



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

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Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Poland today
– Coming out of the shadows of WWII and Communist dictatorship

(a slightly expanded version of the presentation by Stanisław Krajewski, July 4, 2011)

Poland has been free for over two decades. Yet the nation in its entirety, and even more the Jews in Poland, have been living in the shadow of both World War II and, in another way, of Communism. Of the two events WWII has had much more lasting consequences, especially for the Jews. Communist reforms have been largely reversed – and are becoming more and more a matter of history, though perhaps the exception should be made for some mental traces. The consequences of the war in general, and of the Shoah in particular, remain as relevant as ever – from the general devastation to the change of state borders, to the dramatic decline in the number of Jews, to changes in the ownership of real estate.

There were three and a half million Jews in pre-war Poland. Only about 10% survived the war. This means Poland has become for Jews a huge cemetery. (To most foreign Jews of today it is still primarily a cemetery. The matter is much more complicated for us, “Polish Polish Jews”, to use the phrase from my English language book *Poland and the Jews*, who live normal lives in Poland.) In addition to the devastating impact of the results of the war and occupation, in immediately post-war Poland, Jews were not safe. More often than not, they could not return to their pre-war homes. For quite a lot of them the Zionist option seemed the only viable one. For all those reasons, most Jewish survivors emigrated from Poland in 1945-47, in the course of an illegal but tolerated emigration, and then in 1949-1951, in an emigration regulated by the Polish government that wanted to retain “productive” elements and get rid of “bourgeois” and “clerical” Jews. The next waves of emigration occurred later, in 1956-1960, after the political liberalization, and finally after the official antisemitic campaign, in 1968-69. The result was that only some 10% of the over a quarter million Jewish survivors who passed through Poland stayed in the country. Even taken together with their descendants they – or rather, we – constitute a miniscule part of the pre-war community, and a small portion of even the immediately post-war community. What is more, the Jewish individuals who were living in Poland after 1968 hardly formed a “community”. The organized Jewish community was

tiny, most Jews were outside it. Even before 1968 many were intermarried or were born after the war in mixed families. More generally, the majority among Jews were “marginally” Jewish; this category can be divided into three (non-exclusive) types: (1) “non-Jewish,” or completely assimilated Jews who have no connection to Jewish life, (2) hidden Jews who have not yet, or may never, “come out of the closet,” so to speak, and (3) Communist Jews. On the basis of my experiences, I believe, as do most of my friends, that in Poland even today there are many more marginal Jews than members of Jewish organizations. It must be added that many of those in category 1 or 2, assimilated or still “hiding,” were Catholic. All these complexities show how difficult it was to expect a reasonable Jewish partner for dialogue with Christians.

Category 3, Communist Jews, requires a comment, since it is due to another indirect consequence of the war. It seemed clear to a number of surviving Polish Jews, as well as to quite a few others, that the Capitalist system had gone bankrupt. Hitler was its end result – something new was now needed. This feeling contributed to the fact that most of those (few) Jewish survivors who stayed in Poland were approving the new political order, and some of them believed in the Communist promise of the better world in a passionate, quasi-religious way. To be sure, even more basic for the support of Communism was the simple fact that the Soviet army saved the Jews hiding from the Germans, and in the initial post-war years the Communist authorities were the only force who could, perhaps, provide a degree of security. Still, the feeling of the catastrophe of the West mustn't be underestimated. The belief in Communism was short-lived. The process of gradual disillusionment was completed only in 1968, the year of the Communist party sponsored antisemitic campaign. In 1950s and 1960s the main Jewish organization in Poland was dominated by Communists. They wanted to have nothing to do with the Jewish religion or, for that matter, Zionism or Hebrew. Naturally, Christianity was also outside the scope of their interests, so the Jewish leaders were in no way partners for dialogue with the Church. The Jewish religious community was very small and marginalized. It was not in the position to attempt any new approaches, let alone any endeavours in the interfaith realm, so its members continued the traditional mistrust of Church and disapproval of Christianity. In result, also they could not enter any kind of Christian-Jewish dialogue. In addition, Jews preferred to maintain a distance from the Church since all of them remembered that the Catholic Church had not been helpful in the first post-war years when antisemitism had posed a real threat. Asked to intervene, the bishops refused because either they thought that antisemitism was justified by Jewish involvement in the new regime or they did not want to appear as making a political statement that could be interpreted as supporting the Communist government. Bishop Kubina of Czestochowa who alone stated publicly that blood libel accusations were unfounded and based on ill will, was criticized by other bishops. It seems that the changes epitomized by the declaration *Nostra aetate* were hardly noticed by Jews in Poland. (They were also very slowly introduced to the Polish Catholics.)

Also in 1970s and 1980s there were hardly Jewish partners for dialogue. After the 1968 emigration Jewish life was extremely weak and on decline. Everybody thought that soon there would be no Jewish community in Poland. The leaders believed they were there in order “to switch off the lights.” At the same time two phenomena occurred that would prove significant for our topic. First, after 1968 a number of individual Jews, most of them “Poles of Jewish origin”, found their way to Catholic intellectual circles and publications. In addition, some young people of the “marginally Jewish” variety began to explore their roots and the Jewish religious traditions. All these individuals were involved in the growing opposition movement that in 1980 gave rise to “Solidarity” and after 1981 to its underground continuation. The second phenomenon took place among Christians: it was the rise of interest in Judaism and Jewish history among Catholic intelligentsia. Prompted by the gradual implementation of Vatican II teachings as well as by the revulsion caused by the 1968 antisemitic campaign, the interest was first seen in the annual weeks of Jewish culture organized since mid-1970s by the youth section of the Catholic Intelligentsia Club in Warsaw. It included cleaning of the Jewish cemetery, and lectures by Jews or experts. Among the participants were guests including young Jews, for example myself. The interest grew after 1978 due to the attitude of John Paul II. This resulted in highly popular publications of Catholic periodicals – especially *Tygodnik Powszechny*,

Znak, Wiesz – on Jewish topics. I also remember the interfaith programme in a Warsaw church, 25 years ago, parallel to the interfaith meeting in Assisi. I (with my wife) represented Judaism there. All those events had an interfaith dialogue flavour since the meetings and exchanges were between Christians as Christians and Jews as Jews. The trust was based on the joint participation in the democratic opposition. These interfaith contacts were, however, informal, without involving official representatives, particularly on the Jewish side. The main exception, in that period, occurred when the delegation of Polish Jews met with John Paul II, in Warsaw in 1987. I participated and I can say that since then contacts with the Church have been considered as a natural duty of Jewish leaders. This is an important development, even if for only a few such contacts signify something deep. All those processes gained momentum after 1989, when we all gained freedom. The slow awakening of Jewish life was transformed into an expansion nobody would have dared to imagine a few years before. Many new institutions have been established, educational activities and opportunities multiply, contacts with Israel and the wide world are taken for granted. What is interesting and relevant here is the re-emergence of religious organizations as the mainstay of Jewish life and the representative Jewish institutions. External assistance has been crucial. Almost all rabbis are imported. They make a difference. While in 1970 or 1980 there was no rabbi in Poland, in 1990 there was one, in 2000 there were perhaps two, and in 2010 there were a dozen rabbis, including the Chabad and Reform ones. Despite the growth of Jewish institutions absorbing new people emerging from the totally assimilated background, the numbers remain small. Even taking into account the non-affiliated Jews and the (estimated number of the) marginal ones, in the country of well over 30 million Catholics the proportion is as 1:1000. This means, by the way, that if in the Polish CCJ there were 1000 Catholics in addition to myself, the proportion would still be right!

Despite the harsh legacy of history from 1939 to 1989, today's Jewish community in Poland is not some half-real remnant bound to the dead. We are as real and as future-oriented as other Jewish communities around the world. Yet because of the numbers there is no guarantee of survival. What seems sure, however, to survive for quite some time is the interest in things Jewish. It has grown in an amazing way: in many towns events are organized – lectures, performances, concerts; students in schools write papers on local Jewish past; churches participate, especially during the remarkable annual Day of Judaism in the Roman-Catholic Church of Poland. Of course, the level of those events vary and anti-Jewish stereotypes are visible also in some otherwise positive initiatives. The best illustration of this complexity can be seen in the presence of the ubiquitous images and figurines of Jews with coins. Repugnant as they are, they are meant not against Jews but as good luck amulets! All those projects can exist without Jews, but the fact is that the organizers try to secure a "live" Jewish presence. Polish Jews are unable to fulfil the demand. Only few are both knowledgeable enough and willing to participate. Among the hardest is the task of finding Jews who can assist Christians in their attempts to explore Jewish roots of Christianity. This is arguably the most important ingredient in those dialogue meetings that have a religious dimension. Most often, the program is broadly cultural. In the best programs, like the first and incomparable annual Cracow Jewish festival, foreign performers and experts take part, mainly from America and Israel. In others, sometimes kitsch is offered. The acknowledgment of the former Jewish presence is more and more widespread in Poland. Various memorial services are being held, in each place where a local enthusiast can convince local authorities. The actual Jewish presence is also sometimes acknowledged, where possible; in Warsaw, the Hanukkah celebration with the Mayor or in the residence of the President of Poland seems by now almost routine. This is all good, and constitutes a great progress. The question can be asked, however, whether the participants in the events acknowledging the former or contemporary presence of Jews would welcome an influx of a large number of living Jews. I guess that the sincere answer would rarely be positive.

In all dialogue events here there are two dimensions: 1. the universal one, related to our religious traditions and the world history, and 2. the Polish dimension, related to Polish history, WWII and the following decades in particular. Part of it is sentimental, but another part is controversial. This causes widespread interest in Poland, and is discussed everywhere, not just in the "dialogue crowd". The resulting debates have concentrated in recent years around the books by Jan Gross (Neighbours,

Fear, Golden Crops). The Polish public opinion has been divided into two camps: those who recognize the challenge posed by the burden of history, and those who negate the moral challenge. The debate on history is not over but has reached the depth unimaginable in 1980s when it started (after Jan Blonski's article). What is more, the issue has been handled much better than in other East-European countries. Poland, to its great credit, is a leader in meeting the challenge how to face a difficult past. We can also be proud of some accomplishments in the narrowly conceived field of Christian-Jewish dialogue. For example, the Jewish declaration *Dabru emet* of 2001 was published in Polish just three weeks after it had originally appeared, and it was printed in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the Polish equivalent of the *New York Times*. Deep dialogue, by which I understand the long term building of a relationship on the basis of mutual trust and full respect for the religiosity of the partner, is of interest to few (Jews or Christians). Yet its ramifications can be far reaching. I can assert this because I know how important Jews and Judaism are for Poles, the overwhelmingly Catholic nation. The interest can be either negative, antisemitic, or sympathetic, pro-Jewish. The proportion between the two is definitely improving. Also, it is clear that Poland is important for Jews all over the world. The main reason is history, and most specifically the cemeteries, as well as Auschwitz, also a cemetery of sorts. But there can be more. Last year in a Polish little town called Lelow, the Lelower Chassidim came not only to the graves of their former leaders but also to hold there an important gathering at which they were deciding essential matters of their community. Maybe that was exceptional. Yet maybe this indicates that Poland can become more than a cemetery not just for us, "Polish Polish Jews", but also for others. Welcome to Poland!