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Chitterlings and Garlic: The Ignoring of Things Past

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Lawrence Schofer (Jewish) studied German and East European history at the University of California at Berkeley, where he received his Ph.D. in 1970. A student of social history, he first worked in labor history in Eastern Europe. Several articles and his book, The Formation of a Modern Labor Force: Upper Silesia, 1865-1914 (University of California Press, 1975), were based on research done in archives in Wroclaw and Katowice, Poland. He then took up earlier interests by pursuing research on Jewish history in Germany and Poland, on which he published articles on historical methodology and on demographic change among 19th-century Jews in central Europe. He was a member of the faculty of the department of history at the University of Pennsylvania from 1969 to 1977. He received a fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for research in Germany in 1974-75 and was a senior fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1977-1978. He later went to business school and is now employed in health care administration.

For the past several decades Americans have industriously examined the American past and present in order to understand the roots of racism and its persistence in our society. The great social movements of the past two decades have used this historical examination to help erase the effects of racism from our society. The struggle has not been an easy one, and it has often been marked by "two steps forward, one step back." Nevertheless, changes have come about. While many of us continue to pronounce our mea culpa, blacks and whites together have been working to improve the position of blacks in our society. Arguments for change are often couched in terms of the injustices of the past.

Southerners maintain pride in the society of the Old South, but many recognize its flaws as well. From the perspective of Dr. Donnorumo, it behooves Southerners in particular to look into their past because that society contained so much of the good and the bad together. Plato as an historian might say that the unexamined past is not worth studying.

Poland and Polish intellectuals are different. Poland as victim is more likely to be the leitmotif of their ruminations on Polish history. Polish moments of glory are associated with the rare military and national triumphs; one hardly bares one's soul by talking about anti-Semitism--"a necessary evil" as noted by one of the historians in Dr. Donnorumo's essay, but hardly a major theme in Polish history. I doubt that any Polish writer would formulate Polish
history, or even Polish history since the mid-nineteenth century, in terms of Polish-Jewish relations in the ways that some writers have spoken of black-white relations in the United States. One should note that Edward Wynot, the author of the essay about anti-Semitism as "a necessary evil," is an American student of things Polish and brings an American perspective to that study.

Anti-Semitism was a fact of Polish political life in the age of nationalism. Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish national poet, may have been favorably disposed to the Jews, but the movement for which he was the spokesman hardly agreed. Some Jews may have participated in the Polish revolts of 1830 and 1863, but that hardly endeared them to the hearts of other inhabitants of the Polish lands. Particularly after 1863 Polish spokesmen were interested in ridding themselves of foreigners feeding off the Polish body politic—in the west the Germans and the Jews; in the east the Ukrainians and the Jews; in the northeast the White Russians and the Jews; in the capital the Russians and the Jews. Everywhere one encountered the Jews because their way of life was so firmly intertwined with that of the Poles. The 19th-century nationalist drive drew on resentment built up during centuries of economic development in which some Jews acted as the visible agents of large landowners; the new Polish nationalism also was fed by an intense Catholicism that drew sustenance from the tradition of Jews as killers of Christ.

Jews in Poland retained their own community. Three-quarters of the Jews in an inter-war census reported Yiddish as their mother tongue; large cities were marked by distinguishable Jewish areas of settlement; political parties were national in character; occupational patterns of Jews and Poles were quite different. All of this made for two societies.

One should not be surprised at the emergence of anti-Semitism as a potent political force in Poland, and the dislocations of World War I brought out a level of violence unseen in Poland since the depredations of the Cossack revolt of 1648. First the ruling Russians, then the occupying Germans, and finally the Poles emerging from their victories at the peace treaty conference turned on the millions of Jews in Poland. Were all Poles anti-Semitic? Certainly not. Did the government pursue openly anti-Semitic policies? Were the majority of Polish political parties openly anti-Semitic? Yes (with the notable exception of the Peasant Party). Did the organized university students violently attack Jewish students? Clearly. Just as all whites in the United States are not anti-black, so all Poles were not anti-Semitic; but just as one could and can speak of American society as "racist" in some senses, so one could and can speak of Polish society as "anti-Semitic" in some senses.
Polish academic life was not free of these prejudices, and a review of the Polish historical profession suggests that with few exceptions Polish historians either ignored the Jews (leaving them for special study by Jews only) or engaged in a kind of right-wing nationalist history which blamed the Jews for many of the evils of Poland. Dr. Donnorummo notes that "the failure to forthrightly confront the issue of anti-Semitism has deprived the nation of a valuable cathartic exercise," and he implies that the Communist leadership has prevented this examination. I think this a peculiarly American view born out of sympathy for the Poland of the Solidarity movement; it is not one that faces up to the negative aspects of Polish tradition. Polish history was and is inward looking in a way that usually has precluded extensive self-examination. Polish academia has ignored the Jewish role in Polish history since the blossoming of history as an academic subject in the 19th century. It is hard to imagine that the Communist leadership needed to do a lot of convincing to bring about this situation.

"The point is that Poles cannot, and do not want to, forget their past" (Donnorummo). But only selections from their past, only glorious moments—1410, victory over the Teutonic Knights; 1683, defeat of the Turks besieging Vienna; 1794, Kosciuszko and the glorious revolt against the partitioning powers. Donnorummo himself points to only one example of the Polish desire to examine the past, the notorious case of the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn forest in 1941, almost certainly by the Soviet army. The incident fits in well with the Polish tradition of the Poles as martyrs, and it is obvious why the Soviet do not wish the incident discussed; but its importance for the Poles does not signify a desire to examine the past.

I find the comparisons between the American South and Poland to be suggestive, but I think the Polish record on the Jews and on all the minorities is still essentially one of ignoring vast landscapes of the Polish countryside. There are many in the American South who have understood the lessons of the past in regard to relations between the races; there seem to be few in Poland who are ready to integrate Jews into general Polish history.