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'Loving and Hating the Dead': Present-day Polish Attitudes to the Jews

ANTONY POLONSKY

Today there are barely 10,000 Jews in Poland. These last remnants of one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities in the world, a community which in 1939 numbered three and a half million, are mostly elderly and it will be an extremely difficult task to ensure the survival of Jewish life in Poland for another generation. Yet the impact of this community on the Polish consciousness is enormous. It is a community whose traces can be found everywhere—in buildings, in cultural life and in people's memories. As in so many other aspects of life, the Poles seem mesmerised by the past, and still preoccupied by the issues that dominated it.

On the Jewish question, sharply divided and contradictory opinions can be encountered among Poles, sometimes even in the same individual. On the one hand, there has been since the late 1970s a revival of interest in the Polish-Jewish past. Partly this is the result of nostalgia, in the largely mono-ethnic and mono-religious Poland of today (although its homogeneity should not be exaggerated), for the more colourful Poland of the past, with its mixture of religions and nationalities. Ewa Berberiusz, a Catholic journalist in Poland, expressed this view as follows in 1988:

> I would like to say that the absence of Jews whom I still remember but who are gone leaves me, for one, with a sense of irreplaceable loss. I voice here not just a sentiment in which is enshrined an idolised memory of old Poland, but rather an awareness of the real manifest impoverishment of Polish culture. Poland has lost a very important creative contribution.[1]

Partly, this interest in Jewish matters is also the result of a growing awareness that it is impossible to provide a coherent account of Polish history and culture without taking into account the contribution of the national minorities and in particular the Jews. The awareness of the fact that a third of the urban population in Poland was Jewish, that a very large number of leading Polish writers in Polish were Jewish, that on Polish soil a very lively and dynamic Jewish culture in both Yiddish and Hebrew developed and had an impact on the Polish environment has become much better appreciated today.

What is most important is the moral factor: the interest in Jews and the phenomenon of 'loving the dead' that one sees in so many aspects of Polish life is, above all, the product of a desire to come to terms with the less attractive features of the Polish past, principally in this context chauvinism and antisemitism. This preoccupation is, of course, confined to a minority, but it is strong among a section of the Polish intelligentsia. It was stimulated by a number of factors. These include the series of Polish-Jewish conferences between 1983 and 1989 and the shock caused by the

showing in Poland of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, which revealed how deeply rooted antisemitic stereotypes could still be encountered in the Polish countryside. More than anything else, however, it was a product of the higher sense of self-esteem among Poles as a whole, but particularly the intelligentsia, which was created by the emergence of Solidarity and its ultimately successful challenge to the communist system. This phenomenon seemed to negate the western stereotype of the Poles as impractical and incompetent dreamers – people on white horses charging at tanks – and gave to many Poles a greater feeling of confidence and a willingness to investigate the less attractive aspects of the Polish past, such as chauvinism and antisemitism. An important and much discussed article in this context is 'Biedne polacy patrzą na ghetto' ('The poor Poles look at the ghetto') (1987) by the literary critic and Professor of Polish literature at the Jagiellonian University, Jan Błoński.[2]

Błoński took as his point of departure a poem by Czesław Miłosz, written shortly after the destruction of the ghetto, which bore the title *Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na ghetto (A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto)*. In this poem Miłosz imagines the destruction of the ghetto as the first stage in the end of the world, an apocalypse in which he himself will be buried alive. Worse than the fear of this terrible death is another fear. Under the earth he imagines a burrowing mole, guardian of the underworld, with clearly Jewish features, who scrutinises the corpse he finds. The mole will be able to recognise the poet and he will 'count me among the helpers of death, the uncircumcised'. The poem is thus an acceptance of the responsibility of the whole Christian world for the mass murder of the Jews. Incidentally, it is one of only two of his own poems that Miłosz included in his *History of Polish Literature*.

Błoński comments that any attempt by Poles to discuss their reactions to this murder, whether with Jews or with other people, very quickly degenerates into apologetics and attempts to justify Polish conduct. The explanation for this, he believes, is clear: consciously or unconsciously, many Poles fear criticism of their conduct.

> We fear the guardian mole might call to us after having referred to his book, 'Oh yes, and you too, have you been assisting at the death, and you too, have you helped to kill, or at the very least have you looked with acquiescence on the death of the Jews'.

This fear cannot easily be evaded, even if it is shared by the Poles with the rest of Europe. It has to be openly faced. The only way, according to Błoński, for the Poles to calm their subconscious panic is 'to stop haggling, trying to defend and justify ourselves, to stop arguing about the things that were beyond our power to do during the occupation and beforehand, nor to place blame on political, social and economic conditions, but to say first of all, "yes, we are guilty".' This word 'guilty', was, of course what more than anything else stuck in people's throats. They were prepared for the word 'responsible' or 'coresponsible'; guilt was difficult to take.

In Błoński's view, 'guilt' refers not to the mass murder of the Jews – in which the Poles did not, in fact, participate – but to the fact that they made insufficient efforts to prevent it. This was a historical failure.

> If only in the past we had behaved more humanely, had been wiser, more generous, genocide would perhaps have been less imaginable. It would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out and almost certainly would have met with greater resistance than it did. To put it differently, it would not have met with the indifference and moral turpitude of the society in whose full view it took place.

Błoński employs a powerful analogy:

> We did take the Jews into our home but we made them live in the basement. When they wanted to come into the drawing room our response was, yes, but only after you cease to be Jews, when you become civilised... There were those among the Jews who were ready to adhere to this advice, but no sooner did they do so than we started in turn talking of an invasion of Jews, of the danger of the infiltration of Polish society... Eventually when we lost our home and when in its premises the invaders set to murdering Jews, did we show solidarity towards them? How many of us decided that it was none of our business? There were also those, and I leave them out of account, common criminals who were secretly pleased that Hitler had solved for us the Jewish problem. We could not even welcome and honour the survivors, even if they were embittered, disorientated and perhaps somewhat tiresome.
>
> I repeat, instead of haggling and justifying ourselves, we should first consider our own faults and weaknesses. This is the moral revolution that is imperative when considering the Polish-Jewish past, it is only this that can gradually cleanse our desecrated soil.

He concludes with an appeal to the Poles to imitate the way the Catholic Church has repudiated its anti-Jewish past. The central feature, he argues, was just such a refusal to excuse past wrongs:

> We are familiar with the church documents, in which already at the time of Pope John XXIII the relationship between Christians and Jews or rather between Christianity and Judaism was redefined, hopefully for all time. In the Pope's speech as well as in these documents one aspect is immediately clear: they do not concern themselves with attributing blame, nor with the consideration of the reasons – social, economic, intellectual or whatever – that made Christians look upon Jews an enemies and intruders.
>
> One thing is stated loud and clear. The Christians of the past and the Church itself were wrong: they had no reason to consider the Jews as a damned nation, the nation responsible for the death of Jesus Christ and therefore as a nation which should be excluded from the community of nations.

My general term for this phenomenon is 'loving the dead'. It involves trying to find peace with the dead, trying to integrate the dead into the community of Poland and into Polish consciousness of the past, and trying to preserve the memory of the dead through the restoration of their monuments, through the preservation of cemeteries and synagogues and through the publication of works on Jewish culture. Of course, these activities are the work of a minority and, along with the phenomenon of loving the dead, in Poland there is also the phenomenon of hating the dead; and together with hating the dead goes indifference towards the dead.

Here again it is appropriate to start with the Błoński article. It caused a huge controversy in Poland – not surprisingly since it represented a major breakthrough. The controversy was mostly contained in the pages of the leading Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*. The negative responses were as interesting and revealing as the positive responses, and the most articulate of them, which expresses most clearly a quite commonly encountered Polish view, was 'Jan Błoński: w odpowiedzi' ('A reply to Jan Błoński') by Władysław Siła-Nowicki.[3] It is an article that shocks

because of its frequent misuse of historical evidence, its insensitivity and its jingoistic defensiveness. Yet with Błoński it frames the debate and defines the field for other testimony.

Siła-Nowicki is, of course, a man of considerable weight. He is a genuine patriot, a member of the Polish anti-communist underground who spent many years in a communist prison under a sentence of death, a veteran defender of political prisoners and until recently one of the advisers of President Wałęsa. He begins by attacking Błoński for playing into the hands of Poland's enemies and he reproaches *Tygodnik Powszechny* for lending its credibility to what he describes as anti-Polish propaganda. He then rehearses the familiar and not entirely inaccurate selection of facts that so many Poles have used to justify their behaviour towards Jews before, during and after the Holocaust. For centuries, he claims, when they were expelled elsewhere Jews were able to settle in Poland and their numbers increased remarkably. Before 1939, the Jews dominated certain professions and controlled a disproportionate part of Polish wealth. Indeed, one might argue that if there is one catch-phrase that sums up Polish antisemitism, it is 'Ulicy wasze kamienice nasze' ('the streets may be yours but the apartment houses belong to us'). Almost everybody in Poland lived in apartment houses, and the renting of apartments was a largely Jewish occupation. This phrase, attributed to a Jewish spokesman, encapsulates for many Poles the privileged position of the Jews in economic life.

During the War, according to Siła-Nowicki, no European nation did more to assist Jews than Poland, where the risk for such assistance was the greatest, the normal penalty being death – and death not only of the individual, but of his or her family too. Polish suffering in the War was enormous, second only to that of the Jews. There were no quislings in Poland and the Polish underground sentenced to death those who betrayed Jews to the Nazis. Siła-Nowicki also includes other more dubious arguments. He claims that the pre-war quota on university admissions for Jews (the *numerus clausus*) was justified. 'For me,' he says, 'it is natural that society defends itself against numerical domination of its intelligentsia', suggesting that the Jews were not and ought not to have been part of that society. He also claims that it was the passivity of the Jews, more than anything else, that led to their destruction. Habits of accommodation, presumably different from those of the rebellious insurrectionary Catholic Poles, led them to go to their deaths offering no resistance. This is, of course, a view that a number of Polish writers, notably Ewa Prekerowa, have dismissed as stereotypic and historically without foundation.[4] Siła-Nowicki concludes as follows: 'It is even possible to prove in a most scientific manner that in their veins flows only one per cent of the blood of those people who shouted "Hosannah to the Son of David" and then "Crucify him", but their nation continues to exist.' I am not sure what that means, but I don't like the sound of it.

The parameters of debate about Jewish issues in Poland lie, in effect, between the Siła-Nowickis and the Błońskis. The voices that today say outright that the Jews are all involved in a vicious conspiracy to defraud and destroy the Poles are an insignificant minority; those views with which it is necessary to take issue are of the sort that Siła-Nowicki expresses. His views are widely shared: see, for example, the homily of Cardinal Glemp dealing with the Carmelite Convent, or his remarks before his recent American trip. Meanwhile, the Błoński view was articulated by, for instance, Bishop Muszyński in the convent controversy. Thus the same patterns of thought repeat themselves.

Yet one cannot ignore the real antisemites and we must therefore move on from those who, like Siła-Nowicki, do not actually hate the dead (indeed one might argue

that the only Jews that they are really happy with are dead ones and they often protest how much fondness they have for these dead Jews), to the phenomenon of antisemitism as it exists in Poland today. It is certainly true that the end of communist rule has been accompanied by a great increase in the expression of antisemitic sentiments. It should be stressed that what has changed is that sentiments that were probably always present can now be openly expressed. There has certainly been no serious attempt, since the Second World War, to reeducate Poles on the Jewish question and to explain to them the evils of antisemitism. Insofar as efforts have been made, they have been by the communists, who were resisted as an alien force which had imposed itself on Polish society. Indeed, one reason for the increase in antisemitism is the belief that communism in Poland was a Jewish phenomenon and that the Jews had somehow imposed it. As a result, the expression of antisemitic views does not arouse the same sort of condemnation as it would in Western Europe.

Antisemitic views can now be expressed with impunity, primarily as a result of the end of censorship. The expression of antisemitic views is also a symptom of the dislocations that have been caused by a difficult transition to a market economy and a pluralist political system. The temptation to blame current hardships on a hidden Jewish or Masonic hand has a long tradition in Poland, and under present conditions it easily gains credence. It is worth noting in this context that in the last presidential election the Poujadist candidate Stanisław Tymiński, who did not express antisemitic views, won about 25 per cent of the vote in the first round, and Lech Wałęsa, who is not an antisemite, used the Jewish issue against his opponents. At the time, the two phenomena were kept separate. It is easy to see how they could be combined, and the resultant political mixture would be very dangerous in the Polish context. Many sections of the Polish population are in desperate economic circumstances – old age pensioners who are barely able to survive, farmers on small uneconomic farms and over a million unemployed workers, a number that is likely to rise considerably in the future.

All these people are faced with the break-up of a world which, while it might not have been very efficient, certainly placed a great emphasis on caring for people. There is no need to idealise the communist system, but one can see quite well in places like East Germany how the rapid transition to the market inevitably brings with it very serious suffering that has to be addressed. It was far too easy for intellectuals in Poland, including the people around the first non-communist Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, to underestimate the significance of this phenomenon. The political isolation of the intelligentsia from the workers was certainly one of the reasons for the break-up of Solidarity and it has had very negative political consequences.

The political conflict within the Solidarity camp, the clash between Wałęsa and Mazowiecki, was a bitter one with many of the characteristics of a family feud. Neither side could really articulate why it found itself at odds with the other, and this made the conflict much more bitter than might otherwise have been the case. In his presidential campaign, Lech Wałęsa failed clearly to condemn those of his supporters who attacked the Mazowiecki government as being too subject to Jewish influence. He also described himself as 'a full-blooded Pole' with documents going back to his great-great-grandparents to prove it.[5] Before the campaign began he argued that persons of Jewish origin should not conceal this fact. During the campaign he justified this statement on the grounds that

> Chauvinistic and antisemitic views and manifestations appear because the

> present political set-up lacks clarity. There is confusion as to whose interests the administration represents... Links between individuals and the question of responsibility are unclear. The functioning mechanism of the state structure must be made transparent and cliques smashed. Reliance must be placed on competence, rather than on Mafia arrangements. Then the suspiciousness about Jews in government will disappear.[6]

There may be some truth in this explanation, but certainly clearly it is not wholly convincing. What is clear is that the conflict between the two sets of views about the Jewish role in Poland is really an argument over the future of the country. Attitudes towards the Jews are a touchstone for more fundamental views. What is really at issue here is whether the Poland of the future will be inward-looking, chauvinist and prey to conspiracy theories of politics, or pluralist, tolerant and western-oriented. I will examine this particular issue in more detail in the conclusion of this article, but since I have so far dealt essentially with mythical Jews, with the Polish idea of what the Jew is and has been in the past, it might be useful to ask what public opinion surveys show about Polish attitudes to Jews today.

Although there were a certain number of surveys of this kind before the end of communist rule, the subject was really a taboo one at that time. Nevertheless, the Poles have recently had a lot of experience in public opinion polling. Polling was a tool that was used extensively by the martial law government and the polling unit, CBOS, was actually a very sophisticated group made up of individuals with genuine sociological training. Every year they asked the question, 'What is your attitude towards the Jews? Do you regard the Jews in a hostile manner, in a friendly manner, or are you indifferent to them?' The answers gathered over the past ten years have revealed that there has been a significant increase in the number of people who are indifferent to the Jews and a reduction in the number who are hostile. Originally, something like 40 per cent said they were friendly to the Jews, 20 per cent said they were indifferent and 40 per cent said they were hostile. The percentage who are hostile has dropped to about 20 per cent and the percentage who are indifferent has increased to 40 per cent.

This particular question was, however, only one of a series of other questions and the answers are not as significant as those revealed by a poll that was commissioned by the American-Jewish Committee, one of three main American-Jewish organisations.[7] The AJC has been involved in Polish-Jewish dialogue for some time and has set up a Polish American-Jewish American task force. In October of last year, it commissioned a public opinion poll on Polish attitudes towards Jews to be used on the occasion of President Wałęsa's visit to the USA. The poll was also conducted in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but I will refer to the findings in those countries only occasionally for comparative purposes.

The poll starts by trying to ascertain how well informed people are about the size of their Jewish community. In response to the question, 'What percentage of our country's population is Jewish?', 20 per cent correctly said less than 1 per cent; 27 per cent said 2–9 per cent; 9 per cent said 10–19 per cent; 4 per cent said 20–29 per cent; and 39 per cent said that they did not know. Thus only 20 per cent had a fair idea that there are very few Jews in the country.

In response to the question, 'Do the following groups pose a threat to the political development that our country has undergone since the change of regimes?', 16 per cent said yes about the Jews, 65 per cent said no and 18 per cent said they did not know.

'How do you feel about having Jews in your neighbourhood? Would you like to have Jewish neighbours?' Three per cent would like to have Jewish neighbours, 51 per cent said it would not matter to them, 40 per cent said they would prefer not and 7 per cent said they did not know.

'Do you feel that the following groups are achieving too much influence, too little influence or the right amount of influence?' About the Jews, 26 per cent said too much, 5 per cent too little, 27 per cent the right amount and 42 per cent did not know.

'Do any of the following groups behave in a manner that provokes hostility in our country?' About the Jews, 19 per cent said yes, 65 per cent said no and 16 per cent said they did not know.

'Do you think antisemitism in our country is a serious problem, something of a problem or no problem at all?' Ten per cent said it was a very serious problem, 29 per cent said it was something of a problem, 24 per cent said it was not a problem at all, 20 per cent said there was no antisemitism in Poland and 17 per cent did not know. In Hungary, in answer to the same question, 7 per cent said antisemitism was a very serious problem. Forty-four per cent said it was something of a problem, 26 per cent said that it was not a problem at all, 8 per cent came up with the view that there was no antisemitism in Hungary and 16 per cent did not know. In Czechoslovakia, 3 per cent said that it was a very serious problem, 27 per cent that it was something of a problem, 49 per cent that it was no problem and 20 per cent that there was no antisemitism.

'Looking ahead over the next few years do you think that antisemitism in our country will increase greatly, increase somewhat, remain the same, decrease somewhat or decrease greatly?' In Poland, 4 per cent said that it would increase greatly, 13 per cent that it would increase somewhat, 35 per cent that it would remain the same, 11 per cent that it would decrease somewhat and 5 per cent that it would decrease greatly; 32 per cent did not know. In Hungary the corresponding percentages were: 4 per cent increase greatly, 21 per cent increase somewhat, 38 per cent stay the same, 12 per cent decrease somewhat and 3 per cent decrease greatly. In Czechoslovakia, 42 per cent thought it would stay the same.

'Should Jews be allowed to practise their religion openly?' In Poland, 52 per cent said yes, 28 per cent agreed somewhat, 6 per cent disagreed somewhat and 6 per cent disagreed strongly. In other words, 12 per cent thought that Jews should not be allowed to practise their religion! This response, like some others, seems to reveal the existence of a hard core of deep-rooted antisemitism that apparently affects between 12 and 20 per cent of those polled.

'Do Jews have too much influence over our country's culture?' Seven per cent agreed strongly, 13 per cent agreed somewhat, 40 per cent disagreed somewhat, 16 per cent disagreed strongly and 23 per cent did not know. This result seems to indicate that the Poles feel that the Jews have made a positive contribution to cultural life.

'Do Jews have too much influence over our country's economic life?' Ten per cent agreed strongly, 17 per cent agreed somewhat, 34 per cent, surprisingly, disagreed somewhat, 15 per cent disagreed strongly and 24 per cent did not know.

'Do Jews have too much influence over our country's political life?' Twelve per cent agreed strongly, 20 per cent agreed somewhat, 30 per cent disagreed somewhat and 15 per cent disagreed strongly. These figures seem fairly reassuring.

'Some people say that 45 years after the end of the Second World War it is time to put the memory of the Holocaust behind us, and others say we should keep the remembrance of the Holocaust strong even after the passage of time. Which opinion comes closer to your opinion? Thirteen per cent said the former and 81 per cent the latter.

'Which of the following statements comes closer to your opinion? "Jews are an integral part of our country's nation [*sic*]." "Jews are outsiders in our country's society".' Forty-four per cent said the former, 16 per cent said the latter, 11 per cent said they were neither and 8 per cent said they were both (these last two responses were volunteered).

'Several years ago the United Nations passed a resolution to the effect that Zionism is racism. Do you agree or disagree with this resolution?' In Poland, 39 per cent agreed, 19 per cent disagreed and 43 per cent did not know. In Czechoslovakia, 50 per cent agreed, 18 per cent disagreed and 32 per cent did not know. However, in response to the question, 'Do you feel that the state of Israel has a right to exist?' 89 per cent of respondents in Poland said it did, 1 per cent said it did not and 9 per cent did not know.

'With regard to the situation in the Middle East at the present time, do you find yourself more in sympathy with Israel or more in sympathy with the Arab nations? Twenty per cent were more in sympathy with Israel, 11 per cent with the Arab nations, 30 per cent with neither side (a volunteered response), 13 per cent had equal sympathy (another volunteered response) and 26 per cent did not know.

The question was reformulated. 'With regard to the situation in the Middle East at the present time, do you find yourself more in sympathy with Israel or with the Palestinians?' This produced a more pro-Palestinian answer: 11 per cent were more in sympathy with Israel, 18 per cent with the Palestinians, 28 per cent with neither side, 12 per cent with both equally and 31 per cent did not know.

What conclusions can one draw from these public opinion polls? They seem to show that there is a hard core of antisemitism in Poland, as in many countries, but that it does not affect the whole of society. These figures, which are not the products of intellectual debate but which actually represent the views of average Polish citizens, seem to be more encouraging than discouraging.

I have argued that the conflict between the two sets of views about the Jewish role in Poland is really an argument over the future of the country: is Poland going to be outward-looking and 'European', or inward-looking and chauvinistic? This is not a question to which it is easy to give a clear answer, but a number of recent developments give one grounds for cautious optimism. The first unconditional condemnation of antisemitism by the Roman Catholic hierarchy came in a pastoral letter of the Polish bishops of 20 January 1991. It was read out in every one of the 20,000 parishes in Poland. It started by affirming:

> With the Jewish nation, we Poles are linked by special ties. Since as early as the first centuries of our history Poland became another homeland for many Jews, and the majority of Jews living all over the world at present derive from the territories of the former and present Republic of Poland. Unfortunately it is exactly this land that became the grave of several million Jews in our century, not by our will nor by our hand. This is what the Pope, the Holy Father, said not long ago, on 26 September 1990, about our common history: 'there is one more nation, one more special people, the people of patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, the legacy of the faith of Abraham. These people lived with us for generations, shoulder to shoulder on the same land which somehow became the new land of the diaspora. Horrible death was inflicted on millions of sons and daughters of this nation. First they were branded with a special stigma, then they were pushed to ghettos and separated districts, next they were transported to gas chambers and killed only because they were children of this nation. The

> murderers did this on our soil perhaps in order to defile it. But earth cannot be defiled by the blood of innocent victims, earth becomes a holy relic due to such deaths.'

Many Poles, according to the bishops' letter, saved Jewish lives during the War. There are a good number of Polish trees in the Avenue of the Righteous in the *Yad va Shem* in Jerusalem. But 'despite such a large number of examples of heroic assistance on the part of Christian Poles, there were also people who remained indifferent to that inconceivable tragedy'. (This is a point of view close to that of Błoński.)

> We particularly suffer because of those Catholics who were in any way instrumental in causing the death of Jews. They will forever remain a pang of conscience for us, also in the social dimension. If there was only one Christian who could have helped a Jew in danger but did not give him a helping hand or had a share in his death, we must ask our Jewish brothers and sisters for forgiveness. [Again, an echo of Błoński.] We are aware that many of our compatriots still nurse in their memory the harm and injustice inflicted by post-war communist rule, in which people of Jewish origin participated as well. But we must admit that the source of inspiration for their actions cannot be seen in their Jewish origin or in their religion but came from the communist ideology from which Jews too suffered much injustice. We also express our sincere regret at all cases of antisemitism that have occurred on Polish soil. We do this because we are deeply convinced that all signs of antisemitism are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and, as Pope John Paul II has recently underlined, will remain totally contrary to the Christian vision of human dignity. Speaking about the unprecedented extermination of Jews one must not forget or pass over in silence the fact that the Poles as a nation also became one of the first victims of the same criminal racist ideology of Nazism. This same soil that has been a common motherland for Poles and Jews for centuries, the blood shed together, the sea of atrocious pain, the harm suffered by both nations should unite rather than divide them. In particular the sites of torture and in many cases common graves call for this unity. We Christians and Jews are united by the belief in one God, the Creator and the Lord of the whole Universe who created man in his own image, we are united by the ethical principles that are embodied in the decalogue, which may be reduced to the commandment of the love of God and the love of one's fellow man. We are united by our veneration for the Old Testament as holy scripture and our common traditions of prayer. And we are united by hope in the final coming of the Kingdom of God. We wait together for the Saviour, the Messiah, although we believe that he is Jesus of Nazareth and we await not his first but his second coming in might and glory. The crucial way to overcome the difficulties that still exist is to adopt a policy of dialogue which will lead to the elimination of distrust, prejudice and stereotypes and which will allow us to get to know and understand each other better, based on the respect for our separate religious traditions which will open up the road to cooperation in many fields. It is important too that we learn to experience and evaluate the religious beliefs of Jews and Christians in the ways that Jews and Christians themselves experience them today.

I have quoted at some length from the bishops' letter, largely because it passed almost unnoticed since it was issued at the start of the Gulf War.

Meanwhile, President Wałęsa has gone out of his way to repudiate his behaviour during the presidential campaign. He has repeatedly attempted to reassure the Jewish world of his hostility to antisemitism and has set up a high-level commission to improve Polish-Jewish relations, including many people like Jan Błoński himself and the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Jerzy Turowicz, who have played an active part in the recent debate on Jewish issues which led ultimately to the bishops' letter. Speaking to a visiting Jewish delegation shortly after his election, President Wałęsa affirmed: 'Antisemitism has been a serious problem here, we need to build a pluralistic society, we must do this and we will do this.' In his speech to the Israeli parliament in April, in another echo of Błoński, he asked the Jewish people for 'forgiveness' for Polish behaviour during the Second World War. Certainly in the recent parliamentary election the Jewish issue played less of a role than in the presidential contest.

In conclusion, I would like to consider what the Jewish reaction to the conflict over Jewish issues in Poland should be. An answer can be approached in three ways.

Firstly, we need to bear in mind our own heritage. I agree with the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobowitz, who expressed the view that too much stress has been placed on the process of mass murder and insufficient stress on the character of what was destroyed. A unique Jewish civilisation, from which most of us derive our inheritance, was wiped out. If we are to have any understanding of who we are, we must have a better idea of the character of that civilisation. Since there are virtually no Jews in Poland, investigation of the Polish-Jewish past must involve cooperation with those Poles who also wish to preserve the memory of that past.

Secondly, we cannot avoid confronting the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the central event in twentieth-century Jewish history. How it happened, how we could be the subject of mindless hatred that led ultimately to mass murder is a central question, and it is a question that we cannot answer on our own. We have to answer it together with the other peoples of Europe who were involved in various ways; and the Poles were involved very directly. They did not, for the most part, participate, but the Holocaust happened where they were. Their witness is important and it is vital that we listen to what they have to say and that they listen to what we have to say. This dialogue was greatly advanced when some Poles admitted a responsibility for what happened. It then became much easier for Jews to respond. Alexander Erlich, for instance, observed:

> Today in the twentieth century Polish-Jewish relations have taken on the character of a vicious circle. Amongst many Jews, a feeling of distrust was born in relation to the Poles as a result of official or popular antisemitism, and this contributed to behaviour which could be construed as anti-Polish in conditions of a national catastrophe. These acts in turn added oil to the fire and fanned a deeply rooted and 'virulent' prejudice. The historical significance of the discussion which was initiated by Jan Błoński's article... rests precisely on the fact that remarks such as those made by Jan Błoński... help us to find a way out of that vicious circle. They help us create the conditions for a Polish-Jewish dialogue devoid of prejudice and misunderstandings, of irresponsible generalisations and self-defensive denials, for a dialogue characterised by its mutual respect and, what is more, respect for what are at times painful facts. We have started that dialogue late and the path is a long one. Perhaps, however, by a joint effort we will succeed in fulfilling our common duty – and once again to quote Jan Błoński – 'to confront our past in truth'.[9]

Thirdly, Jews have an interest in promoting a democratic system, as a system in which the rights of minorities have been safeguarded most adequately, and in which the right to practise one's religion or cultivate one's own national traditions has been most fully accepted. The revolution of 1989 was an attempt to extend the pluralistic democratic system and the market economy to Central and Eastern Europe. The failure of the attempted Soviet coup of August 1991 has removed many obstacles to the same process in the former Soviet Union. This revolution involves a transition that has never been attempted before, from a society hierarchically organised with a centrally planned economic system and a totalitarian political system. We have seen transitions from fascist or authoritarian right-wing political regimes but none of this type. It is crucial for the stability of Europe that this transition succeeds and that Poland be an outward-looking, pluralistic and tolerant society, which will find its proper place in the new Europe.

Notes and References

1 *Tygodnik Powszechny* (5 April 1987); quoted in A. Polonsky (ed.), *My Brother's Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London, 1989), p. 108.
2 This article is translated in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–52.
3 This article is translated in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–68.
4 This article is translated in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–80.
5 *Gazeta Wyborcza* (19 October 1990).
6 *Tygodnik Solidarności* (28 October 1990).
7 Confidential survey carried out for the American-Jewish Committee.
8 *Gazeta Wyborcza* (26 January 1991).
9 Speech in a discussion on 'Ethical problems of the Holocaust in Poland', at the International Conference on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry, Jerusalem, 1 February 1988; quoted in Polonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 201.