



How long wandering in the desert?

by Edward Kossoy

After the end of the Soviet sponsored regime there are in Poland two seemingly contradicting themselves trends: on one side manifestly wide spread anti-Semitism on the other the more and more popular interest in Judaism generally and in the history of the Polish Jewry especially.

As far as the first of these trends is concerned, its manifestations are visible anytime and any place. So for instance in the last issues of the regretted late *Kultura* of Paris (Nr.6/2000) reporting from Poland, heated discussions about the allegedly Jewish origins of president Alexander Kwaśniewski in connection with his candidature for a second term. In itself nothing new remembering that in the first free election for presidency the unlucky candidate Mazowiecki had to produce proofs of his “aryan” origins. The same source quotes Polish publications asserting that up to 80% of *Sejm* (the lower chamber) members are in spite of their Polish sounding (changed!) family names, in fact of Jewish origins. In the *Senat* (the upper chamber) it is allegedly even worse, the percentage reaching full 95%! In the same category are the broadcasts in the (regrettably) very popular *Radio Maryja* of two notorious negationists asserting that Auschwitz was no death but simple labour camp with some Jews in its hierarchy. The same duo claims on that occasion that *Radio Maryja* is in Poland happily the only mass-medium not under Jewish management. It is not worth while to quote the contents of the scarcely over-painted everywhere present graffiti. Same goes for a good deal of pronouncements in the raging discussions connected with the heinous murder of Jewish populations of Radzilow and Jedwabne in July 1941.

It is somehow a twist of irony that all this happens in an ultra-catholic country, justly proud of its Polish pope John-Paul II. A twist of irony because just that pope calls Jews “elder brethren” of all the Christians and repeatedly declares that anti-Semitism is a deadly sin. However John-Paul’s residence is Rom. Because of his failing health his visits in his Polish homeland became less and less frequent. And anyhow all this does not prevent the notorious prelate Jankowski of Gdansk to repeat his often violently anti-Semitic diatribes to an evident satisfaction of his flock. His original contribution to the discussion around the Jedwabne massacre was a model of burning barn exhibited in his church with an inscription “Jews crucified Jesus and now want crucify Poland”.

The seemingly contradicting but evidently parallel trend of approaching Judaism is increasingly present among the young as well as in certain circles of the Polish clergy. In the higher Polish church hierarchy that trend is represented by for the time being minority group of archbishop Muszyński and bishops Gdecki, Obirek and Jędrzejowski, in the lower by priests Czajkowski, Ignatowski, Musiał, Tiszner. On the initiative of some members of that group a “*Day of Judaism*” (January 17th) is celebrated every year. Its popular influence seems to be on the rise. The same could be said about the ever more popular folkloric *Jewish Festivals* in the ancient Kazimierz suburb of Cracow. The bibliography of Polish publications concerning Jewish-Polish relations and purely Jewish thematics is quite impressive. As last but not least, the passionate discussions concerning the not so distant past should be mentioned.

Prime examples of such discussions are these concerning Cichy’s revelations about the assassinations of Jews during the Warsaw 1944 Polish uprising and around Jan Tomasz Gross’s book “*The Neighbours*” published in Poland in 2000 and its 1998 Agnieszka Arnold’s documentary film predecessor, both concerned with the July 1941 pogroms. In one fundamental aspect these discussions, at least in the leading newspapers, official radio and television, differ from the older but still simmering ones concerned with the early pogroms in Cracow and Kielce: while the latter in their vast majority were centered around dodging Polish responsibility, the actual discussions in their majority target to discover the truth unpleasant as it might be. At the same time there are still circles primly concerned not with the moral issues of the events but with the consequences of such discoveries on Polish relations with the outside world. A substantial portion of Polish opinion claims that the whole issue was raised to strengthen the Jewish-American style of blackmailing for compensation payments. Though none of the Jedwabne survivors or their heirs presented any. The same accusation is made in a recently published book of Lech Z. Niekraś: “*Jedwabne - propagandowy bicz*” (“Jedwabne propaganda whip”). While Gross’s revelations are doubted, contradicted or simply denied, on the other hand his book was in 2001 officially selected as one of seven final runners for “Nike” the biggest Polish literary prize.



Under the shock of Gross's and Arnold's discoveries vociferous Polish opinion became divided in three interchanging trends: one, at first a distinct minority, after some hesitations admitted the evidence as presented and declared itself ready for apology; the other while admitting the facts in principle, raised a very significant "but". That "but" tried if not justify than at least to show understanding matching the crime with the alleged behaviour of Jewish minority during the Soviet occupation. The third trend persisted in flat denial of Polish participation challenging any evidence to the contrary. It has to be said for the Polish president Kwasniewski and the government under the premiership of Buzek joined by numerous leading politicians, intellectuals and many prominent churchmen that they all declared early their allegiance to the first of the three above trends. In fact, the President and the government were initiators of the memorial gathering in Jedwabne on the 60-th anniversary of the massacre.

The "but" trend has been represented by numerous other than above mentioned members of the roman-catholic clergy. Starting with its head the "Primas" Jozef Glemb. True to his known ambiguous and contradictory behaviour, he ordered for the 27th May, 2001 a most extraordinary gathering of all the Polish church hierarchy for "an apology and remorse prayer" specially composed for that occasion. But a few days before that gathering Glemb gave a lengthy interview to the catholic information agency ("KAI"). There he made a number of rather surprising statements: he never met with "anti-Judaism" in Poland however constantly with "anti-Polonism" in American press; there had been no religiously motivated anti-Semitism in the pre-war Poland; at the most sometimes certain manifestation of bad feelings toward the Jews motivated by latter's economic exploitation of Poles, perhaps even Jews should admit that they are guilty of persecuting Poles especially for the time of their collaboration with the Bolsheviks, for cooperation in deportations to Siberia, imprisonments, degrading behaviour etc. Glemb declares also that in his opinion Gross's "Neighbours" were written and published "on order". Glemb finishes his interview in advising Gross to write rather about the present relations of Israeli Jews with their neighbours. These Glemb's teachings were widely commented. Also in *Radio Maryja*. The "remorse gathering" of May 27th did not found there to be worth mentioning.

The trend of stubborn denial of any Polish participation in the Jedwabne massacre is quite prominently represented in the roman-catholic clergy. Besides the notorious prelate Jankowski no less personality than the bishop of the Aom|a diocese Stanislaw Stefanek in one of his Sunday sermons speaking of "burnt alive our Jewish brethren" does not mention the Polish participation with even one word. But he tells his flock that excellent business is now promoted on the innocent blood of the murdered Jews. As to the guilt, he is convinced that there is a complot of hate comparable with that of Neron who burning Rom tried to accuse the innocent Christians... No wonder that the *curé* of the Jedwabne parish in Stefanek's diocese Edward OrBowski claimed to have proofs that not the Poles but the Germans did it. Moreover: "...we cannot apologize for what happened until the Jews apologize first for turning their Polish neighbours over to the Soviets before the German occupation. What happened in Jedwabne was a battle against communists and not Jews..."

It is not surprising that both Stefanek and OrBowski did not attend the 10th of July anniversary ceremonies in Jedwabne. The same goes for the Polish episcopate: no one of bishops was present. Strange, if consider that high clergy of all the protestant Polish churches were represented. Even the German episcopate thought it proper to send an official representation. As to the present inhabitants of Jedwabne, they were represented by the town mayor and the president of the municipal council. Still, in the village one could read posters declaring: "We do not apologize. It is the Germans who murdered Jews in Jedwabne. Those who defame the Polish Nation have to apologize!" President Kwa[niewski apologized for himself and "those Poles whose conscience is perturbed by the crime committed". The Israel ambassador professor Weiss mentioned from his own experience other Polish neighbours who endangered their lives to save Jews. The aged rabbi Jacob Baker having paid a surprising visit to the *curé* OrBowski, spook of his Jedwabne youth calling for forsaking hate, reconciliation and brotherly love.

An enterprise in Radom calling itself "Encyclopaedic (sic!) Publishing Polwin" advertises on the internet promoting such titles as "Judeopolonia – a Jewish state in the Polish state". To give its readers the taste of this book, an alleged speech of Jewish secretary general of the Polish Communist Party Jacob Berman is quoted *in extenso*. As pretended, it was addressed in 1945 to a somehow mysterious "Jewish Committee" and contains detailed instructions how to turn Poland into virtually Jewish state. In the best tradition of the *Protocols of the Wise of Zion!*



On the background of these events it seems worth while to examine if even shortly only, the sources of contemporary Polish anti-Semitism. The same goes for backlash reactions produced abroad by Polish anti-Semitism. As always, for better understanding of the present, it is necessary to reflect upon the less or more distant past.

In that more distant past the independent Polish Commonwealth of nobility headed by an elective king (“*Rzeczpospolita szlachecka z królem obieralnym na czele*”) had been an unique and only creation in the contemporary political scene. One of peculiarities of its social system was the legal prohibition for the nobility to be engaged in trading. The sanction for the offenders was the forfeit of the nobility status. Therefore the trading class population of cities had been of foreign mostly German stock. These towns were governed by foreign (“*Magdeburger*”) laws based on rigid German medieval guild practices and customs. Their burghers to exclude the only possible competition, insisted on getting from the Polish kings the privilege of *non tolerandum Judeorum*. In the rural country and the smaller towns - property of the leading rich nobility, the commercial life was dominated by Jews serving the excluded from trade noble patrons. Another peculiarity of the ancient *Rzeczpospolita* of Poland and Lithuania had been the nobilitation of converting to Christianity Jews: in Lithuania by statutes, in Poland by custom, practically also automatically. In the middle of eighteenth century several thousand families of Polish Jews, followers of the “prophet” Jacob Frank, converted to Christianity injecting quite a powerful drop of Jewish blood into the main strain of Polish and Lithuanian nobility. That peculiar symbiosis of Jews with the ancient Polish nobility explains, why the latter’s anti-Semitism manifested itself on the social and socialite levels never becoming violent and excluding racial approach.

However that in itself successful symbiosis produced on another level a quite different aspect: the deeply rooted anti-Semitism of peasantry and its extended arm - petty trades people. Enslaved since centuries and often pitilessly exploited peasant only exceptionally and on rare occasions faced his lord in person. But every day he had to deal with the lord serving Jew. Thunderous Sunday sermons denounced Jewish inn-keepers (“*karczmarz*”) as spreaders of lethal alcoholism. That the inn was the profitable property of the very catholic noble lord, was passed in silence. Still, at least twice the violent peasant protest against the judeo-nobiliary symbiose manifested itself in the simultaneous massacre of nobles and their Jewish servants. It was the Chmielnicki revolt in 1648 and almost full 200 years later the Jacob Szela rebellion in Austrian occupied Polish Galizia. As far as Jews were concerned, the Szela tradition survived the Austrian occupation: in the spring of 1919 in the anew independent Poland there were in the same territory anti -Jewish disturbances on the scale and character of the Szela 1846 rebellion.

The social and economic structures and conditions under the over hundred years long occupation of Poland by its three neighbours did not develop uniformly. Without digging deep into the matter, it can be said that it has been under the Prussian occupation that the peasantry succeeded first in its struggle for better social and economical conditions coupled with opposition to Germanisation and fully supported by local roman-catholic Polish clergy. Pronouncedly Polish and catholic peasants’ and craftsmen associations and co-operatives succeeded early in eliminating unnecessary brokerage. Traditionally Jewish middlemen, craftspeople and small traders lost their jobs and income. With the exception of short episodes, mainly connected with the failed Polish uprising of 1848, the process went on remarkably peacefully. Under the then proverbial Prussian law and order the Jewish Kempinskys, Tucholskys and Poznans simply left their original Polish townships and moved to Berlin and other Prussian cities finding there relatively friendly welcome and as it then seemed, a high degree of personal security.

The percentage of Jewish population in the provinces of Poznań and *Pomorze* in the ancient *Rzeczpospolita* had been practically the same as in all other Polish provinces. Moreover, during centuries Poznań had been one of most important centers of Jewish specific culture. In fact, Poznań had been the seat of the well known institution of Jewish self-rule “The Council of-Four Countries” (“*Vaad arba arazot*”) It had been quite different between the two World Wars: half out of about 5000 Jews still present in the Poznań province, lived in the provincial capital Poznań. There they were 0.8% of the 300 thousand of the total population as compared with almost 40% in the state capital Warsaw. It is therefore highly remarkable that in that practically Jewry-less (“*Judenfrei*”) province the anti-Semitism had been the strongest of all other Polish counties. Long before Hitler’s ascent to power in Germany, at the entrance to the best Poznań restaurant “*Esplanada*” in the very center of the town one could read a discrete but explicit inscription: “*Jews not welcomed*”.



It seems that there were at least three main reasons of that specifically Poznań old anti-Semitism without Jews. Firstly, some still persisting old resentments based on the almost general identification of the local Jewry with the German minority during the century long German occupation. Secondly, the very pronounced religiously motivated anti-Semitism of the local Roman-Catholic church. And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the substitution of the traditional Polish nobility elites by new ones composed of freshly emancipated peasantry and closely with it connected (predominantly lower-) middle class. These new elites dominated local civil service, associations and municipalities as well as the clergy. There was no need for actual Jewish presence to feed their traditional centuries old anti-Semitism.

The situation in other Polish territories had been initially rather different. After the end of the long foreign occupation the social and political unification progressed slowly but steadily under the lenient dictatorship of Marshal Józef Piłsudski. Himself was notwithstanding his social-democrat past, an exemplary incarnation of the old Polish nobility traditions. His regrettably never realized political conceptions were based on the traditions of the ancient multinational *Rzeczpospolita*. In those traditions there was no room for anti-Semitism of the kind manifested in Poznań and most certainly not for the emerging Nazi violence. No wonder that the then over three million strong Jewish minority in spite of strong leftish leanings, in its majority gave straight or indirect support to the dominant old traditions oriented elite. But the first harbingers of the end of these orientations made already their appearance.

Peasants leaving the over-populated villages streamed into townships. There owing to slow economic development only a fraction could find employment in the industry. Like in the Poznań model, they tried to change into handicrafts and small trade. In that way the conflict with the townships dominating Jews was pre-programmed and eagerly kindled by over-bordering Nazi propaganda. As long as Marshal Piłsudski held the reins of power that conflict did not explode in violence. It did so in March 1936 shortly after his death. Then in the little town of Przytyk during bloody pogrom like disturbances peasants tried to grab the miserable market stalls of the local Jews. Describing these events a traditionally oriented writer regarded them as the first signs of re-stratification of Polish society (Pruszyński Ksawery: *“Podróż po Polsce”* pp.44 ff and 144 ff).

Shortly afterwards the Polish government pirouetted clearly to the right. It was still composed of Piłsudski's known followers but these of Jewish origin were excluded. General Sławoj-Skłodkowski, the prime minister, concerning the Jews stated in the parliament: “No violence but economic warfare - welcome!”. The country understood that statement as permission for open warfare. A good example is a 1938 entry in the official chronicle of the Jedwabne parish: it describes the church sponsored and Nazi-like boycott of Jewish crafts and trade in Jedwabne. It mentions that a woman who ignoring the boycott bought bread in a Jewish bakery was severely beaten up.

Since the beginning of the Second World War the Germans strived purposely and with great deal of success to destruct in occupied Poland, besides the Jews, members of Polish intellectual and social elite. They were mostly connected genetically or ideologically to the traditions of old Polish nobility. In persecuting Jews the Germans tried to enlist the cooperation of the local population exploiting the deeply rooted anti-Semitism and greed of peasantry and its extended arm: the town proletariat. Doubtless, it had been easy and profitable to accommodate in that way the occupants while helping in any way the persecuted Jews was starting 1942 threaten with death penalty. Nevertheless there were some courageous people, mostly connected to the traditional elites, who with some degree of success tried their best to help the Jews. Somehow the violence of the mob overcasts in the collective human memory the acts of the noble and courageous.

In summer 1941 in Jedwabne, Radzilów and many other localities the mob overdid their German instigators in murdering their Jewish neighbours in particularly odious and cruel ways. One year later a rather typical representative of the old elite, the well known writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka addressed a passionate appeal to her countrymen calling them to help the pitilessly murdered Jews. An interesting aspect of that appeal is that alongside with calling the help the moral duty of every Pole and Catholic, the writer describes the Jews as enemies of Poles and Poland. Three years into German occupation and one year after Jedwabne Kossak-Szczucka had to be well aware of the prevailing sentiments of her countrymen. It could be argued that to assure her appeal better chances of effective reception and following, she had to pay knowingly lip service to these sentiments even if she did not share them. There is no doubt that any overtly declared sympathy to Jews would prove contra-productive.



Anti-Semitism persisted unabated after the end of the German occupation. More than 50.000 Jews thanks to the help of numerous Poles survived the occupation. They were joined by over 200.000 returning from German concentration camps and voluntary or forcibly imposed stay in the Soviet Union. A number of them tried to recover some property lost during the German occupation under the well known circumstances. Almost everywhere they met the stubborn resistance of the new owners. Some hundreds of the Jewish survivors lost their lives in Poland after the liberation. A good illustration of the prevailing sentiments are the fortunes of the Christian Wyrzykowski family of Jedwabne. Risking all the time their own lives they hid almost four years long and till the liberation seven Jews saved from the July 1941 massacre. When this became known they themselves were menaced with death by nationalistic-anti-Semitic armed bands still operating in the vicinity. Forced to leave Jedwabne, they moved to the district capital Aom|a but did not find there better safety. Finally they emigrated to the USA. At least the *Yad Vashem* institute of Jerusalem bestowed on all of them long ago the honorific title of "*Righteous of the Nations*". Any Polish recognition of their sacrifice is not yet in sight. . .

Of all liberated from Germans territories and states forced after the end of the war into the Soviet orbit, it was only in Poland that it came to bloody pogrom like disturbances in the provincial capitals of Kielce and Cracov with substantial loss of Jewish life and many wounded. The then heads of roman-catholic church in Poland cardinals Hlond and WyszyDski refused to condemn these events. The immediate consequence had been the mass emigration of the Jewish survivors. Out of 250.000 counted in 1946 there were only 100.000 one year later with the numbers diminishing every year since. (The present Jewish population in Poland is estimated between 5 and 15.000).

The planned destruction of traditional Polish elites by the occupying Germans was consequently completed by the successive Russian occupants. During their half of a century long rule the members of these elites were systematically arrested, deported and condemned to long jail terms or death. Their children were barred from higher education. That firm policy brought the profound restratification of Polish society and its structures. The old elites were replaced on all levels by new ones rooted in peasantry, workers and lower middle-class.

During certain stretch of time the new elites had to share the powers allowed them by the reigning Soviets with the then still present communists of Jewish origin. The latter, trusted by Soviets were overrepresented in the hated state security ("*UB - Bezpieka*") and visibly present in scientific and economic structures. However for a limited time only. Early in 1968 it was decided in Moscow in face of growing unrest in the occupied countries, to resort to time and again successfully used by the old czarist regime method of channelling the popular displeasure into anti-Semitism. The Polish political leaders Gomulka and Moczar (Mikolaj Demko at his Ukrainian birth) accepted the idea with overt satisfaction. And so did the vast majority of the population. The more so, considering that Jews at well paid jobs were replaced by the more or less meritorious "aryan" members of the new elites.

Gomulkas and Moczars disappeared from the Polish political scene. But the notorious Polish anti-Semitism without Jews persists. It is deeply rooted in the peasant traditions of the new Polish elites. And with it as a backlash abroad the anti-Polonism quite popular with certain Jewish circles. As one more illustration, here a quotation from a letter of the legendary ("*The Man Who Tried to Stop the Holocaust*") late Jan Karski. That letter was written by Karski shortly before his death to Marek Edelman, the last surviving commandant of the Warsaw Ghetto 1943 revolt, after the latter's house gate was over-painted in summer 2000 with anti-Semitic slogans: "*It hurts me to state that in the IIIrd Republic prevails the climate of tolerance and acquiescence to anti-Semitism. Nobody could tell me that it is otherwise. Who holding power in Poland says that writing on walls "Jews to gas-chambers!", "Jude raus!", "Poland for Poles!" are innocent jests of young hooligans, does not deserve to belong to the governing elite*". Indeed excuses were offered to Edelman by president Kwa[niewski, prime minister Buzek and many leading personalities from the political and intellectual spectrum. However most of them are these who on each, regrettably still frequent, occasions condemn anti-Semitism and hooliganism. At least on that account they should be. considered as spiritual heirs of the old elites. But for the time being they remain a distinct minority The majority seems to be fascinated with the contemporary technical progress and development and only marginally with the past and its traditions.



Is it possible to break that *circus viciosus*? Somehow there comes in mind the biblical tale of the 40 years long wandering of Moses with the Israelites in the desert. Neither himself nor any of his flock born and raised in the Egyptian slavery were allowed to enter the *Promised Land*. Will the wandering in the anti-Semitic Polish desert end? And if, then when? It seems probably that it would be possible only when all those to whom the *Holocaust* had been directly or indirectly but strictly personal experience, are no longer alive. Moreover, in absorbing that personal experience there is a profound difference between the sentimental feelings of the Jews and the Poles.

There is no doubt that in the wake of the Second World War the political, social and economical situation of Jewish *Holocaust* survivors changed to better, sometimes even dramatically. Still, given the choice between the present and the old pre-*Holocaust* situation, very probably the majority of them would vote for the old. Mostly or even only, because that would in the first place mean the resurrection of the murdered families. But even the most philo-Semitic Pole could not be expected to long for Poland blessed with over three million Jews. In the recent issue of the already mentioned “*Kultura*” (Nr.10/01, p.41) Wacław Zbyszewski states: “*And certainly I never met a Pole from wherever, especially one of peasant or working class origin, who would tell me of longing for cohabitation with Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Jews...*”

It is even worse with a simple arithmetic calculation. One blackmailing hooligan (“*Szmalcownik*”) could betray any number of Jews delivering them to Germans for a certain death. The bitter feelings, anger and resentment of family members and friends of the victims are easy to understand. But saving even of only one Jew from the daily threat of death during the long years of German occupation called for constant exposure to deadly danger and sacrifice of several dozen Poles. They or their heirs expect rightly acknowledgment and gratitude.

What if any are the possibilities to accelerate the mutual understanding and reconciliation? It seems that one of important reasons of the persisting tensions is *ignorance*. The majority of the younger Poles never met a Jew and know little or nothing about the Jewish-Polish common history. Convergenly, almost the same could be said about the Jewish youth, especially in Israel. Hence importance of the Jewish history or judaistics chairs at some Polish universities and the recently established Polish history chair at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Somehow less important seem to be quite frequent gatherings of many elitarian forums promoting judeo-christian dialogue: less important because they are gatherings of people who in principle share similar opinions and do not need be convinced. The downright penetration of their ideas is rather limited. However, certainly there is a big role for modern information media: the press, radio, television and last but not least - the internet. But the most paramount importance goes doubtless to education. In the first line, to primary education by now shared practically by anyone. On that low level in the specific Polish conditions the roman-catholic church and its clergy still keep the keys to heaven. If these are remain with chaplains like Józef Glemb, Henryk Jankowski or Stanisław Orłowski, the chances of seeing the reign of brotherly love remain slim. Let's hope that their time is running out...

Conches, August 2004.