



## 'Religions and Ideologies, Polish Perspectives and beyond.'

International Council of Christians and Jews  
in cooperation with the  
Faculty for International and Political Studies  
of the Jagiellonian University Cracow.  
2011 Conference, July 3-6.

Presentation by Dr Magdalena Kuleta-Hulboj  
Monday July 4, Cracow  
Workshop 5: FOCUS ON YOUTH

### Polish-Jewish Youth Encounters

Every year thirty - thirty five thousand young Jews from all over the world come to Poland. Most of them – approximately 60% - participate in Israeli study trips (usually called “youth delegations” or “voyages”) to former death camps. About seven-eight thousand come here as a part of the March of the Living initiative – mainly Jews from diaspora, some from Israel. Less than 2000 (this is only an estimate since there is no comprehensive data) take part in various Polish-Jewish education, exchange or encounter programs organized primarily by various non-governmental organizations, schools or other institutions. Here are some interesting examples of such programs:

- “Polish-Israeli Forum for Dialogue” – I will elaborate on this program later on – or other student exchange programs such as “Polish Intercultural Youth Encounters” organized by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews;
- school exchanges: for instance, two high schools from Lublin and one from Rishon LeZion (I LO im. St. Staszica, VII LO im. M. Konopnickiej from Lublin and Amit-Amal Municipal Comprehensive High School No.3 from Rishon LeZion);
- tri-national photo workshops in the International Youth Meeting Centre in Oswiecim.

Apart from the participants of the programs I mentioned, most young Israelis and Jews have none or minimal contact with Polish students. At best they have a chance to attend a short meeting organized by a teacher or an NGO leader that does not last longer than a few hours. That is all. Similarly they do not have an opportunity to learn about Poland as it is today. Young Jews visit former death camps, former Jewish quarters or ghettos, and spend most of their time in Poland in a bus.

Israeli educational voyages to former death camps and the March of the Living have been increasingly criticized both by some Poles and Israelis, primarily for promoting ideological and not educational values. It is possible to find this criticism objectionable for various reasons. However, the critics do point out several really important issues. Some argue that the voyages to former death camps and the March of the Living are not educational but rather ideological endeavors, Zionist projects designed to foster Jewish/Israeli collective identity. Jackie Feldman in his book (Feldman, 2008) analyzes the youth voyages as national pilgrimages or *rites de passage*, aimed at fostering Israeli national identity and strengthening participants' dedication to the nation and the state by transforming teenagers into "carriers of memory". According to Jack Kugelmass (Kugelmass, 1996), for the young Jews from the Diaspora the March of the Living is a secular ritual designed to confirm their Jewish identity weakening due to assimilation and secularization in Western societies. A visit to Poland, argues Kugelmass, means "entering an abyss of despair" after which Jewish teenagers experience "the redemption" in Israel. In other words, the fundamental idea underlying the March of the Living is linked to one of the points of Zionist ideology – that there is no secure life for Jews apart from the land of Israel.

Similarly, Baruch Oren Stier (Stier, 2003) interprets the March of the Living and Israeli youth voyages to Poland as a symbolic and mythical voyage from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, from exile and destruction to redemption – in the sovereign independent Jewish state. As such, they are an instrument of Israeli civic religion, Zionist ideology. Indeed, some sociological research has proven that these study trips in fact strengthen Zionist and national values instead of universal and humanistic ones (Lazar, Chaitin, Gross, & Bar-On, 2004). Shaping these two programs as tools for achieving internal Jewish or Israeli ideological goals explains why contemporary Poland and Polish youth are not important here. Young Jews arrive to this country to visit the death camps and not to meet Poles. These voyages are meant to strengthen their national identity, to pass the memory of the Shoah to the next generation etc.

Intentionally or not, the way in which these trips are organized does not contribute to diminishing the isolation of Israeli students from young Poles and Poland. This isolation and a climate created during the journey develop, as Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi put it (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), a "siege mentality" which is a generalized and shared belief that the rest of the world is hostile and dangerous. This way of thinking, in turn, brings about, inter alia, a deterioration of Polish-Israeli relations on the non-official level by strengthening a negative image of Poles and Poland among the Israeli youth.

Other critics point out a disregard for Jewish heritage in Poland as characteristic for these voyages. They argue that the exclusive focus on the tragedy of the Shoah leaves little or no space for any attention to the prewar past.

In recent years, however, the situation has started to change. Although slowly and not on a large scale, some improvements are clearly discernible. For example, since 1998 Polish groups have been participating in the March of the Living (approximately 1500 in 2010, more than 15% of the total number of participants). The Israeli guides, especially those participating in Yad Vashem courses organized in cooperation with Alex Danzig and Yaron Karol Becker, are much better prepared, less ideological, and more open-minded. More information about the pre-war and present Jewish life is included in the Israeli educational delegations agenda and the March of the Living as well. There is also quite a significant increase in the Polish-Jewish youth meetings: in the last few years ca 20% of young Jews coming to Poland each year meet Polish students despite of many problems in organizing such meetings (one can mention the lack of time, the negative attitudes of group leaders, and the fatigue of Israeli participants as detrimental factors). Finally, there are some encounter programs that bring Polish and Jewish (mainly but not only Israeli) students together and give them a chance to talk, to discover some commonalities and differences, to make friendly relations.

I would add a few more programs to those mentioned earlier. "Save the memory. History and culture of two nations" is a program prepared and implemented by the Polish Center for Education Development, Yad Vashem Institute and the Polish Institute in Tel Aviv. It was initiated in 2006. The program includes teacher training seminars in Poland and Israel, educational activities in Polish and Israeli high schools, and youth meetings. The Center has published a booklet for educators and has been creating a network of educators/coordinators as well. Another one, "Polish Intercultural Youth Encounters Program", has been implemented in 2007 by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and incorporates one day encounters organized in cooperation with the Warsaw-based non-governmental organization "Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations", high school exchanges and university student exchanges. The last ones in fact are not full exchanges: Poles go to Israel for 3 months to study and live with Israeli families, but Israelis take part only in a two-week study program. The third example of the Polish-Jewish encounter programs is a student exchange program called "Polish-Israeli Forum for Dialogue". I will elaborate on that a bit later.

What constitutes the most important difference between the March of the Living or the Israeli youth delegations and the exchange or other encounter programs? **The encounter itself.** During the MOL or the Israeli study trips there is usually no time for a real encounter between Jewish and Polish young people. There are some meetings but they last only several hours and the Israelis are usually tired, late or in a hurry. In such circumstances it is nearly impossible to establish any deeper and more meaningful relations between people. Nor is it possible to discuss the difficult questions concerning the Polish-Jewish past, the Holocaust, and the anti-Semitism. During the exchange program, on the other hand, Polish and Israeli students spend together one or two weeks, have a lot of time to talk and to get to know each other. The real encounter is the main goal of such programs. And the chances that the encounter program will bring significant results in terms of an attitude change, prejudice reduction, friendship development etc. are significantly larger.

Obviously, the encounter programs do face certain obstacles and difficulties. First of all, they are fairly expensive – the cost of participation is often prohibitive for many individuals both in Poland and Israel. At the same time, the financial support on both sides is not sufficient. On the official level, the support of youth encounters is rather strongly manifested but in practice it is insufficient – in terms of funding, the mechanisms fostering bi-national cooperation (for example a database of Polish and Israeli schools interested in the exchange does not work as it was meant to) etc.

Negligible interest in Poland among young Israelis constitutes another problem. As one of the Israeli students I have interviewed said: „For the Israelis Poland is not sexy.” It is not “sexy” because by and large in Israeli consciousness Poland exists only as a part of the landscape of the Shoah.

I have thoroughly researched one of the Polish-Israeli student encounter programs mentioned earlier. Now I would like to outline some of the findings of this case study (Kuleta-Hulboj, 2009).

“Israeli-Polish Forum for Dialogue” is an exchange program started by the students themselves in 2001. The participants are mainly students from Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw University and Tel Aviv University. Every year about 30 students from Poland and Israel visit both countries traveling around, getting to know each other, and spending time both on entertainment and on important, emotional discussions about the most controversial matters from Polish-Jewish history. The exchange lasts two weeks (one in Israel, one in Poland) with one or two weeks break. The agenda consists of sightseeing, visiting former death camps, meetings with experts in Polish-Jewish relations and history, formal and informal discussions about „the difficult questions” – the most sensitive, controversial issues concerning the past, present and future of Polish-Jewish relations (*Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue*, 2006). Such meetings and conversations are considered to be the most important element of the exchange.

My study reveals three interrelated dimensions of “Israeli-Polish Forum of Dialogue” as an example of Polish-Israeli youth exchange program. Its most striking feature is a very difficult and highly emotional confrontation of two different, partly even contradictory and competitive, collective

memories about Polish-Jewish past (Michlic-Coren, 1999; Polonsky, 2004; Steinlauf, 1997; Tokarska-Bakir, 2004; Zertal, 2005; Zerubavel, 1994, 1995). Polish self-perception as an innocent victim of Second World War clashes with Israeli stereotype of Polish anti-Semitism and partial guilt for the Holocaust. To their great surprise young Israelis discover the history of Polish suffering and martyrdom during the war. One of the students I interviewed said: „It turned out that the persecutors were also the victims.” The confrontation of two diverse memories often elicits highly emotional reactions. For participants it is a very meaningful and learning experience which remains in their memory for a long time.

The dimension of intercultural encounter is less pronounced. During the program several cultural differences and expectations come to light. Polish students are in a way disappointed that the Israelis are not “Jewish,” meaning not like “the East European Jews before the war”. They also find strong Arabic and American cultural influences in Israel. The Israelis – astonishingly again – discover how much in common they have with the Poles.

The third aspect is an amusement. Having fun and getting to know peers from abroad also matters!

What are the possible results of such exchange? It is necessary to emphasize that the conclusions I have reached cannot be generalized.\*

1. Structure and agenda of the program create special atmosphere that contributes to friendly relations between participants, supports personal sharing and intimate, open discussions. That facilitates development of cognitive and emotional empathy – one of the main factors of intercultural learning.
2. During the exchange Israeli image of Poland and Polish people undergoes significant modifications. Young Israelis find out that Poland is neither „an extension of Auschwitz” nor „necropolis of night and fog” (Weinbaum, 2001), but a country like many others, worth sightseeing, with interesting past and normal everyday life. They learn a little of Polish history and discover that Poles also suffered during the Second World War. Poles cease to be perceived as anti-Semites. Instead they begin to appear as hospitable, intelligent, open-minded, nice, and pleasant. Israeli students do see some traces of anti-Semitism in Poland but no longer consider anti-Jewish sentiments as dominating in Polish society.
3. Young Poles note certain positive characteristics of their Israeli counterparts. After the program they describe them as mature and open-minded. And they discover that young Israelis are very much like themselves. Polish students, however, do not change their basic perception of the Israelis. Interpersonal encounter confirms their opinion that the Israelis are not familiar with European and Polish history besides the Holocaust, and that they have a negative image of Poland and Poles.
4. The fact that there is no significant change of opinion among the Polish participants of the program is most likely due to different reasons behind taking part in the program, different selection of students and diverse preparation process in Poland and Israel. Polish participants come to the encounter well prepared and often deeply interested in the Polish-Jewish dialogue. In some cases they know more about Judaism than Israelis. They are highly motivated and focused on Polish-Jewish dialogue, they want to make personal contribution to its improvement. That is the reason they applied for participation in “Israeli-Polish Forum of Dialogue”. Israeli students, on the contrary, are not particularly interested in Poland or in discussing the past, their knowledge about this country and its history is limited. They do not perceive the exchange program primarily as a chance to improve Polish-Jewish relations but as an ordinary student exchange program. They participate in it because they want to get to know students from abroad, to enjoy themselves etc. Some of them take part in the

---

\* The qualitative research methods (observations, personal interviews) used in the study do not allow of such generalization.

exchange program also to visit former death camps. During the program their initial motivation changes – they become more and more engaged in Polish-Jewish dialogue.

5. Other results of the exchange are as follows: increased interest in host country history and culture, its past in general and its role in the present; greater social and intellectual maturity.

All of that indicates that the student exchange programs may be of a great value. They obviously will not replace Israeli youth voyages nor the March of the Living since they have different goals and principles. But it could – and should – constitute more and more significant and meaningful alternative to them.

## References

- Bar-Tal, D., & Antebi, D. (1992). Siege Mentality in Israel. *Ongoing Productions on Social Representations* (1), pp. 49-67.
- Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue*. (2006). Warsaw.
- Feldman, J. (2008). *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag. Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity*. New York.
- Kugelmass, J. (1996). Missions to the Past: Poland in Contemporary Jewish Thought and Deed. In P. Antze & M. Lambek (Eds.), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (pp. 199-213). New York and London.
- Kuleta-Hulboj, M. (2009). *Pamięć – edukacja – dialog. Studium przypadku polsko-izraelskiej wymiany młodzieży*. Toruń.
- Lazar, A., Chaitin, J., Gross, T., & Bar-On, D. (2004). A Journey to the Holocaust: modes of understanding among Israeli adolescents who visited Poland. *Educational Review* (1), pp. 13-31.
- Michlic-Coren, J. B. (1999). The Troubling Past: The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust. *East European Jewish Affairs* (1-2), pp. 79–85.
- Polonsky, A. (2004). Poles, Jews and the Problems of Divided Memory. In *Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* (pp. 125-147). Kazan.
- Steinlauf, M. C. (1997). *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*. Syracuse.
- Stier, B. O. (2003). *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*. Boston.
- Tokarska-Bakir, J. (2004). Obsesja niewinności. In J. Tokarska-Bakir (Ed.), *Rzeczy mgliste* (pp. 13-22). Sejny.
- Weinbaum, L. (2001). *The Struggle for Memory in Poland*. Jerusalem.
- Zertal, I. (2005). *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*. Cambridge-New York.
- Zerubavel, Y. (1994). The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors. *Representations* (45), pp. 72-100.
- Zerubavel, Y. (1995). *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago.