Judaism in Poland

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Our subject matter, Judaism in present-day Poland, is narrower than would be that of "Jews in Poland". Eastern Europe, including Poland, was also a seat of secular Jewish culture and secular Jewish national and social movements. The Jewish religion is a recognised religion in all the communist states of Eastern Europe, and in some of these states, including, significantly, the Soviet Union and Poland, the Jews are also recognised as a national group.

In Poland, this duality has found expression in the existence of two Jewish organisations: the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (1944-49), which was succeeded by the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKZ); and the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations (or the Religious Association of the Mosaic Faith). Membership of these two bodies overlaps to a significant degree, but their leadership and organisation do not. Differences between the two are considerable. This is not only because the former has always been a secular organisation; it was also militantly communist for many years and opposed to Zionism, emigration, and religion. This characteristic, however, has been eroded since 1968. The ethos of both bodies is very much linked to the past — to the Holocaust and to pre-Holocaust Polish Jewry — and of course both bodies are controlled by the Polish authorities. In recent years institutional control has been largely vested in the Office of Cults, a situation which would have been unthinkable for the TSKZ in its heyday. Other state bodies involved are the Ministry of the Interior and the departments of the interior of the local authorities, and the Ministry of Culture.

At present, membership of the two organisations numbers no more than a few thousand. This points to a fundamental fact regarding Jewish life in Poland. In 1939 there were three and a half million Jews in Poland, with over 300,000 in Warsaw alone. The majority were observant, and even those who were not belonged to local religious communities which constituted the framework of Jewish communal

life. No published official statistics exist with regard to the post-war years, but the numerical decline of the post-Holocaust Polish Jewish community is indisputable. The still numerically significant community of the immediate post-war years — survivors of the Nazi camps, those who survived "on the Aryan side" and repatriates from the USSR (the latter group being the largest) — was reduced in the late 1940s by the wave of emigration which resulted from the trauma of the Holocaust, post-war conditions within Poland, and the emergence of Israel. The remainder, roughly 50,000, was halved by the post-October 1956 emigration. Subsequently, the surviving community was again considerably depleted, perhaps more than halved, by emigration in the wake of the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. The majority of Jews in Poland, at least after 1956, were non-observant, many not even regarding themselves as Jewish.

In view of all this, any discussion of Judaism in Poland today may occasion surprise. But the issue has ramifications beyond the existence of the tiny community of believers. There is the question of the preservation of Jewish monuments (mainly of a religious character), and the interest taken in Jews and Judaism by an important segment of Polish society. The activities of the remaining Jews and the very existence of the community are of considerable importance in this respect.

In all these matters the heritage of the past, together with present-day political interests, affects — directly or indirectly — those who display an interest in Jewish affairs, and also the attitudes and policies of the institutions which dominate the Polish scene, that is, the communist state authorities and the Catholic Church. It is often difficult to differentiate between the heritage of the past and present-day political attitudes. Historical influences play a major role in discussions and declarations about Polish-Jewish relations in the interwar period and under the German occupation. But has, for instance, the controversy around Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*[1] been no more than a historical debate? And are the accusations of past anti-Semitism which state propaganda levels against the Catholic Church and the repeated references made by liberal and opposition figures (many of whom are closely connected with the church) to the communist anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 exclusively or even largely related to the past? Political self-interest can be detected in the conviction, which is spreading among both the communist and

[1] In this film, Lanzmann shows the locations where the mass extermination of Jews took place, and presents the testimonies of survivors, non-Jewish eye-witnesses, and operators of the "Final Solution" machine. Controversy was aroused by the testimonies of a number of Poles living in the vicinity of the death camps who displayed a degree of anti-Jewish prejudice. For this reason, the film was denounced in the Polish media, while a minority expressed the view that such bigotry still existed.

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An interesting and significant example of policies being clothed in a garb of pro-Jewishness is the recent improvement in Polish-Israeli relations, which had been broken off in 1967. The improvement reflects a general tendency in the Soviet bloc; the recent establishment of interest sections in Warsaw and Tel Aviv in particular is a step unlikely to have been taken by the Polish government independently. Nevertheless, the step has been presented by official spokesmen for Poland as a humanitarian act stemming from a special historical relationship with the Jews, for millions of whom Poland was the homeland.

The Religious Community

The Polish Jewish Calendar 5746/1985-86 lists 16 congregations, seven synagogues and 15 houses of prayer. Half of these congregations are located in the western territories of Poland which became part of the country after World War II. These are the congregations of Bytom, Dzierzoniów, Gliwice, Legnica, Szczecin, Walbrzych, Wroclaw, Zgorzelec and Zary. All these were relatively lively Jewish centres in the first years after the war, largely because of the resettlement of repatriates from the USSR. Today the considerable role played by the Jews in the resettlement of these territories as part of the new Poland is scarcely mentioned. Of these communities only that of Wroclaw is now of any substance. By far the largest community is in Warsaw. Other important congregations are at Katowice, Lódź and Cracow, the latter including Jews from neighbouring locations, some having their own houses of prayer. Bielsko-Biala, Czestochowa and Lublin complete the list of Jewish congregations. There are synagogues in Bytom, Dzierzoniów, Legnica, Lódź and Warsaw, and two in Cracow. These are all functioning synagogues, that is they usually have a praying quorum on Saturdays and Jewish holidays and a larger number of worshippers on the High Holidays of *Rosh Ha-shana* and *Yom Kippur*, but fail to attract on a daily basis the ten Jewish males over 13 years of age necessary for a *minyan*. We will later refer to those synagogues which are no longer used for prayer but serve cultural purposes.

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of its own. Attempts to bring over a rabbi from the United States to reside in Poland have failed. It seems that the Polish authorities are now prepared to accept that a foreign rabbi may officiate in Poland, and they also allow a cantor and an *Ishofar* (ram's horn) blower to be brought from abroad for the High Holidays. *Kosher* meat is available in certain centres but there is an acute shortage of *kosher* slaughterers, and the community therefore seeks to enlist candidates to the *she-hita* trade by promising high wages.

The Jewish religious community also maintains eight *kosher* canteens. While dietary laws occupy an important place in Jewish observance, in Polish conditions the canteens also provide an important social service for the community at large. Many of the Jews are elderly people living on low incomes, and they are often lonely and frail. The situation has become more acute in recent years, as obtaining food has become something of a problem even for able-bodied people with average and above-average incomes.

The religious community is also the natural caretaker of the Jewish cemeteries. There are several hundred of these — close to five hundred according to one source — and most of them are derelict. Since the task of looking after the cemeteries goes far beyond the religious community's capabilities, and beyond even those of the combined Polish Jewish organisations, it has lately attracted the attention of Jewish communities abroad and the Polish authorities. The cleaning and putting into order of Jewish cemeteries in a number of towns (including Warsaw and Lublin) is undertaken at certain times of the year by volunteer groups of Jews and Poles.

The Jewish religious community publishes an annual calendar. The last issue to reach us — that for 1985-86 — goes far beyond the usual rudimentary contents. It is a beautifully published volume of over two hundred pages, with multi-coloured illustrations and a rich religious, historical, and cultural content. The weekly *Folks-sztyme*, published by the TSKZ, with nine pages in Yiddish and three in Polish, is also likely to be read by members of the religious community. It publishes information about the activities of its bodies and details of functions held jointly by the religious and secular organisations. It also publishes religious texts — recently, for example, selected extracts from the *Midrash* — and lessons in Hebrew.

The religious community, like the other Jewish organisations, serves as host to Jewish groups from the West and Israel who visit Poland. The number of these visits has increased considerably in recent years. They include visits by delegations, as well as by scholars and journalists, and also tourists. Particularly interesting, though, are the visits of religious significance, such as pilgrimages of *hassidim* to the graves of their rabbis, and the exceptional event in 1985 when an

American youth received his *bar mitzva* in the Templum synagogue of Cracow, the city where his parents were born.

A central component of Jewish religious life, especially in pre-Holocaust Poland, has always been religious study — from the basic teaching of the Pentateuch to the independent study of the Talmud and Jewish religious literature. *Talmud Torah* schools for young people were in existence until the 1960s but have now disappeared. Traditional forms of Jewish study are virtually non-existent in present-day Poland.

Recently Radio Warsaw has been broadcasting Jewish religious programmes at Passover, the High Holidays of *Rosh-Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) and in 1986 also on *Shavuot*. There were no broadcasts of this kind in either pre-war or communist Poland. But in January 1982 the military regime introduced religious broadcasts and signed an agreement with the Polish Ecumenical Council and its affiliated churches, and the Jewish religion also benefited from this.

The local Jewish congregations are united in a national *Vaad Ha-kehillot,* whose official name is *Zwiazek Religijny Wyznania Mojzeszowego* (Religious Association of the Mosaic Faith). The central organs are a General Board, which appoints a Presidium with a chairman and secretary, and an auditing commission. These bodies are elected by a Congress comprising elected representatives of the local congregations. No such Congress had been held since 1968, but one was convoked in December 1984 by a Provisional Board constituted in October 1983. Fairly close cooperation developed between the *Vaad Ha-kehillot* and the secular Jewish organisations. Such cooperation had not always, to say the least, been apparent in post-war Poland.

Although the 1984 Congress resolved to re-introduce membership subscriptions, financial assistance from the American Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) is as fundamentally important to the work of the religious communities as it is to that of the secular Jewish organisations. (Some of the activities of the latter, such as the Jewish theatre, the weekly *Folks-sztyme*, etc., are, however, financed from the state budget, directly or indirectly.) In particular, the operation of the canteens would have been impossible without foreign assistance. The possibility of receiving such assistance cannot be taken for granted in communist Poland. The Joint was expelled from Poland in 1950, permitted to operate in 1956, and expelled again in 1968 — all important dates in post-war Polish history. The signing of an agreement with the Joint regarding the renewal of its operations was prepared during the period of Solidarity, but the actual signing coincided with the proclamation of martial law in December 1981.

The communist authorities' desperate need for hard currency favours a resumption of the Joint's activities.

The Jewish Monuments

The vast majority of Jewish monuments in Poland are of a religious nature — synagogues and cemeteries. Many of the synagogues were destroyed by the Nazis, including the magnificent Tlomackie synagogue in Warsaw which was blown up in 1943 and the great synagogue in Lódź which was blown up on 11 November 1939. But many synagogues survived and today a number of them are used for worship. Amongst them is the celebrated sixteenth century Remo (Rabbi Moshe Isserles) synagogue in Cracow and the newly-restored (1983) Nozhik synagogue in Warsaw. Amongst the few synagogues restored as important buildings of architectural interest are the seventeenth century synagogues of Zamość and Tykocin — the former used as a library and the latter as a Judaic museum. Many others are still in use as libraries, schools, houses of culture, cinemas, etc.; the Poznań synagogue was converted into a swimming pool. Some synagogues were destroyed after the war and others were earmarked for demolition but in the meantime are used as warehouses. Now, with the growing interest in things Jewish and the place of Jews in Polish history, the historical and architectural qualities of some of these synagogues are being rediscovered and plans are being made for their restoration; in some cases steps towards the realisation of these plans have already been taken. The buildings cannot be restored to their original use, but the least that should be done is to mark in an appropriate manner their former purpose and the fate of the community which worshipped in them. As increasing numbers of Jews come from abroad to visit the places where they or their ancestors once lived, interest in the restoration of some synagogues and the establishing of commemorative plaques seems to have grown considerably. Such interest, however, is by no means universal, and most deplorable is the fate of the Jewish cemeteries. Many were destroyed by the Nazis, and the gravestones were used to pave streets and courtyards, or even crushed and used for building a road, as in the case of the Zwoleń cemetery.[3] Some of these gravestones are now being retrieved.

However, a large number of cemeteries survived the war intact or almost intact. In some, the Jews who returned erected monuments to victims of the Holocaust in the given locality. Of these cemeteries, most ended up in a state of neglect and were vandalised. It is difficult to distinguish between greed and hooliganism, anti-Semitic or

otherwise, as motives for the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and gravestones. But in some cases anti-Semitic motivation seems clear. One example is that of the cemetery of Kielce, where there were two mass graves with monuments — one for 45 Jewish children shot by the Nazis on 23 May 1943 and erected by their next of kin shortly after the war, and the other to 42 victims of the Kielce *pogrom* of 4 July 1946. Both monuments were destroyed in 1968, the year of the official anti-Semitic campaign. Among other cases of wanton destruction to have come to public attention are the repeated attacks on gravestones at the Cracow cemetery. The Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* (10 June 1984) described this series of acts of vandalism as "an operation conducted permanently and effectively".

Jewish organisations in the West and a number of rabbis have displayed interest in the fate of the cemeteries and have been in contact with the Polish government. But only in the 1970s, with the increased openness to the West under Gierek, did some hint of realism appear in such contacts. What is more important is that part of the Polish public have begun to show interest in the Jewish dead. For instance, since 1974 the Warsaw Club of the Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK) has organised a week of Jewish culture annually in June: the mornings are spent tidying up the Warsaw Jewish cemetery at Gesia/Okopowa Street and the afternoons are devoted to prayer and lectures. In 1979 it was reported that students of the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) were putting the Jewish cemetery in their city in order. More such reports appeared in the press in the 1980s, when the effort to preserve the Jewish cemeteries became a public issue and received more coverage in the media.

On 9 April 1981, during the Solidarity era, a public committee for the protection of the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw was founded. It was supported by many people of cultural prominence. An analogous body appeared in Cracow. Although the Warsaw committee was not very active and became bogged down in a bureaucratic controversy, the matter was not allowed to rest. In 1984 the old, inactive board was removed and a new one, in which representatives of a younger generation interested in Jewish culture were included, was established. Also, the authorities carried out a survey of Jewish cemeteries which revealed the appalling extent of the situation. At the behest of the committee, a number of cemeteries were included in the list of monuments, and in some of them preservation work did indeed begin.

Progress in the field of preservation and restoration of Jewish monuments has been rather slow, but a change of attitude is evident. An interesting manifestation of this has been letters to the press and local conservation bodies about the state of the Jewish cemeteries in

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Zygmunt Hoffman, Maurycy Horn and Jerzy Tomaszewski; on Jewish gravestones by Monika Krajewska; and on the remnants of Polish Jewry today, by Malgorzata Niezabitowska and Tomasz Tomaszewski. Three books by Julian Stryjkowski on Biblical themes appeared: *The Answer* on Moses, *King David Lives*, and *Judas Maccabaeus. The Inn* by the same author, which deals with a Galician Hassidic community facing a *pogrom* by Cossacks in 1914, was made into a film, and *Azriel's Dream*, which portrays the moral anguish of a traditional Jew, was among the forty most popular books in Poland between 1975 and 1984. The works of Isaac Bashevis Singer have been translated into Polish and have found an eager readership. *Fiddler on the Roof* was shown not only in the American film version but as two separate stage shows in Poland.

In 1983, when impressive celebrations commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising were held, the Catholic monthlies *Znak* (The Sign) and *Więź* (Bond) published special bulky "Jewish issues". A wide range of subjects was discussed — religious, historical and political, literary and linguistic — and documents and statements on present-day Catholic attitudes to Jews and Judaism were included. In 1984 the monthly *Literatura na świecie* (Literature in the World) published an issue devoted to Yiddish literature and in 1985 the underground *Spotkania* (Meetings), which describes itself as an independent Catholic journal, published a "Jewish issue" which concentrated on Polish-Jewish relations. Articles and comments on this topic proliferated in the press, both legal and underground. Items on subjects such as Martin Buber's thought and King David's faith also appeared. Last but not least, it should be mentioned that studies in Polish-Jewish history have been inaugurated at the universities of Warsaw and Cracow. In general it would seem that there is some substance to the claim that there was a "Jewish wave" in Poland in the 1980s.

A Religious Renaissance?

There is in Poland a group of a few score individuals who are actively involved in the "Jewish wave". Among them are a few whose involvement is at least in part determined by Jewish religious motivation, and this has led to a crystallisation of Jewish religious attitudes. One such person is Dr Symcha Wajs, originally a Lublin Jew but now living in Warsaw, who belongs to the older generation steeped in traditional religion. Thanks to his efforts a commemorative plaque was affixed to the building which housed the *Yeshivat Hakhmey Lublin* and is now the *Collegium Maius* of the Medical

Faculty of Lublin. He is also actively involved in the care of the Lublin Jewish cemetery and the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw.

In the last few years Monika and Stanislaw Krajewski, together with other individuals (notably Jan Jagielski), have toured Poland in search of Jewish cemeteries, establishing their state of repair, photographing the more interesting gravestones, and trying to organise their upkeep. The Krajewskis lecture on the cemeteries and other Jewish subjects in Poland and have also given lecture tours in Israel, the United States and Great Britain.

The Krajewskis form the nucleus of a small group of people, born since the war, who have embarked on an attempt to return to the religion of their forbears. Their parents are usually non-religious, as were often their grandparents. It is likely that feelings of Jewishness were aroused in this younger generation by the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 rather than by any influences received at home. The general religious upsurge in Poland has further fired their interest — an interest which applies to Jewish tradition as well as to Jewish religious thought and inter-faith relations. The crucial test for this small group (which includes young families with children) will come at the point where they have to introduce their children to Jewish observance. This will be difficult for a group which is small in number and belongs to a society for whom Judaism — "Jewish wave" notwithstanding — is alien and exotic. Nevertheless, the *bar-mitzva* ceremony of a boy from such a family was held in 1984 in the Warsaw Nozhik synagogue. The ceremony was preceded by the boy studying religious texts and precepts, aided by a learned member of the traditional Jewish community. Children also participate in the activities of the secular TSKZ, including celebrations rooted in religious tradition.

What will be the fate of this revival of Jewishness and Judaism amongst those who are descended from Jews, as distinct from the interest shown by the non-Jewish Polish public? It would seem that the odds are against them, but belief in the eternity of the Jewish people is not confined merely to the Jews themselves.