to have their past, present, and future seen through a clear lens. Yet it was not permitted to do so.33

Solidarnosc did not face political opposition from the Polish people when it called for a freeing of Polish history from the distortions of ideology and censorship. Poles carry with them a sense of national history that defies comparison in the American context. In April 1985, a monument was unveiled in Warsaw honoring the Polish officers killed in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk in the Soviet Union. It was no accident that it was unveiled without great ceremony. This monument replaced a recently constructed monument to the Katyn dead which correctly dated the event, April 1941, i.e., before Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union contends that these Polish officers were killed by the Nazis in the late summer of 1941. This new monument is not dated.34

The point is that Poles cannot, and do not want to, forget their past. I believe they want it exposed, even if this means exposing the ugly along with the beautiful. The sores of Katyn Forest, political corruption, and anti-Semitism are all prime candidates for exposure and debate. While this would be therapeutic in the long run, it would be politically dangerous in the short run for the present regime. In December 1981, a state of war was declared which halted the advance of the Solidarnosc movement and kept all the skeletons in the closet. Leaders who lack legitimacy cannot risk serious short run disruptions since it might be a recipe for their termination.

Yet for many of us non-Poles, admiration for Poland and the Polish people would not be tarnished by a full exposure of its past. A thorough and honest introspection of Poland's history by Poles would be most welcomed. This would benefit existing scholarship, but much more importantly, others who have not had the opportunity to become familiar with Poland and Poles, past and present, would be able to do so without the agonizing whispers of anti-Semitism. It would also remove a precariously stored rusty sword which is casting a dark shadow on an essentially positive Polish spirit.
Endnotes


2The irrationality of the nationalism versus anti-Semitism issue has, I feel, reached new heights (or lows) with the anti-Semitic charges aimed at the admittedly Great Russian nationalist, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, because his expanded version of August 1914 notes the assassination of the Tsarist Prime Minister by a Jewish anarchist. Richard Grenier, "Solzhenitsyn and Anti-Semitism: A New Debate," The Washington Post, November 13, 1985, p. 24.

3Andrzej Szczypiorski, The Polish Ordeal: The View from Within, translated by C. Wieniewska (London: Croom and Helm, 1982), pp. 73-82. Szczypiorski clearly states that "One of the widespread myths in the West is the view that Poles and anti-Semites are one in the same thing. I shall not argue with that view as I am too old and too tired to deal with absurdities" (p. 73).

4Styron, p. 301.

5Ibid., pp. 301-2.


7This is quite the opposite of the Italian experience when in the mid-nineteenth century it was stated that there was now an Italy and what was needed were Italians. For a valuable look at many of these concepts, see Rudolph Jaworski, "History and Tradition in Contemporary Poland," East European Quarterly, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 1985), pp. 349-62.

8The extreme of the exclusion of Jews from the "Polish family" can be demonstrated with a comparison to Hungary, where in 1910 almost 80 percent of its Jewish population claimed Magyar as its mother
tongue. Yet in the Polish census of 1931, 85 percent of the Polish-Jews claimed Yiddish or Hebrew, not Polish, as their mother tongue.


10 Ibid., p. 59.

11 Ibid., p. 69.


14 Ibid., p. 68.

15 Ibid., p. 47.


18 The 1861 emancipation of the serfs by the Russian tsar granted the Polish peasants more land than their Russian counterparts. This was viewed as punishment for the rebellious Polish nobles.

19 Henryk Grynberg, "Is Polish Anti-Semitism Special?" Midstream, Vol. 29, No. 7 (August/September 1983), p. 19, notes that "The common phrase 'traditional Polish anti-Semitism' is a platitude with very little historical justification. Anti-Semitism came to Poland as part of Western culture and civilization."
Thanks to the work of Bartoszewski and Lewin (*Righteous Among Nations*) we are left with ample firsthand evidence of Poles saving anywhere from 40,000 to 120,000 Polish Jews. A more profound discussion which masterfully depicts the complexities involved is found in Emmanuel Ringelbaum, *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, trans. and ed. by D. Allon, et al. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976).

Grynberg, p. 20, notes that in France 13,000 Jews were handed over to the Nazis on July 16-17, 1942, and he doubts that this many Jews were handed over during the entire period of Nazi occupation in Poland.

This complexity is underscored by Grynberg who notes that "the anti-Semitic campaigns of the 1930s and 1960s were the most compromising episodes in the history of Polish-Jewish relations, but not so the behavior of the Poles during the Holocaust," p. 23.

See Heller, pp. 59-60; Ringelbaum; and Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness*.


The list of works documenting the rise of anti-Semitic activities in the latter half of the 1930s is large. Here I will only note Heller, pp. 98-109, 119-25; and Marcus, pp. 160-61, 365-66.


28 Szczypiorski, p. 131.

29 See Szczypiorski, preface. He insightfully notes that "... I am a Pole and contemporary Polish history is my destiny. An Englishman, an American, or a Frenchman writing his own biography may not notice his country's history. Freedom from history is a blessing, but also, in a certain sense, an obstacle for people of the West."


31 Checinski, Poland: Communism, Nationalism, and Anti-Semitism.

32 "This We Won't Abandon": A Talk with Jan Rulewski," RAD Polish Samizdat Extracts/10F, October 25, 1985, Radio Free Europe, Vol. 9, No. 44 (November 2, 1984). This was taken from Tygodnik Wojenny, No. 91, August 30, 1984.
