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The Jews in Poland: Recent Developments

Rabbi Michael Schudrich, March 18, 2009

Filed Under: [World Jewry](#)



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- The Polish Jewish community is growing and the average age of its members is declining. The process of Jews discovering their Jewish origins and wanting to “do something Jewish” is likely to continue for years to come. A number of new rabbis have arrived from abroad in recent years. Developing local leadership, however, remains slow.
- Many issues from the Jewish past in Poland have to be dealt with. It is difficult to strike a balance between focusing on the future and dealing with problems of the past. About 1,300 of the 1,400 remaining Jewish cemeteries are still unattended. Also, information is increasingly forthcoming about unmarked mass graves.
- General Polish interest in Jews and Israel is intensifying. More and more small non-Jewish groups want to “do something Jewish.” A number of them are involved in cleaning up unattended Jewish cemeteries.
- Relations with the Catholic Church remain ambivalent. Some bishops take a very positive attitude toward Jews. The teachings of the late Pope John Paul II play a major role in their attitude. Others are traditionalists and hold problematic positions toward Jews.

“The median age of the Warsaw Jewish community in the last three years has declined from over 65 to about 45. New members joining are all under the age of 40. Parents and grandparents had given up being Jewish. Some of their children, however, are deciding that they want to be members of the Jewish community. This phenomenon is no longer an exception, but a rather normal occurrence. Our membership is now about 550.

“When the Warsaw community had its General Assembly at the end of 2008, a hundred people participated—from the age of 20-25 to those who are over 80. Communal general assemblies tend to be boring. Yet all these persons were concerned enough to give up their free Sunday afternoon in order to attend. They were from all parts of the spectrum—both those who come to the synagogue and those who don’t.”

New York-born rabbi Michael Schudrich served as Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Japan from 1983 to 1989. He began working in Poland in 1990 on behalf of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Schudrich has been Rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz since 2000, and since 2004 also serves as Chief Rabbi of Poland.

He says: “When I came to Poland for the first time in an official capacity eighteen years ago, the question was ‘Why are you going there? There are no Jews.’ Now, people abroad ask ‘Is the community viable?’ The change reflects the positive developments in the community.

“My answer must be ‘Who knows?’ As a Jewish historian I think that rationally the Jewish people should have disappeared in 586 BCE or certainly later. There is nothing logical about how Jewish communities function and survive. As long as there is a community, I feel, being a rabbi, an obligation and honor to be there to help people connect to their Jewish identity.”

Anecdotal Evidence

Schudrich observes: “One can also put it differently. Until a few years ago the problems in Poland were predominantly post-Holocaust, post-communist ones. As far as we can look ahead, the Jewish community will continue to live in the shadow of the Shoah. Yet most problems now have become more ‘normal’ ones.”

He comments: “Only anecdotes can explain this as there is no normative story. One girl, for example, said to me: ‘Rabbi, I am 23 years old. I know all the boys in the community and don’t like any of them. How am I going to get married?’ This is a universal problem in small communities. Or, parents will say to me: ‘My son is 15. He has decided to become Orthodox, but he has no Orthodox friends. What is he supposed to do?’ Again, this is a typical problem of a normal, small community.

“There are also the stories of those who are only now returning to Judaism. This year more than a hundred people sought me out to discuss their Jewish roots while additional ones went to other rabbis. This phenomenon is likely to continue in the coming years. We must always keep in mind that, during the fifty years from 1939 to 1989, nothing gave a Jew in Poland the impression that it was a good idea—or even a safe one—to say that he or she was Jewish. There were six years of murderous German occupation followed by forty-four years of Soviet communist totalitarianism.”

Doing Something Jewish

"Poland has only known democracy since 1989. Some people, even those who knew that they were Jewish or had Jewish roots, needed a long period to conclude that perhaps the time had come to 'do something Jewish.' Their fear often dissipates very slowly. And, once again, anecdotes tell more than a cold analysis.

"A few months ago a man of about 60 approached me and said that his Jewish mother had died. They had buried her next to his non-Jewish father in a nonsectarian cemetery. He told me that he had never done anything Jewish, but now felt the need to say Kaddish. So, on a Friday morning, I sat down with him and taught him this prayer for the dead.

"Then I said: 'Shabbat begins this evening. Why don't you come to the synagogue?' He mentioned that his wife was also Jewish, and therefore also their 21-year-old daughter. I invited all three of them. They came and were moved. At the end of the service I spoke with them and told the daughter that she should visit Israel on a Taglit-Birthright Israel program. She may or may not do so. A few months later a cousin of the wife, who had gone to Israel some decades ago, visited them and told them more or less the same.

"Another story: A young woman, now 24, discovered less than four years ago that her mother's mother was Jewish. She started to look into it and, in the past two years, has become observant. She met a young Jewish man from the United States who was visiting Poland, and they fell in love. The two of them went together as volunteers to a small village in western Kenya. While there they decided to get married. Her mother wants the wedding to be in New York so that the neighbors won't see that they are having a Jewish wedding.

"This is one more proof that fear doesn't dissipate easily. This does not so much concern current anti-Semitism, but mainly what might happen again. This is based rationally on what people have experienced during most of their life. As a rabbi I have a major responsibility. I don't feel I should say that one can be sure it won't happen again.

"I met the young couple in New York recently. The girl told me that several of her first cousins want to go on a Birthright Israel tour. While these cousins are happy with the idea, their parents are appalled. Even now, when it is more common for Jews to 'come out of the closet,' some people lose friends when they tell them they are Jewish."

Coming out of the Closet and Losing Friends

"There are several aspects to this. The reason could be anti-Semitism but there are others as well. If one has had friends for decades but never told them one was Jewish, some non-Jews might feel that this is dishonest. They might think: why didn't you tell me this sooner."

Schudrich relates yet another story. "A woman of about 60 came to see me with her two daughters in their mid-twenties, a physician and a lawyer. The mother said that some thirty years ago she had asked her mother if they were Jewish, since they looked Jewish and the family story she had been told didn't make sense. Her mother confirmed that they were Jewish but, as the mid-1970s was a poor time to discover this, she didn't do anything about it. However, recently her daughters suddenly asked whether they were Jewish. She confirmed it; thereafter they made an appointment to see me and asked me what to do.

"I replied that the community has classes, lectures, and services. I suggested that they come to the class on Sunday mornings where I teach basic Judaism. They started to attend. For a long time the doctor came wearing a very elegant cross with diamonds. I didn't say anything, as that was an expression of her identity. Then, suddenly, she started to wear a beautiful string of pearls. Was it a change of identity or did it simply go better with her outfit? It's not my responsibility to tell people what jewelry to wear. With time and patience, more often than not, they will understand where they belong."

Many More Rabbis

"Another sign of the community's development is that the number of rabbis in Poland has increased greatly in the last few years. There are now ten. Six are traditional, plus two Chabad emissaries, and two are Reform. Two of the traditional rabbis are Polish-born. Rabbi Mati Pawlak discovered that he was Jewish at age 16. He later studied at Yeshiva University and came back to Warsaw as the director of the Lauder-Morasha School. He has a difficult job, because it is very problematic to teach Jewishness at a school where only half the children have Jewish roots.

"Rabbi Pinchas Zarcynski was born in Warsaw in 1981 and went to Israel with his parents in 1985. He has now returned to Warsaw as a rabbi. There is also a new Zionist *kollel* (fulltime Talmudic study for married men) where young Jewish men study our tradition. This institution, Kollel MiTzion, is headed by Rabbi Ephraim Miesels, also one of the six who are traditional. The rabbis include new ones in two other towns: in Krakow, Rabbi Boaz Pash from Israel officiates and in Wroclaw, Rabbi Yitzchok Rappaport (born in Stockholm, Polish-raised).

"The Chabad emissaries are Rabbi Shalom DovBer Stambler in Warsaw and Rabbi Eliezer Gur-Ari in Krakow. Rabbi Burt Shuman serves as the spiritual leader of Beit Warszawa, the Progressive community. The other Reform rabbi is Tanya Segal, also in Krakow.

"In such a small community we should make great efforts to avoid division among Jews as much as possible. On Israel's *Yom HaZikaron* [Memorial Day], I invited both the rabbi of Beit Warszawa and the local Chabad rabbi to participate in the ceremony. When Israel's President Shimon Peres visited Poland in 2008, all of us sat together near the Holy Ark. Part of what keeps the Jews in Poland united is that we don't want Hitler to have won the war."

Leadership Problems

Schudrich observes: "Local people often don't want to take leadership positions. More people are coming to synagogue and attending activities, but there it ends. I am also aiming for the day when the Chief Rabbi will be Polish but, as of now, it doesn't seem likely that this will happen in the immediate future.

"As for the economic and social status of the Jews, there are no Jewish oligarchs such as in Russia or Ukraine. If that were the case it would have made the financing of Jewish activities in Poland much easier. At present we are still significantly dependent on Jewish foreign aid.

"The Joint [American Joint Distribution Committee] is active in Poland, mainly in welfare but also in community leadership training. The Jewish Agency is also involved, including helping youngsters participate in Taglit-Birthright Israel programs. The World Zionist Organization supports rabbis and has, for instance, produced a children's *haggadah* [religious text for Passover] and other support material for the Jewish holidays. There is also Shavei Israel-an organization that reaches out worldwide to people with Jewish roots such as Bnai Anusim-Marannos, Bnai Menashe, and now in Poland-which, for example, supports three of the rabbis in Poland and operates a unique summer program in Israel for in-depth study of Judaism. This program is for Poles with Jewish roots and is hugely successful.

"Among the private foundations active here is the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, which started to work in Poland in 1988. One of its main projects is the Jewish school, which has two hundred pupils from prekindergarten through ninth grade. In more recent years the Taube Family Foundation based in San Francisco has also funded many activities. Its founder, Ted Taube, was born in Poland and escaped as a child to the United States. In recent years he has become a key supporter of the community."

The Balance between Memory and the Future

"Our main obligation is toward the living Jewish community: to help them with their identity and assist them in expressing their Judaism. Yet there is a major Jewish past in Poland. Many issues resulting from this must be dealt with. When teaching young and old, the question remains: how much does one focus on what will be and how much on what was? There has to be a balance; neglecting one for the other is not reasonable.

"What, for instance, should the small Jewish community's attitude be toward the 1,300 unattended Jewish cemeteries? We cannot save all of them. My first priority is that we will not permit their further desecration. If there are neglected, forsaken, and overgrown cemeteries, this is painful. Yet taking care of them cannot be a priority in our present situation.

"It is, however, unacceptable for somebody to build a road over a Jewish cemetery. In that case we must take action. At the end of last year I went to Ostrów Mazowiecki, a one-and-a-half-hour drive from Warsaw. They have a flea market every Monday morning in a location of which one-third is on the old Jewish cemetery. The mayor told me that if I said this was wrong according to Jewish laws, he would move the market.

"One never knows what will happen. We often do not know why a mayor or town council is ready to be helpful. Nor is it essential to know. We focus on restoring and saving as much as we can, and are ready to work seriously with whoever proves to be helpful."

Schudrich mentions another example. "In Sierpc, a town about an hour's drive from Warsaw, the mayor received me graciously. He gave me a copy of the memorial book of the Sierpc Jews, which they had translated into Polish. The mayor said he wanted to develop the land behind the cemetery and for this the city needed to extend the road. The town planner thought it would be best to curve it and thus it would go over the cemetery.

"In such cases one has first of all to show respect to one's host, sit in his office, and drink tea. Afterward I said, 'Let's go to the cemetery.' It was fenced, though not very well. I knew the rabbi who had fixed the boundaries, which was done correctly. We walked around and I suggested an alternative route for the road. The mayor agreed.

"There could be various reasons why the mayor didn't come up with this idea earlier. One might be that he didn't want to oppose his city planner. One must then ask why the city planner didn't see this possibility. He might reply that it is probably better to have a road curving than at a right angle. Or, perhaps decisions are influenced by the fact that in Poland the tradition for Christian cemeteries is that they are closed after they haven't been used for several decades and one can build over them.

"The challenge for us is that as Poland develops, unused land becomes more valuable. Then, if no one has paid attention to a Jewish cemetery for fifty years, there is an inclination to build over it. This now becomes a matter of public education for us. Over the last five years I have found increased sensitivity to our tradition among the authorities. I only encountered one substantial exception in Lezansk, a town with a strong Jewish history due to the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Elimelech, who is buried there. Today, every year thousands of Hasidim and other Jews visit Lezansk. Despite that or perhaps because of it, the town has too often been insensitive to Jewish needs. Yet the process of negotiation is extremely time-consuming. I doubt whether we can save all 1,300 unattended cemeteries, because we cannot get such massive funding.

"If somebody comes and says he has put together a group of people from the town who want to fund the restoration of the Jewish cemetery, or at least clean it up and build a wall around it, then it is the obligation of the Jewish community to provide the administrative services that will enable this. We are aware of this duty and our assistance here has to be improved."

Unmarked Mass Graves

"In recent years we have learned that there are hundreds of unmarked Jewish mass graves all over Poland. They have various origins. The Germans, as they entered a town, would often take several tens of Jews out to the forest, shoot them, and bury them there. Also, during the deportations to the death camps in 1942-1943, there were often several hundreds of Jews the Germans didn't feel like bothering to send off to the camps. They just shot them somewhere between the town and the cemetery. Furthermore, during the death marches from Auschwitz and other camps to the west, when the Russian army advanced, many Jews died and were buried on the side of the roads. There were also random killings by German murderers as well as by Polish gangsters.

"We increasingly receive information about this. There is a Baptist-a very unusual denomination in Poland-who travels by bicycle through villages in eastern Poland asking old people if they know where Jews are buried. Since he is a Pole,

elderly witnesses speak to him more easily and often are relieved to talk. They may have seen some of the killings at a young age, not having been careful enough to run away. Those who now come forward are often traumatized by these memories, which they have kept to themselves for sixty-five years.

"We already have information on tens of such sites. We might, in the future, make a large effort to gather additional data. Thanks to the GPS, we can now store the information on such a location easily once it is pointed out to us.

"A very different issue is that of assisting Righteous Gentiles. We cannot do enough to help these precious people. There is a Jewish Foundation for the Righteous that assists some of them, and there are also some other organizations. These gentiles are now all elderly and many have healthcare needs. The last few hundred remaining in Poland should be enabled to live out the rest of their lives in dignity and some comfort."

Interaction with Authorities

Regarding recent political changes, Schudrich says: "After the parliamentary elections of October 2007, the right-of-center government was replaced by a centrist one. It is headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the liberal Civic Platform, which received more than 40 percent of the votes. The two extremist minority parties that had been members of the previous government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the Law and Justice Party, did not return to parliament.

"What is especially important is that the Polish Families League, an anti-Semitic far-right continuation of a similar party that existed before the Second World War, is no longer represented in parliament. In a previous government its leader, Roman Giertych, was deputy prime minister as well as education minister.

"There are also some anti-Semites among the Law and Justice parliamentarians. A few years ago one of them, Artur Gorski, proposed electing Jesus as king of Poland. More recently this same person made extreme racist remarks about U.S. president-elect Barack Obama, saying his victory marked 'the end of the civilization of the white man' and calling Obama 'the black messiah of the new left.'

"The president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, a twin brother of the former prime minister, is also a member of the Law and Justice Party. We have good relations both with him and Prime Minister Tusk. In 2006 and 2007, we went to the presidential palace on the first night of Chanukah to light the menorah. In 2008 the president came to the synagogue."

Interest in Jews and Israel

"There is a great interest in Jews and Israel among the various authorities and also many other Poles. Even among anti-Semites there is respect for Israel. There is an attitude of: 'At least these people are willing to stand up for themselves.'

"Some attribute the rising interest in Jews to guilt feelings. I don't think these are very important. Most Poles do not have the sense that they were the ones who killed the millions of Jews. If they do feel guilt, it's about having been bystanders to the murders.

"More important is a Polish fascination with what the Jewish contribution means to Poland today-in connection to the past, the present, as well as the future. Many Poles want to become more Jewishly literate. In March 2008, when Israeli chief rabbi Yona Metzger visited Poland, he spent Shabbat in Lodz. We invited Prof. Jerzy Kropiwnicki, the mayor of the city, for the end of the Shabbat meal. He came with a member of his staff – a young Polish Catholic who is studying Hebrew and occasionally visits the synagogue.

"The mayor, who is an academic, has done much for the preservation of Jewish memory in his town. I said to him jokingly, 'Isn't it great that you have a rabbi on your staff'-referring to the young man. The mayor replied: 'Of course he is a rabbi-his voice is so bad he couldn't be a cantor!' There are few cities in the world where a mayor would know enough about Jews to make such a comment."

Missing the Jews

"Now that there are hardly any Jews left, some Poles miss them. It is almost like an amputee who feels the arm that is no longer there. Furthermore, it was taboo under the communists to talk about Jews. As soon as something that has been forbidden is again permitted, it becomes interesting in the public domain. There are also those who work for a new Poland and consider it to be in Central Europe. The old Poland and the prewar Poland, which were anti-Semitic, considered themselves to be in Eastern Europe. The rejection of the old Poland with its anti-Semitism brings with it 'anti-anti-Semitism.'

"As a result of all this, small groups of people in more and more places want to 'do something Jewish.' This differs from place to place: it might be saving a synagogue or an unattended cemetery, celebrating a Jewish festival, teaching about Jewish history in high school, or having a historical discussion group that meets in the cultural center.

"How do we nurture this phenomenon? Our experience has made us very adept at identifying anti-Semitism and fighting it, as we have no choice. We are far weaker at identifying potential allies and friends. In 2008, there was a grassroots conference in Zdunska Wola, southwest of Lodz. A few dozen young non-Jewish Poles, who work to preserve Jewish cemeteries around the country, came together to share experiences.[1] They want to honor a people that for over a thousand years was part of Poland. They often face local opposition. When we give them moral support, it gives them the sense that they are doing worthwhile work, and they want to do more."

Relations with the Catholic Church

"The Catholic Church's leadership is ambivalent about relations with Jews. The Church has a very closed hierarchical system. Some bishops take a very positive attitude toward Jews; prominent among them is Jozef Zycinski, the Archbishop of Lublin. The official Polish version of the Good Friday prayer states that the Jews are 'the nation that was chosen,' instead of the Latin version 'the nation that is chosen.' Archbishop Zycinski said they have now decided to change this text to the correct translation, but it will take three years until a new prayer book comes out.

"The Church has an annual Day of Judaism, which confronts the participants with the Jewish origins of the Church. Yet there is also a battle being waged between the traditionalists and others. Many well-meaning people are rather ineffective in the struggle and are not heard. The old anti-Semitic voices are louder even though they are fewer. This is slowly but clearly changing as people of goodwill are finding their voice. These need our help and support. We have to be aware that this is an internal Church matter and we should stay out of it. We need to support those elements that follow in the footsteps of John Paul II but not to place ourselves in the midst of a battle.

"Numerous bishops and priests follow the thinking of the late Pope John Paul II. The Polish pope made a major contribution to fighting anti-Semitism. His followers reject the Catholic anti-Semitic radio station Maryja, which has an audience of about 2.5 percent of the population and is independently funded. Their opinion can be summarized as: 'This station broadcasts terrible things, they are beyond the pale, and we must stop it.' The other side says, 'They are the most popular Catholic radio station. We cannot negate them; we have to work with them.'

"In addition there is the problem that some politicians, especially before elections, use Radio Maryja for political gain. Elections are decided by small numbers of floating voters and some politicians consider that the radio's audience may make the difference in the elections."

The Polish Council of Christian and Jews

"One small but important group that tries to bridge differences through interfaith dialogue is the Polish Council of Christian and Jews.[2] It has two cochairmen, Zbigniew Nosowski, editor of the important Catholic intellectual monthly *WIEZ*, and on the Jewish side Stanislaw Krajewski, a professor of philosophy at the University of Warsaw. The council is about twenty years old and was founded toward the end of the communist regime.

"They hold regular discussions and issue statements on controversial issues. One occasion was when, after Jan Gross's book *Fear* came out, it was attacked by ultranationalist historian Robert Novak who spoke in churches. The council said that it was not against free speech, but churches should not be abused for such attacks.

"Another issue concerns stained-glass windows or paintings in churches that depict Jews committing ritual murder. In Poznan, Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki had such a window removed. A case that has not been resolved concerns an eighteenth-century painting in the cathedral of Sandomierz.[3] The local bishop appears incapable of reaching a decision on what should be done with it. In the meantime the cathedral is being restored. This enables them to have an easy, temporary, ineffective solution of covering the window with a drape.

"A group of young Poles undertook field research among the residents of Sandomierz, asking them what they thought about this painting. The typical answer was: 'Of course it doesn't happen anymore, but it could have happened in the past.' The question is what should be done? Should the painting be permanently covered? Should it be removed? Is it better to leave it while attaching a large plaque saying: 'This represents the positions of the Church of which we have repented'? My view is that one should not remove it but rather focus on what one can learn from it. What exact text to put there is a complex question.

Conclusion

Schudrich says: "In recent years the number of Poles who are advocating the preservation of Jewish memory has grown significantly. We have to realize that three million Poles were murdered by the Germans during the Second World War. When dialoguing with Poles and wanting them to feel our pain, we must feel their pain as well.

"As far as Jews are concerned, I have always believed that our work in Poland is to revive the Jewish identity of individuals. I want to give people the chance to decide to be Jewish.

"To sum up, the Polish Jewish community is reemerging and developing. At the same time it is facing new problems and has to try to solve them."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

[1] Associated Press, "Catholic Poles Take Initiative to Save Jewish Cemeteries," *Haaretz*, 19 September 2008.

[2] See Zbigniew Nosowski (ed.), *The Bond of Memory* (Warsaw: Laboratorium WIEZI, 2008).

[3] Ewa Kiedio, "In the Shadow of the Libel," in *ibid*, 47.

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