WRESTLING WITH GHOSTS: POLES AND JEWS TODAY

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"Everyone knows that Poles imbibe anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk."

"It's a well-known fact that those who accuse Poles of anti-Semitism are enemies of Poland."

Everyone who has spent any time talking to Poles and Jews about the relations between them has heard some version of the sentiments paraphrased in these two comments. Even though Jews and Poles no longer live together in Poland, the simple phrase "Poles and Jews" evokes powerful emotions. Jews have bitter memories of friction and conflict, of being despised and threatened by Poles. Distrust of and dislike of Poles is handed down within the culture; most Jews today have had no personal experience of living among Poles. In contrast, when challenged to think about Polish-Jewish relations, Poles are quite likely to recall the good old days before the Nazis came when Poles and Jews got along very well with each other. But this sentimental memory is often linked with a sense of betrayal; since Jewish-Polish relations are remembered as good, Jewish accusations of Polish anti-Semitism are perceived as base ingratitude, if not treachery.

In the ethnic cauldron that is Eastern Europe, there is nothing unusual about the historic frictions between Poles and Jews, for there can be little doubt that intense ethnic animosity is one of the principal features of the region. To be sure, Eastern Europe is not unique in this regard. Ethnic conflict is a universal phenomenon, emerging from a tangled web of linguistic, religious, economic, and (broadly defined) cultural differences. These differences may be exacerbated by the political subordination of one group to the other, or of both to a third.[1] Conditions of poverty and powerlessness encourage the tendency of groups to define and affirm their own identities in ways that do not merely exclude, but also demean and demonize others with whom they come into contact.

Numerous factors, including ethnic consciousness, religion, and class differences, have contributed to the historical animosities between Poles and Jews. In past centuries, Polish landowners employed Jews as estate stewards and tax collectors responsible for overseeing and extracting wealth from the peasantry. Although peasants themselves had little if any sense of national consciousness until the late nineteenth century, it is no wonder that they disliked and resented the Jews, given the roles that the latter filled in the rural economy. The other economic roles that Jews played, as purveyors of goods and suppliers of capital--

mostly on a small scale sufficient only to sustain a marginal existence--further intensified the antagonism toward them among Poland's rural inhabitants. It might be noted, incidentally, that the differentiation of economic roles based on ethnicity, which is encountered in widely varied cultures, typically fuels the resentment of the majority against what they perceive as an exploitative and advantaged minority. The situation of the Overseas Chinese in Indonesia is one of many possible analogous examples.

Because the situation in Poland was extraordinarily complicated, a thorough discussion of Polish-Jewish relations would have to take into account a wide range of regional differences. Here I simply wish to provide a brief background and to highlight several areas in which the differences between Poles and Jews engendered mutual suspicion. From the eighteenth-century partitions until Poland regained its independence in 1918, Poles and Jews were both minorities in the Russian and Austrian empires and in Prussia. In some areas where the landowners were Polish, the peasants were predominantly Ukrainian, Byelorussian, or Lithuanian. The Jews in these multi-ethnic regions had to deal with all these different Christian peoples who were divided along religious and class as well as ethnic lines.

Language, food, dress, religion, and supposedly innate ethnic characteristics were the major areas which gave rise to tensions between Poles and Jews. During most of their history as neighbors, Jews and Poles spoke different languages. When they came into contact with each other, in the marketplace and elsewhere, they communicated in a mixture of pidgin Polish and pidgin Yiddish. They ate different foods and observed conflicting food taboos. Observant Jews, bound by the laws of *kashruth*, were enjoined from ever sharing the non-kosher food of their Polish neighbors; there was no breaking of bread together. Because of their distinctive dress, it was obvious at a glance who was a Pole and who a Jew. Both peoples apparently believed that they were strikingly different from each other in physical appearance although enough intermingling of the gene pools occurred over the centuries to produce "pure" Poles with stereotypical Jewish features and Jews who looked surprisingly "Polish."[2]

The crucial difference between Poles and Jews is, of course, religion. Poland is by no means the only predominantly Christian country to have experienced waves of anti-Semitic hysteria, nor has anti-Semitism been limited to the Roman Catholic Church. What is surprising, and not well known except by Poles, is that there were long periods in Poland's history, most notably during the turbulent times of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when Poland offered Europe a shining model of religious tolerance.[3] This was no longer the case in the first half of the twentieth century (the period most clearly remembered by contemporary Jews), when the Catholic Church as an institution and individual Catholic clergy adopted a strongly anti-Jewish posture. It must also be stated unequivocally that Jews viewed Christians with hostility; the Poles are by no means the only Christian people whom Jews have held in contempt.

Despite such fundamental differences, however, Poles and Jews managed to coexist in relative peace, if not amity, for many centuries. Strangely enough, in many ways Poles and Jews came to resemble each other. Some of the central Polish and Jewish mythologies are strikingly similar. Each people cultivates an image of itself as a chosen nation and each cherishes the memory of its martyrdom. Jewish claims, of course, are based on scripture. The Polish myth offers a revision for the Christian era, not a refutation of the past Jewish role. Chosen by God to suffer for the sins of all nations, as Christ suffered for the sins of mankind, Poles must endure in their own diaspora until the dismembered body of Poland is resurrected. Thus, their apparent failure as a nation is actually a special sign of divine grace--as it is with the Jews. These self-representations convert what would otherwise be histories of defeat and victimization into profoundly meaningful, if painful, manifestations of a divine plan. They offer powerless, stateless peoples[4] an assurance of superiority to counter a profound sense of inferiority.[5]

The obsessive interest that each group has shown toward the other suggests, however, that both Poles and Jews are often ambivalent about their self-defined superiority. Perhaps the most striking manifestation of this ambivalence is their mutual obsession with the question of how much Jewish blood flows in the veins of famous Poles. (The question of how much Polish blood flows in Jewish veins does no appear to be of interest to anyone.) Implicitly, Poles and Jews both assume that Jewish blood is a more potent conveyor of racial traits than Polish blood, since even a single Jewish forebear may make an individual Jewish. Playing the game of "Who's a Jew?" is both a Polish and a Jewish national pastime.[6] However, when Poles and Jews speculate, for example, about whether a particular Polish intellectual or activist had any Jewish forebears, different complexes are apparently at work in each group. Both peoples seem to agree that <u>intellectual</u> superiority is a Jewish biological trait.[7] Poles betray anxiety about their own intellectual and creative powers. Jews, burdened by a host of other inferiority complexes, appear to crave these apparent validations of their intellectual superiority.

But the reverse may also be true. Poles who are preoccupied with sustaining their belief in Polish superiority find it tempting to ascribe the negative qualities that they would prefer not to see in "one of their own" to the powerful polluting effect of Jewish blood. Thus, many Poles took some comfort in the fact that the noxious spokesman for the now defunct Jaruzelski regime, Jerzy Urban, is Jewish. However, since one characteristic of Polish political culture is the conviction that nothing is ever what it seems, Urban's role, along with Jaruzelski's, is now being re-evaluated.[8] The belief that Jewishness implies both high intelligence and a lack of loyalty to Poland probably explains why people could suddenly become convinced, during the 1990 presidential election, that Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a devout Catholic, is really a Jew.

Such "folk geneticism" is fairly benign in and of itself although it is certainly subject to manipulation for sinister political ends. Even the well-documented folk beliefs that ascribed demonic qualities and Satanic practices to Jews did not lead inevitably to massive violence by Poles against Jews or to their expulsion from Poland. In fact, such beliefs were

often held by individuals who at the same time accepted Jews and even had some positive feelings toward them as well. In the mid-1970s and again in 1984, a Polish sociologist interviewed inhabitants of small towns and villages in southeastern Poland about their attitudes toward Jews. Her sample of 184 respondents came up with the following contradictory attributes, many mentioned by one and the same individuals: Jews were said to be dishonest, lazy, greedy, miserly, sly, and dirty, but they were also said to be hard-working, good neighbors, intelligent, quiet, friendly, pious, and above all good family men who did not beat their wives or children. (These same people spoke of Poles as industrious, brave, quarrelsome, drunk, and given to wife-beating.)[9]

The virulent "scientific" racism that had its heyday in Poland during the interwar period was the product of many social and economic discontents. Anti-Semitic scapegoating offered an apparently magical cure for these ills. Poland, as we all know, was by no means the only European country in which "scientific" racism and the politics of hatred found a ready response in the 1930s. In Poland, the radical nationalists (the Endeks or National Democrats were the largest of these groupings) were obsessed with the Jewish threat to Polish aspirations. They were also obsessed with the threat from communists and socialists and were violently opposed to the original Piłsudskiite vision of a democratic Polish state that was inclusive rather than exclusionary. The anti-Semitic right believed in an international Jewish conspiracy based on innate Jewish materialism, which explains the otherwise paradoxical "fact" of Jews controlling both international capitalism and international Bolshevism.[10] But not all Polish nationalists were racists or anti-Semites. The popular appeal of the nationalists' program stemmed from a potent mix of economic grievances, demonizing anti-Semitic mythologies, the teachings of the local Catholic church, and the sheer misery of life for many Poles as the decade wore on.

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The Holocaust inevitably casts its grim shadow over everything that came before it. It is hard to read the mad prewar diatribes about Jews and blood and racial traits without the gas chambers and crematoria coming to mind. If today we are inclined to interpret the radical nationalists' diatribes against Jews as more poisonous than, for example, their attacks on Ukrainians or Byelorussians or Lithuanians or Germans--who were also perceived by them as "alien elements"--it is because we assume a cause-and-effect relationship between Polish anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Many Jews (and not only Jews) believe passionately that Polish anti-Semitism made the Holocaust possible--that without Polish acquiescence the Nazi death industry could never have functioned so efficiently. The fact that the extermination camps were constructed on Polish soil is seen as incontrovertible proof of Polish complicity, while the equally obvious fact that Poland was home to by far the largest population of Jews in Europe is dismissed as irrelevant. But there is simply no evidence that the undeniably widespread anti-Semitism in interwar Poland in fact contributed in any significant degree to the Nazis' success in carrying out their policy of genocide against the Jews. The boycotts of Jewish businesses, the "ghetto benches" in the universities, the hooligan attacks on individual Jews, the inflammatory sermons and articles

by village priests and prominent Catholic clergymen, and so forth--all these are morally repugnant and should certainly not be dissolved in a nostalgic mist and redefined as insignificant quarrels between old neighbors. Still, there is a significant difference between virulent anti-Semitism and actual genocide. To ignore that difference is to insist that every human being who harbors irrational prejudices, who dislikes or even hates his neighbor, would, given the opportunity, be an all-too-willing accomplice in mass murder.

No accounting will ever be able to tell us whether the number of Poles actively involved in saving or prolonging Jewish lives during the Holocaust fell short of, equalled, or exceeded the number actively involved in betrayal or exploitation. We cannot predict behavior during the war on the basis of an individual's prewar position on the Jewish question or his personal attitudes toward Jews. There were, for example, unabashed anti-Semites whose Catholic faith obligated them to heroic action in defense of the Jews they so greatly disliked.[11] There were Jews whose terror in the face of imminent death led them to betray their neighbors. There were people who did nothing and silently rejoiced in Hitler's solving "the Jewish problem"; there were others who took tremendous risks and still felt ashamed at doing so little. How can each individual's actions, sometimes consistent over time, sometimes self-contradictory, be entered into a ledger sheet proving the collective culpability or innocence of a people?

Yet precisely such an irrational exercise has engaged the passions of Jewish and Polish commentators over the years. For political reasons, the debate was carried on outside of Poland until just under a decade ago.[12] The Jewish voice of accusation was therefore the one most often heard, and thus the more convincing in the court of public opinion. In Poland, the debate was joined in the mid-1980s. It has been marked by an extraordinary amount of personal and collective soul-searching, as well as by defensive denials and heated counter-accusations. Certainly, it has come as a shock to the Poles, whose self-image (like the Jews') is that of a martyr-nation, that in other people's eyes they bear the mark of Cain upon their foreheads. Only in the last few years has a genuine dialogue been initiated between Poles and Jews (scholars and theologians from both sides) on the issue of Polish-Jewish relations. We shall return to this dialogue below.

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The combined effect of the Holocaust and the drastic redrawing of Poland's boundaries at the conclusion of World War II radically changed the country's demography. It is generally accepted that approximately 3,000,000 Polish Jews and 3,000,000 ethnic Poles were killed between 1939 and 1945. The Poles, in other words, lost approximately ten percent of their prewar population (excluding Jews) and the Jews, ninety-eight percent. It is believed that the Jewish survivors numbered anywhere from a low estimate of 50,000 to a high of 200,000. (The majority of the Jewish survivors were saved because they had found themselves in or had fled to the Soviet-occupied zone in 1939.) Most of those who survived in the German-occupied territories owed their lives to Poles who sheltered them at considerable risk and to the underground network that manufactured false baptismal

certificates and "Aryan papers." A smaller number of survivors emerged from the concentration camps.

During the first postwar decade, the Jewish population in Poland was in flux. Many returnees left out of fear and revulsion in the wake of the infamous pogrom in Kielce in 1946 and numerous less well-known incidents of intimidation and violence. Others, having failed to find any surviving family members, left Poland because they could not bear living in a cemetery. Still others emigrated to Palestine (after 1948, to Israel). In the mid-1950s, a wave of repatriated Jews from the Soviet Union increased the ranks of Poland's Jewish population. Many of these families emigrated once again as soon as they could, leaving Poland for Israel or America. At least half of these had emigrated by the time a factional struggle within the Polish United Workers' Party and the state security organs ended in 1967-68 with the purge of Jews from positions of even moderate influence in Polish political and cultural institutions.[13] The ensuing exodus of Jews put an end to the centuries-long coexistence of Poles and Jews. Today, there may well be no more than 5,000 Jews left in Poland, although no one knows for sure.[14]

Nevertheless, the relationship between these two peoples is by no means over. It is, however, temporarily and spatially out of joint. In Poland, for reasons that will be explored below, since the late 1970s there has been a growing fascination with the Jewish culture and the history of Polish-Jewish relations. With virtually no Jews left among them, those Poles who are participants in what one observer has aptly dubbed "the Jewish memory project" are engaged in a relationship with the Jews from the past.[15] At the same time, except for a tiny number of Jewish commentators within Poland, the Jewish part of Jewish-Polish relations is being carried on from abroad, and not always by Jews from Poland. American Jews in particular have been watching Poland like hawks. During the 1980s, evidently irritated by the outpouring of popular support in this country for Solidarity and the Polish democratic movement, official and unofficial spokesmen for American Jewry repeatedly attempted to refocus public attention on real and imagined evidence of Polish anti-Semitism. They sought to set the agenda for the public debate on Poland in terms of Jewish grievances and a felt need to keep the memory of the Holocaust in the forefront of American attention.[16]

The Jews who left Poland in 1968, like the Jews who preceded them in this century, took along their hostility toward Poles as part of their emotional and intellectual baggage. The anti-Semitic Pole has become a stock character in Jewish folk culture in this country and elsewhere. People who would not dream of making racist remarks in public think nothing of baldly stating that "if you scratch a Pole, you'll find an anti-Semite." The vast majority of American Jews have probably never known a Pole or set foot in Poland. Nonetheless, far too many of them accept as an article of faith all the negative stereotypes about Poles as slothful drunkards, incorrigible anti-Semites, and preening pseudo-aristocrats. Conflating vastly different historical eras, these descendants of East European immigrants indiscriminately ascribe to today's Poles all the horrifying stories they have heard about the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, the anti-Jewish pogroms staged by drunken Slavic

peasants and/or Cossacks, the Cossack and Ukrainian violence against both Poles and Jews in the seventeenth century (Khmelnitsky is widely thought of as Polish), the anti-Semitic outrages committed by Poles in interwar Poland, and the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi state on Polish soil.[17] In short, a mean-spirited anti-Polonism[18] is prevalent among American Jews who "know" about Poland only what they want to know.

American Jews' selective "knowledge" about Poland is manifested in numerous ways. One of the most revealing is the attitude expressed by the Jewish tourists in Poland. Anecdotal evidence along with the itineraries of specially organized "Jewish-interest" tours demonstrate that visiting Jews see Poland only as a place of Jewish martyrdom, a storehouse of Jewish memories and memorabilia, a stimulus for maintaining Jewish rancor against the Poles. Jewish tourists travel through Poland as if it were a land which had no present existence, no cultural artifacts that demand attention in their own right. As one analyst of this phenomenon has trenchantly observed, "For most visiting American Jews...the country exists as a vast tableau vivant, bearing silent testimony to a destroyed people.... Poland provides a superb stage upon which to enact an American Jewish ideology in which Europe represents the past and destruction while Israel represents the future and rebirth."[19]

Although the Jewish side of the Polish-Jewish equation has been in emigration since 1968, the matter of how Jews and Poles view each other remains a part of Polish reality both within Poland and in the international arena. Furthermore, it has also become a part of American reality. Polish-Americans and Jews have long been engaged in a kind of competitive martyrology over who suffered more during World War II and the Holocaust. Tensions have increased in the last decade with the renewal of Polish-American pride in response to Pope John Paul II's reign and the triumphs of Solidarity. Polish-Americans are no longer reluctant to confront Jews over such issues as who belongs in the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum or who will control the new high school curricula for Holocaust studies. The widely reported conflict over the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz only exacerbated the tensions between these groups. Tempers flared when, in 1989, a small group of European Jews, angered by the continuing presence of a Carmelite convent on what most Jews thinks of as exclusively Jewish holy ground, demonstrated on the convent grounds. Polish workers, in defense of the nuns, attacked the Jews. Photographs and reports of this incident inflamed public opinion in Poland and in America. Jewish spokesmen and writers of letters-to-the-editor complained that the presence of a cross would prevent their praying for the dead. Poles responded with incredulity that silent prayer by nuns could possibly be considered offensive, and with reminders to Jews and the world community that many thousands of Poles had also died in Auschwitz. The conflict, now resolved (the convent is being built close by, but not in Auschwitz), is just one more grotesque manifestation of the martyrological competition between Poles and Jews.

The widely reported upsurge in anti-Semitic vandalism (mainly in the form of nasty graffiti) and name-calling during Poland's 1990 election campaign seemed to confirm Jewish convictions about the almost genetic quality of Polish anti-Semitism. In contrast, when anti-Semitic crimes--not just graffiti-writing or name-calling incidents, but acts of vandalism with

the potential to cause bodily harm--occur in this country, they are generally understood, by Jews and non-Jews, as the work of a fringe element.[20] That these anti-Semitic manifestations in Poland have been roundly condemned in both the secular and Catholic press, for example, and most recently in an official Church document read in all Catholic churches on January 21, 1991, has not been as widely reported in this country as has been the stereotype-confirming news about anti-Semitism.[21]

Poland's standing in the international political arena may also be affected by the widespread perception of Poland as a breeding ground for anti-Semitism. At present, there are two diametrically opposed images: the Poles as brave, long-suffering opponents of Communism and defenders of individual rights versus the Poles as congenital anti-Semites who instinctively blame their own failings on the machinations of an invisible enemy. Polish political leaders are well aware that the American press and Congress have used the treatment of Jews as a convenient measure of a country's progress toward democracy or, at the least, adherence to human rights agreements. (Witness the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, with its linkage of Most Favored Nation status to Soviet policies on Jewish emigration.)

General Jaruzelski, for example, clearly sought to manipulate this sentiment when in April 1983, while Poland was still under martial law, he announced preparations for an elaborate official celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Jewish leaders attended from around the world, even from Israel; very few heeded the democratic opposition's call to boycott the ceremony as an act of solidarity with the oppressed Polish people.[22] The regime had calculate that most Jewish organizations would focus exclusively on a Jewish agenda in Poland, and they were right. The Jaruzelski government, in fact, developed very good relations with Jewish interest groups abroad, and a number of privately funded restoration projects (of synagogues and cemeteries) were initiated, centers for Jewish studies were established in Cracow and Warsaw, and an astonishing number of books about Jews began to roll off the presses. In fact, for the remainder of the 1980s, Jews and Polish-Jewish relations were very much on the public agenda in Poland. This may have been, strangely enough, the one issue around which the interests of the Jaruzelski regime, Catholic intellectuals, and the democratic opposition converged--if for different reasons.[23] For while the regime was apparently using its "Jewish policy" as a means of achieving international respectability, intellectuals connected with the opposition and the Church had undertaken a painful reconsideration of Polish-Jewish relations as a test of their own commitments to democratic values and Catholic morality.

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As long as Poles and Jews lived side by side, whatever antipathies they might have harbored toward each other as representative figures were potentially subject to amelioration on the basis of real individual experience. "Side by side" should not, of course, be understood literally. In prewar Poland, the Jewish population was concentrated in the *shtetln* (small towns) of the eastern borderlands and, in large numbers, in the crowded Jewish neighborhoods of Poland's few big cities. In prewar Warsaw, for example, close to

half of the city's population were Jews. Although the majority of Jews were unassimilated or only partially assimilated into Polish culture, in those areas with a sizeable Jewish population it would have been impossible for Poles and Jews not to have some contact with each other. To state this is not the same, of course, as to suggest that contact necessarily led to any social intercourse or real mutual understanding. But at least it made possible some genuine human relationships that could serve as a reality check against mythic thinking.[24]

Since the war, each group has been freer than before to ground its perceptions of the other in the familiar old stereotypes. Those Jews who survived the Holocaust and left Poland know only the Poles of their memory; for most of them, those memories are bitter, and there are no new meaningful contacts with Poles to alter them. After the Holocaust, Jews became a tiny minority (less than one percent even at the most generous estimate). They ought to have been virtually invisible, but many Poles "saw" them everywhere. Focusing their attention on those Jews who were, in fact, Communist functionaries, members of the security apparatus, and Soviet apologists, they drew the conclusion that "all Jews" were engaged in the same sort of dastardly activities. The convenient stereotype of the *żydokomuna* (the American equivalent would be "Commie Jew"), which developed in the interwar period, "validated" this assumption. That <u>proportionately</u> more Jews than Poles were involved in establishing Communist power is undoubtedly true; that Jews outnumbered Poles in the party and state apparatus is patently false. The question of Jewish support for and visibility in the Polish communist party (technically, the Polish United Workers' Party) remains one of the most sensitive and controversial issues in Polish-Jewish relations. This is such a sensitive topic that Polish and Jewish writers alike have tended to steer clear of it.[25] It will no doubt be a very long time before this question can be addressed dispassionately. At present, despite some striking exceptions, Jewish-Polish dialogue on this question of Jewish treachery under the Communists, as on the question of Polish collaboration with the Nazis, can best be described as an unfortunate duel of name-calling in which the Jewish accusation, "You're an anti-Semite," is answered with the Polish accusation, "And you're a Commie Jew."[26]

For most Poles today, Jews are but a figment of the imagination, remembered or imagined through a mist of sentimental nostalgia. The majority of Poles, like people everywhere, are immersed in their daily life and undoubtedly give very little thought to Jews or to anything else that is not on their immediate horizon. Yet growing numbers of Poles, including people who were born after the Holocaust and thus can have no true memories of Jewish life in Poland, now feel a nostalgic longing for "our Jews." They cherish a romanticized image of the exotic color lent to the Polish marketplace by the small shopkeepers and street peddlers of prewar days. There has been a veritable flood of popular publications in recent years about Jewish customs, Jewish music, Jewish cooking, Jewish proverbs, and so on.

In the first years of the Jaruzelski regime, these publications were probably intended primarily for export. The regime was intent on gaining some international recognition of

its respectability, and, as mentioned above, it undertook a number of initiatives aimed at Jews abroad in the hopes of using the perceived Jewish control of the media to manipulate international public opinion. That the publication of books about Jews and Judaism was part of this apparently cynical campaign does not negate the fact that there has been an astonishing surge of genuine curiosity about Jewish culture over the past decade. True, this popular interest is tinged with sentimentality and easily satisfied by kitsch. The reality of what happened to the Jews of Poland is so horrifying that it must be soothing to dwell on pleasant memories of how Jews dressed, cooked, or sang before the Nazis came.

Most of the old stereotypes have not lost their appeal. They are sufficiently elastic to support both approbative and condemnatory attitudes. In today's Poland, there are perfectly intelligent, successful Poles who fantasize about being Jews themselves, because Jews are smart, capable of getting ahead in a complicated world, and mysteriously attractive. In some circles, Jewish ancestry has become fashionable and people who think they have Jewish blood are proud to proclaim the fact and to find ways of demonstrating their Jewishness.[27] There is even a new word to describe this phenomenon: *neo-Żydzi* ("neo-Jews"). Not unexpectedly, the positive mythologizing is matched by a hostile counter-myth. In the negative elaboration of the stereotype, intellectual prowess, for example, becomes a rather nasty, manipulative shrewdness that enables Jews to land on their feet at the expense of Polish interests. Today's radical nationalists still attribute all that is rotten in Poland to the old *żydokomuna* demon.[28] Blaming the Jews still has popular appeal--as the 1990 presidential election demonstrated. But the parliamentary elections of 1989 and 1991 demonstrated, too, that that appeal has limits: no xenophobic, ultra-nationalist, openly anti-Semitic candidates--and there were some--won election to the Polish Sejm.

The growing popular fascination with things Jewish is part and parcel of a more general nostalgia for the interwar period, misremembered as a golden age. Since the first period of Solidarity's triumph, Poles have evinced a hunger for filling in the "blank spots" in their history. The main impetus for this drive to ferret out the long-concealed historical truths has no doubt been the urge to provide incontrovertible proof of the Soviet Union's crimes against Poland. This is surely true for the general public. However, the process of historical revision has also entailed a moral reckoning with Poland's own sins as a nation. The venerable myth of Poland as eternal victim has been rejected as simplistic and self-serving. Poland's own offenses against its present and former minorities and neighbors have been placed on the agenda for scrutiny by journalists, scholars, and creative artists.

The effort to move beyond stereotyped thinking and to take an unflinching look at Polish-Jewish relations is a significant component of this quest for national renewal through a truer understanding of Polish history. What is fascinating and new about the discussion of "the Jewish question" today is its link with a reconceptualization of what Poland is, of what it means to be a Pole. Implicitly, the argument--which not all Poles would agree with, to be sure--is that Poland can no longer be Poland because one of its crucial elements has been destroyed. Many of those thousands of Poles who flock to the theaters for theatrical performances of Jewish life, who crowd the museum exhibits of Jewish artifacts, who attend

the festivals of Jewish folklife held annually in Cracow and other cities, and who read the many books now available about Jewish culture and Jewish religion are seeking to replace this lost part of Polishness.[29] As the novelist Andrzej Szczypiorski has written, Poles "are unaware that they have been crippled, and that without the Jews they are no longer the Poles they once were and should have remained forever."[30]

A small but growing cadre of Polish scholars has emerged in the past decade whose research focuses on the vanished world of Polish Jewry. Some of these scholars live abroad now, but all were educated in Poland. Since 1984, when an international conference on Poles and Jews was held at Oxford, they have been engaged in scholarly dialogue and collaborative work with their counterparts in Israel, North America, and Western Europe.[31] Polish researchers are now producing a steady flow of contributions to the vast scholarly literature on East European Jewry.[32]

Underlying much of the new scholarship on Jews is the implicit recognition that it is morally wrong for Poles not to grapple with Jewish accusations of persistent and pernicious anti-Semitism. In January 1987, the literary critic and respected Catholic intellectual Jan Błoński initiated a dramatic public debate about Polish culpability in the Holocaust.[33] Writing in the Catholic weekly, Tygodnik Powszechny, Błoński called, in effect, for a national soul-searching leading to an admission of Polish guilt toward the Jews. He accused Poles of having accepted Jews only grudgingly throughout their common history and of having been indifferent, at best, to Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. Only a moral revolution, he argued, "can gradually cleanse our desecrated soil."[34]

An open debate about Błoński's painful accusations continued in the pages of Tygodnik Powszechny for many months. Jerzy Turowicz, the weekly's editor, has said that the flood of letters in response to Błoński's essay proved something he had not believed possible when he first agreed to print the controversial article: namely, that anti-Semitism was still a vital force in Poland. But the essays and letters printed by the paper revealed a range of responses to Błoński that were serious and respectful in their grappling with this difficult moral issue.

Not only scholars and ethicists have turned their attention to Polish-Jewish matters. Since the mid-1980s, a number of Poland's most respected writers have sought to represent prewar Jewish life and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust in their fiction. This is new and noteworthy. Until recently, Polish writers of the postwar era had not attempted to create fully conceived Jewish characters. From 1948 into the 1980s the overwhelming majority of Polish works of fiction (not counting works by Jewish authors) represented Jews--if they did so at all--only en masse, as pitiful victims of the Holocaust, or, if individually, as superficially delineated minor characters.[35]

The most interesting of the new works--from a literary as well as an "ideological" perspective--is Umschlagplatz by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz.[36] A hybrid blend of novel, confessional journal, meditative essay, and record of investigative research, Umschlagplatz

explores a number of extremely painful issues. Rymkiewicz wants to know why the Umschlagplatz, the square in Warsaw from which half a million Jews were deported to Treblinka and other death camps, has never been accurately described nor its boundaries marked off as hallowed ground. Rymkiewicz-the-narrator[37] torments himself with the thought that he is guilty because his wartime childhood was happy while Jewish children his own age were murdered. A family snapshot proves that just weeks after the Jews were deported from a resort town on the outskirts of Warsaw, the narrator's parents took him and his sister on vacation to that town. As an apparent act of penance, he peoples this resort with attractive young Jewish intellectuals, granting them through the powers of his imagination vital life on the eve of the war. And then he mourns his inability to save them. The imagination proves powerless against the Holocaust. Rymkiewicz-the-narrator argues with his Jewish wife about whether survivors should be consumed with these burdens from the past. He (or, perhaps, the writer speaking as himself now) addresses himself to his fellow Poles, goading their consciences and revealing the currents of anti-Semitism that are concealed beneath the surface of Polish life. His book is an act of penance, and a form of homage to the Jews of Poland who died before the author could become conscious of their existence.

Umschlagplatz can be read as an elaboration of the fundamental ethical issues raised in Jan Błoński's essay. The debate over the nature of Polish-Jewish relations between the wars and of the Poles' culpability, if any, in the extermination of the Jews has by no means ended. Those who insist that all Poles are anti-Semites are choosing to read only the graffiti on the walls, rather than the words of sensitive and honest thinkers. Cardinal Józef Glemp's ugly insinuations in the homily he delivered at the height of the Auschwitz convent controversy have been widely quoted. His speech, drawing as it did upon all the well-worn clichés about Jewish power and vindictiveness, revealed one current in contemporary Polish thinking about the Jews.[38] But his remarks were met with immediate condemnation by spokesmen for both Solidarity and lay Catholic groups. These responses are not well known outside of Poland.

On December 19, 1990, Poland's Catholic bishops issued a document that condemned anti-Semitism as "against the spirit of the Gospel," reiterated the Vatican's pronouncements that Jews do not bear responsibility for the death of Christ, and expressed "sincere regret over all cases of anti-Semitism which were committed at any time or by anyone on Polish soil."[39] This document was read in every Polish church on January 20, 1991. It remains to be seen how Jews and other observers will respond to this statement. Will they accept it as a heartfelt effort to right a wrong and avert its perpetuation or merely as a confirmation that Poles are anti-Semites and even their church cannot control them? Or, as one Polish Jew put it, has this "major breakthrough...simply come too late?"[40]

The historical grudges that each people holds against the other are firmly embedded in both Jewish and Polish culture. The fact that for over two generations there has been minimal contact between these two peoples has done little to erode the negative stereotypes with which each conceptualizes the other. Nonetheless, the prospects for improved

understanding between Poles and Jews have never looked better. Since there are simply not enough Jews left in Poland to serve as plausible scapegoats, it is unlikely that a long-lasting wave of anti-Semitism will ever again sweep Poland in response to a disastrous economic or political situation. So many Poles, and the Church itself, have gone on record in opposition to this kind of thinking that eventually the public expression of anti-Semitism will become as socially unacceptable in Poland as it is in America today.[41] It is only a matter of time and education, and the Church's willingness to initiate a public campaign. It is even possible that as the Jewish-Polish dialogue between scholars and theologians continues, and as the new Polish thinking about Polish-Jewish relations is disseminated abroad, more Jews will be willing to look at Poles as unscarred by the mark of Cain. It is surely too much to hope that the age of Polish-Jewish ethnic frictions will soon be over, but perhaps what we are witnessing now is the beginning of the end.

NOTES

1. See Donald L. Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), passim.

2. A Polish sociologist has written a fascinating book about Polish folk images of Jews based on interviews conducted in rural southeastern Poland during the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the people whom she queried about what Jews look like emphasized differences in dress, rather than physical differences. When pressed, they would refer to typically Jewish hair or noses. Jewish women were remembered as very good-looking. Alina Cała, Wizerunek żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej (The image of the Jew in Polish folk culture) (Warsaw: Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, 1987), pp. 31-36. But the "Jewish nose" as a giveaway of concealed Jewish identity is definitely present in Polish consciousness. There is a very funny story by Sławomir Mrożek, the Polish playwright and satirist, that plays upon this Polish obsession ("Nos" [The nose], Kultura [Paris], July-August 1984, pp. 37-45.

3. There are many excellent studies of Polish religious tolerance in relation to Jews and Moslems as well as to the Protestant reformers. For a concise overview of this issue see Wiktor Weintraub, "Tolerance and Intolerance in Old Poland," Canadian Slavonic Papers, vol. 13, no. 1 (1971), pp. 21-44; reprinted in From Rej to Norwid: Studies in Polish Literature and Culture (forthcoming from Northwestern University Press).

4. The Poles literally had no state during the century and a quarter of Poland's disappearance from the map of Europe. Since 1918, they have experienced only a little over two decades of true self-government. Before the creation of the state of Israel, Jews in Poland were divided between those who yearned for a Jewish homeland in Palestine and those who wanted to become an integral part of whatever Polish state might exist.

5. Dostoyevsky's cruel caricatures of Poles and Jews as alternately contemptuous of others and cravenly ingratiating (as portrayed in, for example, Notes from the House of the Dead, Diary of a Writer, and The Brothers Karamazov), capture the tension between feelings of inferiority and superiority, and also reveal how similar Poles and Jews seem when viewed from outside their cultures.

6. The eagerness of Jews to "claim" Poland's national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, and the reluctant Polish suspicion that the great poet might indeed have been Jewish, is only the most dramatic of these cases of contested identity.

7. Jews have a Yiddish expression for a stupid person: "goyishe kop" (Gentile head). One variant of this is "poylishe kop" (Polish head).

8. Could he, in fact, have been the necessary and faithful lightning-rod sidekick for the true (if misguided) patriot general? What, in fact, was Urban doing in those freewheeling televised press conferences with foreign journalists: making it clear to Poles how much contempt he and the Jaruzelski government had for their aspirations, or opening a window for them through which they could hear what the rest of the world knew and thought about their political situation? Urban certainly has a clever mind, a mordant, often nasty, wit, and a long history of involvement with the Communists--all "well-known" Jewish traits, which, of course, could apply as well to many a "pure" Polish intellectual.

9. Cała, pp. 27-29.

10. See Anna Landau-Czajka, "The Ubiquitous Enemy. The Jew in the Political Thought of Radical Right-Wing Nationalists in Poland, 1926-39," POLIN, vol. 4 (1989), pp. 169-203, for an extremely informative discussion of this phenomenon.

11. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, a Catholic intellectual and one of the organizers of *żegota*, a conspiratorial group that funneled aid to the Jews during the Holocaust, offers a striking example of this "split." She did not like Jews, thought of them as Christ-killers, believed that Poland would be better off if Jews had their homeland, and yet, because she also believed in the Christian duty to save life, she was, in fact, instrumental in saving many Jews.

12. In her recently published book on "the Jewish memory project," the intense revival of interest in things Jewish during the 1980s, Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argues convincingly that the public debate on anti-Semitism and Polish-Jewish relations originated in private debates among the "generation of 1968," the young people whose lives were touched by the Party-engineered purge of Jews from educational institutions and "sensitive" professions and the ensuing emigration of some 15,000 Jews from Poland. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1989).

13. See Michael Checinski, Poland: Communism, Nationalism, Anti-Semitism (New York: Karz-Cohl Publishing, 1982), for the first serious investigation of the manipulation of anti-Semitism by both nationalists and communists in Poland.

14. There are no absolutely reliable figures on the number of Jews in Poland now or at any time since World War II. In addition to the usual problems connected with any census figures, the question of how many Jews there are in Poland at any particular time is complicated by the reluctance of many Jews to identify themselves as such. Assimilation or "passing" was surely preferred by some percentage of Jews as either a survival strategy or a true expression of felt identity. People of mixed parentage might or might not choose to identify themselves as Jews, no matter that custom or Jewish religious law (if their mother was Jewish) would label them as Jews. And, as was demonstrated in 1968, hundreds, if not thousands, of "pure" Jews learned of their identity only when they were "unmasked" during the anti-Semitic purge.

15. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Neutralizing Memory, passim.

16. I offer just two examples of the tunnel vision exhibited by American Jewish spokesmen. In April 1983, when the Jaruzelski government was trying to re-establish its credentials as a civilized regime while continuing its repression of the democratic opposition, the leadership of major American Jewish organizations participated in the official commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, brushing aside pleas by Solidarity leaders and even Marek Edelman (the sole surviving leader of that uprising). More recently, when Lech Wałęsa visited the United States to appeal for support for the fragile new Polish democracy, Jewish leaders subjected him to an inquisitorial session, demanding, in effect, that he apologize for anti-Semitic sentiments and offenses against Jews for which he had absolutely no personal responsibility.

17. The writings of Polish Jewish émigré commentators who still claim Polish high culture as their heritage usually express much more nuanced and temperate views. They have their history straight and their ambivalence derived from a lived, not imagined, experience of Polish-Jewish interactions.

18. After martial law was declared in Poland in December 1981, for example, there was a flood of letters to the editor of the New York Times and other American newspapers, expressing the sentiment that Poles, as inveterate anti-Semites, deserved to have their democratic aspirations crushed.

19. Jack Kugelmass, "Going Home: How American Jews 'Invent' Their East European Old Countries" (unpublished manuscript). Kugelmass explains that most tourist groups return to America via Israel, "the Jewish state, the new 'Old Country.'"

20. For example, when rocks were hurled at two synagogues and a Hillel house in Madison, Wisconsin, and the brakes on a school bus for a Jewish day camp were severed, the New York Times (September 17, 1990) quoted the rabbi of one of those synagogues as saying, "People are in disbelief that these kinds of things could happen in Madison, with its liberalism, education, and high level of culture.... We live in a wonderful society in Madison. But sadly, even wonderful societies have kooks and anti-Semites."

21. Just a few examples: an ad placed privately in the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny by a committee of artists and scholars from Łódź, condemning "intolerance, chauvinism, and nationalism" (June 17, 1990); a challenge by father Stanislaw Musiał, S.J. to Poles to begin a critical re-examination of Polish complicity in the Holocaust (reported in the New York Times, November 7, 1990); a humorous feuilleton ridiculing the idea that there are hidden Jews everywhere among the political and intellectual elite in Poland (Chrzan, "Mały narodowy donosik w sprawie czystości" (A tiny little national denunciation on the issue of purity), Tygodnik Powszechny, December 9, 1990, page 10).

22. The most passionate appeal for a boycott came from Marek Edelman, the sole surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He begged Jewish leaders abroad not to lend a cloak of respectability to a regime that had cruelly suppressed its own people's aspirations to freedom.

23. For a perceptive analysis of why the Jaruzelski regime wanted and was able to open up discussion of the role of Jews in Polish history and the problem of anti-Semitism in Poland, see Irwin-Zarecka, especially chapters 3 and 4.

24. To be sure, people are quite capable of entertaining both mythic and reality-grounded thoughts about one and the same thing. Thus, individuals who demonized Jews according to all the stereotypes current in the popular culture might also make an exception for "their" Jew, who was known as an individual.

25. Perhaps the most sympathetic and psychologically perceptive exploration of why some Jews sided with the Communists immediately after the war can be found not in scholarly work, but in a novel, The Seizure of Power, by Czesław Miłosz (New York: Criterion Books, 1955). Likewise, Miłosz's attempt in The Captive Mind (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953) at explaining why Polish intellectuals were attracted to Communism remains one of the most persuasive explorations of that subject.

26. Roman Zimand, a Polish-Jewish historian, has written poignantly about the hopelessness of this ongoing debate. See his essay, "Wormwood and Ashes (Do Poles and Jews Hate Each Other?)," POLIN, vol. 4 (1989), pp. 313-53.

27. There is also a fad, probably arising from the same craving for social distinction, of proclaiming one's real or invented aristocratic lineage.

28. The *żydokomuna* argument also has great currency in some Polish émigré circles. See the October 1989 issue of Studium Papers for a depressing collection of hate-filled diatribes elicited by that periodical's special April issue devoted to the "Traces of Polish Jews."

29. On this point I take vigorous exception to Iwona Irwin-Zarecka's argument in Neutralizing Memory that by appropriating Jewish history as part of Poland's, Poles are saving their own consciences and misusing the Jews instrumentally to prove that Poland is a democratic state. The Poles, it seems, cannot win.

30. Andrzej Szczypiorski, Poczatek (The beginning) (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1989), p. 37. Originally published in Poland through the uncensored press in 1986, it was published in English as Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman (New York: Random House, 1991).

31. Strictly speaking, the first international scholarly exchange occurred at Columbia University in March 1983 at a conference on "Poles and Jews: Myth and Reality in the Historical Context." The Polish government allowed only two scholars to attend this conference, both of whom held to the "party line" that there was never any anti-Semitic feeling in Poland. But the situation has changed dramatically since then. For a brief informative summary of the history of these international contacts during the 1980s, see Magdalena Opalski, "The 'Polish-Jewish Dialogue' in Retrospect," in Studium Papers, vol. XIII, no. 2 (July 1989), pp. 68-69, 73.

32. The best English-language compilations of this scholarship (they also contain contributions by non-Polish researchers) are the annually issued volumes of POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies and two volumes of collected essays, The Jews in Poland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), and The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989).

33. In his front-page essay, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto," Tygodnik Powszechny, 11 January 1987. English translation, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," POLIN, vol. 2 (1987), pp. 321-36.

34. English translation in POLIN, vol. 2, p. 331.

35. See Artur Sandauer, O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku (On the situation of a Polish writer of Jewish origin in the twentieth century) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1982), for a provocative wide-ranging discussion of how "the Jewish question" has been dealt with in Polish literature and in Polish intellectual life.

36. Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1988.

37. Umschlagplatz "feels" autobiographical, but it is the creation of a literary imagination. I hesitate to identify the first-person narrator with the "real" Rymkiewicz. The genre of the hybrid not-quite-autobiographical narrative that mixes deliberate fictions with apparently confessional autobiography accounts for some of the finest recent writing in Polish letters. (Tadeusz Konwicki and Kazimierz Brandys, both accessible in English translation, are masters of this genre.)

38. After attempting to speak even-handedly about both Polish and Jewish faults in regard to the other group, the Cardinal went on to make some very inflammatory remarks:

> "To understand the complexity of Polish-Jewish problems, we have to ask ourselves the questions: was there ill will and were there disturbances against Jews in Poland?--yes; were there Jews during the occupation who collaborated with the Nazis, who were no up to the heroic defenders of the ghetto?--yes; were there periods of silence in Poland about Jewish suffering and victimization?--yes; were there Poles who died saving Jewish lives?--yes."
>
> "We have our faults in regard to the Jews, but today, one would like to say--my dear Jews do not talk to us from the position of a nation raised above all the others. Do not give us conditions which are impossible to fulfill."
>
> "Don't you, esteemed Jews, see that your protests against them [the Carmelite nuns] disturb the feelings of all Poles and our hard-earned sovereignty? Your power lies in the mass media, in many countries at your disposal. Let this power not serve anti-Polonism."
>
> "Admittedly the nuns were not killed nor was the convent destroyed, because they [the "squad of seven Jews"] were restrained..."
>
> "Without anti-Polonism there wouldn't be anti-Semitism here..."

Excerpt from the homily delivered by Glemp on August 26, 1989, the feast day of Our Lady of Częstochowa. English translation in Studium Papers, vol. XIII, no. 4 (October 1989), p. 217.

39. As reported in the New York Times, December 20, 1990.

40. Konstanty Gebert, who also writes under the pseudonym Dawid Warszawski, as quoted in the New York Times, ibid.

41. In November 1990 two respected members of the World War II underground state, Jan Karski and Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, writing from Washington, D.C., published an appeal to all Poles to roundly and publicly condemn all anti-Semitic incidents. They expressed their moral revulsion against such hateful graffiti as "Jews to the gas" scrawled on a wall. But they also backed up their appeal with a lesson that they apparently felt would be new to some of their readers: that open anti-Semitism is simply unacceptable in the West today and that Poland's reputation is sullied by reports of such incidents. As Poland looks toward the West to re-discover what is "*comme il faut*" and as it seeks to be accepted in the new Europe, pragmatic considerations may be as effective as moral scruples in curbing the public display of anti-Jewish sentiment. And once something is no longer expressed, it tends to fade from people's minds. Tygodnik Powszechny, December 2, 1990, p. 2.