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Jews in Poland: Between Cultural/Religious Renewal and New Uncertainties

In the context of European-Jewish history of the twentieth century and the Shoah, the fate of Polish Jewry could be considered as dramatic in particular. About three million Jews had their home in Polish territory before the outbreak of World War II, but only a few hundred thousand survived the Nazi German occupation (mainly by timely evacuation into the former Soviet Union). Though, when Polish Jewish survivors in greater numbers returned to their former home places after the end of the war, many of them were received with aversion, hate or even lethal hostility.¹ The pogrom of Kielce in summer 1946 appeared as the harshest proof that hatred of Jews continued, in line with anti-Jewish discrimination during later decades in Communist Poland, now camouflaged as “anti-Zionism.”² When a targeted state communist campaign against alleged “Zionist agents” drove tens of thousands of Jews to flee the country in 1968, organized Jewish life in Poland finally seemed to be a thing of the past.

Seen from this perspective, the re-establishment and moderate growth of some local Jewish communities since the 1990s – i.e., after the end of the Communist regime – appears in a certain way, just like the unexpected growth of local Jewish communities in Germany in the late 1990s, due to the influx of former Soviet Jews.

In all the countries of the former Communist “East Bloc,” Jewish communities – if present at all – were living in the shadows, and this was the case in Poland as well. Though, after the end of the Cold War and the transition process of the East-

1 As Carla Tonini writes, the book of Jan T. Gross, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (published in 2006), in particular sparked a sharp debate in Polish public and society on the widespread Polish hostility against Jewish Holocaust survivors immediately after their return from concentration/death camps or from exile. Gross writes that pogroms occurred in the eastern regions of the country and in the district of Krakow, while fifteen hundred were killed trying to get back their properties. See: Carla Tonini, “The Jews in Poland after the Second World War.

Most Recent Contributions of Polish Historiography,” *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 1 (April 2010), accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/the-jews-in-poland-after-the-second-world-war-most-recent-contributions-of-polish-historiography/>.

2 See: Jarosław Dulewicz and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, ““An Unfinished Story”: Genealogy of the Kielce Pogrom Victims (Selected Problems and New Research Possibilities),” *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 18 (2020): 163–188, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.ejournals.eu/Scripta-Judaica-Cracoviensia/2020/Volume-18/art/19397/>.

ern European countries aiming to form Western style democracies, new opportunities and perspectives for organized Jewish life became reality – partially by intensifying contacts to Jewish organizations in Western Europe, to Israel, and to the American-Jewish community. However, the individual commitment of outstanding personalities with a special bond to Polish-Jewish history should not be omitted. Undoubtedly, for example, American-born Michael Joseph Schudrich has played a crucial role in re-vitalizing organized Jewish life in Poland for many decades. Schudrich, who grew up and studied in New York City, among others at Columbia University and at the Yeshiva University, settled on behalf of the Lauder Foundation to Warsaw in the early 1990s, where he has continued to work – with few hesitations – until today. His own grandparents had been Polish Jews, and they emigrated to the United States before World War II and the Shoah. Since 2005, Schudrich is holding two citizenships: American and Polish. He considers his work as the Chief Rabbi of Poland in the following way: “That is the story of Polish Jews today. When Jews around the world discuss Poland, they have an obligation not only to remember the past, but also the work being done to bring as many Jews here in Poland back to the Jewish people. This is our real challenge.”³

Not only individual protagonists “from outside” but also experienced organizations like the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and Chabad Lubavitch began to start activities in and with Jewish communities in Poland in order to stabilize Jewish life on-site, to provide for the needy and to work on the future of the local communities, especially by enhancing educational programs. However, Jewish life on site still depends on local stakeholders and activists – people who are ready to invest time and energy, and who are motivated to participate in committees and engage in administrative work in the longer run.

Nowadays, Jewish life in contemporary Poland is mainly based on communities in Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Łódź, Katowice, Szczecin, Gdańsk and a few other cities, all together counting not more than 10,000 members.⁴

Quite similar to the interview series in Germany, a sample of Jewish and non-Jewish interview partners who are often present in public, share responsibilities, and shape public discourse on the Jewish/non-Jewish relations was approached. Twelve women and men were willing to give an in-depth interview, eight of them with a Jewish background and four non-Jews (committed to projects and activities such as research on Jewish history and contributing to the culture of remembrance, or being active in Christian-Jewish initiatives).

³ *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 5, 2009, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.thejc.com/news/israel/murdered-sisters-are-daughters-of-former-radlett-rabbi-1ypH3xahvCo91YKw3LANmV>.

⁴ World Jewish Congress, Jews in Poland, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/PL>.

We focussed on question(s) such as to what extent relations between Jews and non-Jews have changed after the end of communism and if rapprochement is possible according to their opinions. We have also asked to what extent Jews in Poland feel accepted and integrated into non-Jewish majority society; what they consider as core elements of their Jewish identity today; the meaning of Israel for their life as Jews; and also their perception of ongoing nationalistic and antisemitic trends and tendencies in Poland. The non-Jewish interview partners were primarily asked for their specific motivation(s) to familiarize themselves with Jewish topics as well as to contact and exchange with Jewish people and institutions. We were also interested to learn about their impressions and perceptions of a growth of Polish nationalism (and patriotism) and possibly also of new manifestations of antisemitism. We established initial contacts with (Jewish) intellectuals in Warsaw and with (Jewish and non-Jewish) protagonists of NGOs, with all further contacts resulting from the “snowball principle.” Most of our interviewees preferred to appear anonymously in later citations, thus we decided to keep all quotes anonymous. The (first) names used here are fictional and do not indicate any connection to our interview partners.

Interestingly, the most active Jewish leaders we interviewed (mainly in Warsaw) offered a somewhat moderate perspective by being reluctant to join the “revival euphoria” supported by some media. These attitudes did not directly contradict Ruth Ellen Gruber’s thesis of a rather “virtual Jewish life” currently present in Eastern Europe.⁵ In parallel, these conversation partners offered astonishing insights into local community dynamics that showed growing Jewish pluralism, despite the statistically limited size of this minority in Poland.

The Jewish interviewees spoke of an atmosphere of departure in some synagogues, projects, and Jewish interest groups, especially in Warsaw – although not typical for the general scene. They also reported on outstanding inner Jewish commitment, despite certain difficulties, to reach the younger generation. “We have to compete with lots of alternative offers aiming to our Jewish youth, especially in the cultural scene,” Krzysztof, one of the leading Jewish representatives in Warsaw, told us. However, according to some of the Jewish interviewees, a certain number of young Polish Jews become very religious and observant. As in other countries under focus in this project, young people have discovered the wealth and beauty of Jewish tradition to an extent that was impossible for their parents who had grown up in a state-socialist, anti-religious vicinity. The next generation started to rebuild Jewish identities.

⁵ Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (University of California Press, 2002).

Currently, those young Jewish adults, who are deeply involved in new outreach projects, try to remain realistic and not succumb to euphoria. Thus, Blanka, one of the most active protagonists in the past 20 years, promoting youth initiatives but also being involved in programs to consolidate local Jewish communities, assessed soberly:

To me, the future of Jewish life in Poland seems very difficult. And I don't see guarantees for the next 20 years. Why? Because we are too assimilated. There is no vision within the Jewish community how to build this community. It's very compulsive how the community operates in all Poland. We have eight Jewish communities. (...) All together it's maybe 2,500 Jews. People who were born, with Polish roots.⁶

The same interviewee reflected on the problem of fluctuation among young Polish Jews, such as in the metropolitan cities. For example, it would be difficult to find an appropriate Jewish partner, given the relatively small number of Jews permanently living in the country. Blanka stated:

Many of us don't have a perspective to find a Jewish partner. And it's very difficult to live a Jewish life without [a] Jewish partner because nobody in Poland who is 'like normal thinking' wants to have [a] Jewish life or raise children in [the] Jewish tradition because it's very difficult to be Jewish here.⁷

According to some of the Jewish interview partners, there is – indeed – a certain trend among young Polish Jews to become religious and – along with that – quite active in local Jewish places. But then, due to the lack of a wider infrastructure to guarantee the possibility of an observant Jewish lifestyle and also to find a Jewish partner, at least some of them decided to head for Israel or any other flourishing Jewish places in the Western world.

We have the impression that all of the interview partners had strong ties to Israel, either by family bonds, connections with friends, or just feeling emotionally attached. In one of the Jewish cultural centres in Warsaw we met Natan, a young man who explained a more detailed way of his individual relation to Israel:

Israel is very important to my identity, my sense of belonging, the language and the country – I translate from Hebrew to Polish, it's one of my jobs. Though, I don't want to call it a job because it doesn't bring in money, I translate for example Shmuel Agnon's stories, I already got a prize for that (laughs). So it's the language and the Israeli culture. Jerusalem is a very important thing for me, I lived there and it's very important. (...) I go there once a year I think, with friends or just to visit my family. But it's a different thing when you just go for a week to

6 Interview with Blanka in Warsaw, May 13, 2019.

7 Interview with Blanka in Warsaw, May 13, 2019.

hang out in Tel Aviv or just going to visit your family and spend a week there, but in a lot of sense, Israel was always important for me and my family, even in Communist times. We loved these Israeli post stamps on all these letters... It was always very exotic.⁸

As we could see, strong ties to Israel might embody an important factor for individual and collective Jewish identities in Poland, among religious as well as among secular Jews. However, immigration to Israel (“Aliyah”) was only seriously considered by one of the interviewees. Hanna decided to move to Tel Aviv, while being in a partnership with an Israeli man, and wanted to create a family in the near future.

Regarding religious affiliation, some interviewees underlined that they consider themselves less religious or completely secular and their Jewishness was primarily defined by cultural heritage and Jewish intellectualism. Some even referred back to “East Bloc times,” claiming that some of the then existing organizational structures and the cultural activities have been inspiring and reliable. Thus, Dawid, a middle-aged publicist, working for an arts journal for a couple of years, told us:

There is a general claim that Jewish identities have changed with the system turn after the end of the Cold War, and especially with the new Jewish structures, offers and institutions. But there were Jewish organizations before. There was no Lauder foundation and no Jewish community like ‘Kehila’ but there was TSKŻ (Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland) and other organizations. We never hid our Jewishness and we never – I never experienced the change of the system like a change of my own identity. I know that there are people who say that that they experienced that. They hid, they concealed their Jewish identity during these times and then everything burst out, but it’s not my story.⁹

Maja, considerably experienced in the leadership of the Jewish community of Warsaw, justified her Jewish public commitment and activity with neither religious nor cultural or intellectual reasons while arguing in a European-Jewish context:

First of all, the future of the Jewish people in Europe depends on the future of Europe. If the future of Europe is going to be in the grey zone of constant conflict management and populism, security threats, physical – security instability, rising conspiracy theories etc. then I’m afraid generally most Europeans will not be happy in Europe. That’s going to change the world we live in, unfortunately, and it’s not about Jews, it’s about us as European citizens. If it goes about Poland, I do not believe that there will ever be hundreds or thousands of Jews living in Poland, because it means they would have to come from somewhere. They would have to move from somewhere and I do not see – in this political situation – from where. However, I believe that it’s extremely important to care about the safety and the

⁸ Interview with Natan in Warsaw, May 15, 2023.

⁹ Interview with Dawid in Warsaw, May 14, 2023.

well-being of the Jewish life in Poland because it's our historical home, for Jews around the world, no matter if you are from Poland or not, I'm talking about numerous concentration camps, death camps, cemeteries, material heritage. It's extremely important to keep the memory of the Jews here in Poland, to keep this place safe because we need to come here.¹⁰

In addition, professional Jewish historians feel a sense of mission when dealing with the (mostly tragic) past of Jewry in Poland. They try to convey knowledge on the centuries long Jewish history inside Polish society, as an important element of a new interrelationship primarily between Jews and Christians. They simultaneously emphasize the joint experiences from disastrous periods of time, where both groups suffered in at least partly similar ways. Six million Polish civilians have been murdered in World War II under Nazi occupation – three million Jews and three million non-Jews. Adam, currently one of the most important Jewish exhibition curators in Poland, a historian and at the same time religiously active, formulated desired aims while not avoiding a generally dire European context:

We need to remember that Poland hasn't been a free country after 1945. Also, we need to remember strong changes at the end of the 1960s, and also John II. activities in the 1980s. And regarding current challenges, we are not in the vacuum. Similar problems are all over Europe. Fear of strangers, for example, fear of social descent, and diffuse fears stimulated also by overly problematic reports in the media. From the past, we should learn where stigma can lead to. I believe that prejudice could be defeated by education, education and again education. I remember, a few years ago, it was still very difficult for many politicians in this country to say "Jew", because it was used like a curse word.¹¹

The non-Jewish interview partners usually had key emotional experiences as young adults when attending memorial places of the Shoah, meeting Holocaust survivors or doing voluntary work for civil organizations who aimed for reconciliation. Later on, they engaged in activities to promote mutual respect and challenge surfacing trends of historical revisionism and antisemitism. Thus, Milena, one of our interviewees, a young woman in her early 30s, who accompanies Polish youth groups and school classes to "lieux de memoire," sites of memory, in her leisure time and organizes meetings with eyewitnesses, said:

I cannot say that there was any one-dimensional reason, why I have been such a long time active in educational work on Jewish history. I would say this was a kind of process, and the realization that we are facing an unusual crime – the attempted murder of a whole people

¹⁰ Interview with Maja in Warsaw, May 10, 2019.

¹¹ Interview with Adam in Warsaw, May 14, 2019.

and a whole culture. Today, in our educational activities, we work closely together with Jewish individuals and organizations, and we share a lot of mutual learning.¹²

Similar to the German interviewees, we met people who had developed their specific interest in Jewish issues and Jewish contacts by exploring religious commonalities and differences (between Christians and Jews), or by attending longer stays or internships in Israel. However, the dialogue between Christians (especially Catholics) and Jews in Poland has seemingly reached its potential. Thus Szymon, a Jewish publicist, stated:

[The dialogue] is always within the social bubble, an intellectual thing. When you gather five intellectuals and one rabbi and two priests in one room it's very important to know that you don't have enough of an impact. Of course, the church has its own agenda so they participate in various Jewish events (...) but it's like an official thing. There is a day of Judaism in the church so I think for the intellectual life it's important. The Catholic intellectual life is divided in sides, there are some liberal Catholics but it's a minority within a minority, so this official church intellectual life is almost non-existent. The clergy is definitely not an intellectual thing but within the very conservative Catholic Church you can find people who like Jews and you can find some conservative Catholic intellectuals who don't like Jews, so it's like that.¹³

Regarding social effects and possible “fruits” of an enlarged Christian-Jewish dialogue, expectations are set rather lower, compared to other countries. This might be rooted, at least partly, in some statements of Catholic representatives in public, sometimes repeating old anti-Jewish stereotypes typical for centuries. An additional, problematic factor affecting Jewish-Christian relations is the growing nationalism – an old-new nationalism that often includes the assumption that “Polish” is synonym for “catholic.”

Undeniably, Catholicism has a prominent importance in Polish collective identity. And for many people, being a good Polish patriot is interchangeable with being a good Catholic. Public discourses on national identity oscillate around the quest for “fundamental values,” and – unlike some other countries explored in this study – considerable parts of society and even politics strongly hark back to religious values (faith, holiness of the family, and others). This trend might not necessarily lead to the exclusion of other population groups – like non-Catholics and non-Christians – but it might impede the public interreligious and intercultural dialogue and exchange in a substantial way.

Marta, a Jewish manager in her late 30s, described what such nationalist attitudes could mean for the Jewish (and other) ethno-cultural minorities:

¹² Interview with Milena in Warsaw, May 14, 2023.

¹³ Interview with Szymon in Warsaw, May 15, 2023.

If you want to raise a child in Poland your child will have a religious Polish education. For many parents and teachers, it is a matter of fact, to raise Polish pupils as 'good Catholics'. It makes it much more complicated for the parents and the kids, if the latter shall be raised in Jewish values and tradition. I heard many times from Polish boys that I'm a nice and clever woman but they don't want to build a family with Jewish children. And it doesn't mean that they don't want to raise them to be Jewish. They just don't want to have Jewish children by blood. (...) Being Jewish by blood means that you are second category person you are not the same like the others, just like being with defects.¹⁴

Polish officials would probably deny that such attitudes are a widespread behavior pattern, and the most recent revival of organized Jewish life in several cities of the country is declared as a welcome enrichment for society. Antisemitic actions are sharply condemned, and governmental politics towards the Jewish communities express a receptive positive attitude, including the commitment to preserve Jewish heritage. Thus, in December 2017, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage assigned 100 Million Złoty for the endowment fund for the renovation of the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw. The same institution, in cooperation with the Jewish community, enacted conservatory guidelines that aim to halt any works that endanger the existence of cemeteries.¹⁵

However, only a few weeks later, at the beginning of 2018, the Polish parliament, the Sejm, passed a new law¹⁶ according to which it will be a punishable offense to ascribe responsibility to the Polish nation for crimes committed by National Socialist Germany. This law is extremely questionable, due to some obvious Polish cases of former collaboration with Nazi Germany under occupation. This also includes crimes of murder against the Jewish population, like in the case of Jedwabne, a small city where at least 300 Jews were killed by Polish neighbors in July 1941, when the German Wehrmacht invaded the city and ousted the former Soviet occupation troops.¹⁷

Thus, the Jewish communities in Poland are currently torn between public and State-supported well-meaning, but also State-sponsored trends of historical re-

14 Interview with Marta in Warsaw, May 13, 2019.

15 Anna Chipczyńska, "Preserving Jewish Cemeteries as an Actual Challenge in Contemporary Poland," in *Being Jewish in 21st Century Central Europe* by Haim Fireberg, Olaf Glöckner, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2020), 300.

16 The bill states that "whoever accuses, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich ... shall be subject to a fine or a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years." BBC, "Poland's Senate passes controversial Holocaust bill,"

February 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42898882>.

17 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

visionism (and “whitewashing” from cases of collaboration during the Holocaust) and obvious discomfort stemming from antisemitic incidents.

According to our Jewish interviewees, antisemitism in Poland is currently not perceived as an existential threat but nevertheless a problem to cope with. Gabriela, one of the Jewish community leaders, told us in the interview:

So far yes, we hear lots of unpleasant antisemitic incidents, lots of verbal hate speech. That’s what I wanted to say. Not being beaten up like in the streets of Belgium or France but definitely being threatened. Though, I would never tell the people: “Do not wear a Kippa!” or “Do not wear a Shtreimel!” I would tell them about the consequences, about what could happen.¹⁸

Despite the above-mentioned rather unpleasant trends, many of our interview partners stressed that they feel, especially in metropolises like Warsaw, “at home” and as part of the overall Polish society. Szymon confirmed:

I belong to Warsaw, I definitely do, it’s not the only town where I lived but it’s a place where I have so many friends, so many connections, so I think I have a very strong sense of belonging. Half of my friends have Jewish ancestry, more or less. Most of my friends are liberal academics or intellectuals or journalists (...) So I live in a bubble and I think I have a strong sense of belonging to this bubble which is partly Jewish. Do I have a strong sense of belonging to the country or to the state which is represented by this government? No.¹⁹

Statements like this gave the impression that those who have a strong Jewish identity and are prominent in public do feel connected with Polish civil society and urban life, but are also aware of their position of (cultural) “outsiders.”

The diversity of Jewish lifestyles and perspectives in contemporary Poland have an intriguing impact on the inner dynamics. Orthodox and traditional communities work away from rather liberal groups, intellectual circles, milieus, and networks understanding themselves primarily as “culturally Jewish.” Among the committed religious forces providing external support, while carrying their own political agendas, is the Chassidic movement Chabad Lubavitch that gained enormous ground in many of the Eastern European countries after the end of the Cold War. In contemporary Poland, however, it didn’t achieve comparable success like in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Generally, the various Jewish communities and organizations do respect each other but certain religious and political disagreements cannot be overlooked. Powerful dissents appeared, during the interviews, while contemplating on how to preserve the long and rich former Jewish history in the country, on how to relate to

¹⁸ Interview with Gabriela in Warsaw, May 16, 2019.

¹⁹ Interview with Szymon in Warsaw, May 15, 2019.

Polish society if nationalism grows further, and on how to deal with current forms of antisemitism. There are a few Jewish men and women who decided to leave the country because of either fearing a drastic increase of antisemitism and Judeophobia in the coming years or not finding a satisfying manner to live a full-scale Jewish life anywhere in the country. On the other hand, our interviewees witnessed reverse trends. Currently, young people settle in Poland from Israel, either for professional self-fulfilment, founding start-up companies in the Polish market or just using the opportunity of getting local citizenship due to their Polish Jewish ancestry.²⁰ However, the number of those Israelis who come to Polish metropolitan cities for long periods has been rather small, and not comparable – for example – with the growing community of Israeli Jews in Berlin or Barcelona.

However, there are some more partly quite surprising developments that might also strengthen and stabilize the Jewish communities in Poland in the longer run, and prevent an advancing demographic decline. A rather new phenomenon is the intention of not a few Polish people to check their ancestors' descent. There is historical proof that greater numbers of Jewish children had been (secretly) adopted by Christian families in Nazi-occupied Poland which is what often saved their lives, but they then became “invisible” as Jews.²¹ Many of those originally Jewish children have never been told after 1944/45 about their descent, either in order to avoid psychological breakdowns and trauma, or just to keep the (Christian) family status and atmosphere as it had been for years. Also, the prevailing antisemitic and anti-Zionist atmosphere in Communist Poland could have been a grave reason for the Christian/non-Jewish adoptive parents and grandparents to conceal their offspring's original roots. Within recent decades, especially among young Polish people – as almost everywhere in Europe and in the Western world –, there is a tendency to search for new and modern identities, also by looking back to the own family histories.²² In case of Jewish roots discovery, some of the bearers willingly (re-)turn to Jewish identities. In some rare cases, this shift may even result into a “Chazara B'teshuva” (return to Judaism) and – if necessary – also conver-

20 A similar regulation is in effect in Germany. Descendants of the former German-Jewish “Jekkes” who had settled worldwide during the 1930s, after fleeing the so called “Third Reich,” can nowadays apply for German citizenship and are usually approved for that, after checking the verifying documents. It is to assume that one of the strong motivations for applying for Polish or German citizenship is the prospect of also becoming a “citizen of the European Union.”

21 See: Renee Ghert-Zand, “Polish hidden Jews embrace ‘hip’ ancestry,” *The Times of Israel*, October 30, 2014, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/polish-hidden-jews-embrace-hip-ancestry/>.

22 Katka Reszke, *Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland* (Academic Studies Press, 2013)

sion.²³ It might be too soon for concluding how many of these people who re-discover their Jewish lineage will in fact return to Jewish religion and culture, and – all the more crucially – how many will join local Jewish communities and play active roles there.

Some of those rediscovering their Jewish roots might become additionally encouraged when seeing the growing interest of Polish non-Jews in Jewish history, culture and tradition, not only among interested Christian circles but also among civil rights activists, artists, local historians, educationists, and others, as for example in the *White Stork Synagogue* in Wrocław, where the Jewish community closely cooperates with the Bente Kahan Foundation and the Department of Jewish Studies of Wrocław University. The synagogue does not only offering religious service, but also exhibitions, film screenings, workshops, lectures, concerts, and theatre performances.²⁴

The Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Krakow also became a symbol of reconciliation especially given the role played by non-Jews in its revival. For example, non-Jewish volunteers are crucial for helping out on Shabbat, when Jews are not supposed to work.²⁵

As the research outcomes made apparent, Jewish life is not only understood as a domain of religious communities and synagogue activities. In parallel, a high number of cultural activities is being performed. These events enhance the Jewish cultural heritage per se and in parallel integrate Jewish culture, arts, and lifestyle into a broader society. This applies, at least partly, to Polish Jewish Intellectuals who experience the hyphenated identity, as Polish (democrats) and as part of the Jewish world that should contribute to promote civil society. As Paweł, a former political dissident and well-known Polish intellectual, declared:

Even in times of State-Socialism, we had sensitized Jewish protagonists who tried to combine Jewish tradition, Jewish values with working for democracy and a better society. There is no reason to hide Jewish traditions of thought and the very long experiences in Jewish people's fight for freedom and justice. I think it is also important for Jews in this country to show their concern when government's policy seems to turn into predominantly power politics, a trend we can also see in other European countries, and even in Israel.²⁶

23 Those Polish people, firstly discovering their Jewish family roots and then joining the Jewish communities in Poland, should not be intermixed with former non-Jewish, often Christian-socialized converts who also enter the local Jewish communities.

24 <https://fbk.org.pl/en/synagogue/history-of-the-synagogue/> (accessed April 5, 2022).

25 Yardena Schwartz, "40 Miles From Auschwitz, Poland's Jewish Community Is Beginning to Thrive," *iTIME*, February 27, 2019, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://time.com/5534494/poland-jews-re-birth-anti-semitism/>.

26 Interview with Paweł in Warsaw, May 15, 2019.

Vice versa, within recent decades parts of the Polish (non-Jewish) civil society have increasingly become sensitized not only by the Jewish traumas in World War II and the Holocaust, but also by the tentative comebacks of (organized) Jewish life in some places of Poland, especially since the end of the communist period. Theologians, artists, historians, and even some politicians have developed their interest in supporting and accompanying the renewal of Jewish life in the country. As Geneviève Zubrzycki recently indicated, the pro-Jewish euphoria of Polish elites may represent attempts to erase the equal sign between Polishness and Catholicism; to redefine the national identity in a more embracing and multidimensional manner.²⁷

Our interviews among non-Jewish Polish citizens who are closely connected with Jewish issues revealed that the younger generation in particular has developed a growing interest not only in the fate and history of Jewish people who became victims of the Shoah. There is also an increasing interest in exploring Jewish impacts on Polish history in general, in interactions between Jews and non-Jews before and also after World War II. However, this has also resulted in some governmental decisions for preserving Jewish history and culture, remarkably beyond the care for Jewish cemeteries, as for example with the museum of the Ghetto uprising in Warsaw, currently under construction. In the most ideal case, these general moves of approach to Jewish history and culture – as part of Polish history and culture – could be completed by painful but maybe wholesome joint attempts to undergo the years of Nazi occupation and the subsequent times of renewed anti-semitism. Such a readiness among many Polish Jews and non-Jews seemed to be given, and the open discourses on Jewish/non-Jewish relations during WWII, as they firstly appeared at the beginning of the 2000s, have aimed exactly in this direction.

Nevertheless, many “disturbing factors” also belong to the current reality for Jews and non-Jews in Poland, aside from the growing nationalism and – probably intertwined with it – the so-called competitive victimhood. Decades ago, politics and civil society started with new forms of commemorative culture (dedicated to the annihilated Jewish population). Nationalist and revisionist movements have tried to counter this trend, blaming politics and society for exaggerating the crimes against the Jewish population or for efforts to neglect memory of non-Jewish victims and non-Jewish resistance. The term “double Holocaust” thus resulted. In a certain way, such trends flow into claims that national resistance against Nazi Germany was, principally, also combined with attempts to protect

²⁷ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland's Jewish Revival* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

and to solidarize with pursued Jews (we can see these trends in Poland as well as in Hungary and in Slovakia). Such tendencies might put Jewish communities and their representatives in a quite uncomfortable situation: on the one hand they know that close solidarities with Jews were very rare under Nazi German occupation. On the other hand, a number of such cases did occur, and, of course, commemoration to non-Jewish victims should not be downplayed.

Summary

Organized Jewish Life in Poland is currently only visible in a few cities and local places – first of all, but not only, in Warsaw, Krakow, and Wroclaw. Aside from local communities who witness a certain revival of Jewish religion and tradition especially among young people – a generation that already grew up in the post-communist era – Jewish intellectuals and artists are also quite active in the public scene. Like in other countries under focus, joint events and cultural weeks, co-organized by Jews and non-Jews, work quite successfully. There is also a tradition of Christian-Jewish dialogue, though, as it seems, not yet affecting broader Christian communities. Antisemitism in Poland seems to be on the rise – as almost everywhere in Europe – but is obviously not permanently worrying for the Jewish population.

In particular, left-liberal Jewish intellectuals expressed a certain discomfort when talking on nationalist trends in the country, though they did the same when talking about political trends in Israel. Religious interview partners were less critical and emphasized their appreciation in particular for the Polish governmental care for Jewish history preservation.

Strong bonds to Israel seem to be typical for both the local Jewish communities but also for Jewish intellectuals and artists. In addition, Jews in Poland feel a bit unsettled by the somewhat cooled relations between the Jewish and the Polish State since 2018/19. In a certain way, migration movements take place in both directions: Polish Jews are leaving Poland for Israel and (young) Jewish Israelis settle in Poland (mainly Warsaw). To what extent the small but vibrant local Jewish communities in contemporary Poland will stabilize in the near future is not yet recognizable. Predictably, key figures of the Jewish communities see the realization of the full potential of Jewish life in Poland intertwined with the future of Europe.

