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Polish – Jewish Relations: A Historical Perspective and Contemporary View

Richard J. Hunter, Jr.^{1,2}

¹ Professor of Legal Studies, Seton Hall University

² Adjunct Professor, University of Tulsa Collins College of Business and College of Law

Abstract

This article is the expansion of a presentation made by the author at Zarrow Pointe in Tulsa, Oklahoma in July of 2022. It considers the topic of “Polish-Jewish Relations” in four parts: (1) Historical Perspectives on Polish-Jewish relations to World War II, including background on early Jewish migration into Poland, information on the period of Polish Partitions, the establishment of the Pale of the Settlement by Russia, and growing Anti-Semitism fueled by elements of the Polish Catholic Church – all leading to September of 1939; (2) World War II and the “Destruction of Polish Jewry” during the Holocaust, including a discussion of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, information relating to various concentration and extermination camps, and events that negatively impacted on Polish-Jewish relations that took place during this period; (3) The period of the imposition of communism (1945-1989), including the events of the 1967-1968 “Anti-Zionist Campaign” that resulted in many of the remaining Jewish population leaving Poland; and (4) Polish-Jewish relations today. The article concludes with some observations on future of Polish-Jewish relations going forward from the positives, negatives, and contradictions inherent in the discussion.

Keywords: Poland, Holocaust, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Pogrom, Anti-Semitism, Auschwitz

1. Historical Perspectives on Polish-Jewish Relations to World War II

The history of Jews in Poland dates back more than one thousand years. The first Jews to come to Poland were traders who would traverse trade routes leading to and from the east to Kiev in today’s Ukraine and Bukhara in today’s Uzbekistan (see generally Weiner, 1997). The first actual mention of Jews in Polish literature and oral chronicles occurs in the 11th century, where it appears that Jews then were living in the vicinity of the city of Gniezno, at that time the capital of Poland’s *Piast dynasty*. Among the first of these Jews to arrive in Poland in 1097 or 1098 were those who had been banished from Prague (Polishjews.org, 2009). The first permanent Jewish community in Poland is referenced in 1085 by a Jewish scholar **Jehuda ha-Kohen** (mentioned prominently in the background information provided throughout this paper on the on-line encyclopedia *Wikipedia*), “a thirteenth-century Spanish-Jewish philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician,” in the city of Przemyśl, in today’s Southeastern Poland (Postan, Miller, & Habbakuk, 1949).

The principal economic activities of Jews in medieval Poland were commerce and trade, including the export and import of cloth, linen, furs, hides, wax, and metal objects (YIVO Encyclopedia, 2018). Jews operated the Royal

Mint and the profitable salt mines in Wieliczka (still in operation today), and collected customs fees and tolls for the state.

The first extensive Jewish migration from areas of Western Europe to Poland occurred around the time of the First Crusade in 1098 (Pogonowski, 1998). **King Boleslaw III** accepted the contributions of Jews in the development of Polish commercial interests, as Jews came to form the foundation and “backbone” of the Polish economy. **King Mieszko III** employed Jews as engravers and technical supervisors in the Royal Mint—coins minted during that period even bore Hebraic markings (Polishjews.org, 2009). Poland’s Jews enjoyed relative peace, tranquility, social status, and a high standard of living in the many principalities into which Poland was then divided. Jews formed a unique middle class in a country where the general population then consisted of two groupings: landlords (eventually developing into the *szlachta*, the term later used for the Polish nobility) and peasants (Poet, 1988).

Another factor spurring Jewish emigration to Poland was the promulgation of the *Magdeburg Rights* (or Magdeburg Laws), a charter given to Jews outlining their rights and privileges in Poland. For example, Jews were able to establish distinct Jewish neighborhoods and set up commercial monopolies in these areas, making it very attractive for Jewish communities in Western Europe (especially from modern-day Germany) to move to Poland (Abramson, 2013).

The welcoming tolerant situation was gradually challenged by the dominant Roman Catholic Church (Poland had adopted Roman Catholicism in 1066) on the one hand, and by neighboring German states on the other hand, who were often hostile to its Jewish populations (Dubnow, 2001). As a consequence, in 1264 **Boleslaw the Pious**, the Prince of Great Poland, issued a General Charter of Jewish Liberties (commonly known as the *Statute of Kalisz*), which granted all Jews in Poland the freedom of worship, and the right to engage trade and travel (Lewin & Lewin, 1943). Specifically, Article 31 of the Statute forbade the Catholic Church from disseminating so-called “blood libels” against the Jews, by stating: “Accusing Jews of drinking Christian blood is expressly prohibited. If despite this a Jew should be accused of murdering a Christian child, such charge must be sustained by testimony of three Christians and three Jews” (see POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2022). This provision guaranteed that Jews would be protected against the more spurious charges made against them. Unhappily, however, anti-Semitic impulses among the population at-large would not be completely eradicated.

During the next hundred years or so, elements of the Catholic Church continued to persecute Jews, while the rulers of Poland generally offered protection to them (Dubnow, 2001). At various times, however, Jews were ordered to be segregated from their Roman Catholic neighbors, ordered to wear a distinct special emblem, banned from holding public offices where Catholics would be subject to the civil jurisdiction of Jews, and Jews were forbidden from building more than one “prayer house” in each town in which they lived.

As a result of the marriage of **Wladislaus II (Jagiello)** the Grand Duke of Lithuania to **Jadwiga**, daughter of Louis I of Hungary (who was quite interestingly the “King of Poland”) in 1386, Lithuania was united with the kingdom of Poland in a Commonwealth that at that time was the largest such political entity in Europe. A “Golden Era” began for the Polish state, now a part of a sprawling Commonwealth on the European continent.

In 1388–1389, broad political, economic and religious privileges were extended to Lithuanian Jews, including freedom of religion. Jews were granted the ability to engage in commerce on equal terms with the Christians. Under the rule of Wladislaus II, Polish Jews increased in their numbers and attained prosperity throughout the Commonwealth. As time went on, however, religious persecution gradually returned and sadly increased. *Pogroms* (or targeted attacks on Jews) were reported in many towns in Silesia in what is now western Poland. There were renewed accusations of “blood libel” by members of the Polish clergy, and riots against the Jews in Poznań occurred in 1399—a charge that would tragically resurface many times in the future (see Wegrzynek, 1993).

1.1. Poland as the “Center of the Jewish World”: 1505–1572

Nevertheless, Poland was recognized as being more tolerant of Jews than other nations in Europe, especially after the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, as well as from Austria, Hungary, and Germany. The Protestant Reformation was not kind to the Jews of Europe in areas that embraced Protestantism (see Weinbaum, 1999; Teter, 2006). Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, was recognized as a virulent anti-Semite (Goshen-Gottstein, 2018), thus stimulating Jewish immigration to a much more welcoming Poland (see Fram, 1996). Carty (2019) notes: “This study argues that Luther's treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* demonstrates a consistently held anti-Judaism defined by a refusal to accept that Jews could remain in the world as Jews in the face of the Christian gospel. This basic anti-Judaism informed his violent polemics and his supposed “friendly” work on the Jews written earlier when he believed they would soon be converted. His anti-Judaism was integrated with his political thought. Spiritually, the Jews were the worst of the opponents of salvation by grace; politically, they were a suspect people nearly always in breach of the temporal government's laws over blasphemy. Based on this anti-Judaism, in the face of his failure to convert Jews to the Reformation, Luther came to conclude that Jews must be forced by the temporal authorities to either leave or face expulsion.”

These are representative quotes from Luther:

“We want to deal with them in a Christian manner now. Offer them the Christian faith that they would accept the Messiah, who is even their cousin and has been born of their flesh and blood; and is rightly Abraham's Seed, of which they boast. Even so, I am concerned [that] Jewish blood may no longer become watery and wild. First of all, you should propose to them that they be converted to the Messiah and allow themselves to be baptized, that one may see that this is a serious matter to them. If not, then we would not permit them [to live among us], for Christ commands us to be baptized and believe in Him, even though we cannot now believe so strongly as we should, God is still patient with us.”

“However, if they are converted, abandon their usury, and receive Christ, then we will willingly regard them our brothers. Otherwise, nothing will come out of it, for they do it to excess.”

They are our public enemies. They do not stop blaspheming our Lord Christ, calling the Virgin Mary a whore, Christ, a bastard, and us changelings or abortions. If they could kill us all, they would gladly do it. They do it often, especially those who pose as physicians—though sometimes they help—for the devil helps to finish it in the end. They can also practice medicine as in French Switzerland. They administer poison to someone from which he could die in an hour, a month, a year, ten or twenty years. They are able to practice this art.”

“Yet, we will show them Christian love and pray for them that they may be converted to receive the Lord, whom they should honor properly before us. Whoever will not do this is no doubt a malicious Jew, who will not stop blaspheming Christ, draining you dry, and, if he can, killing [you].”

Indeed, with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain by the “Catholic King and Queen” Ferdinand and Isabella, and the implications of the Spanish Inquisitions which began in 1478, the latter part of the 15th century became a time in which Jews were “urged” to convert to Catholicism, Poland became the recognized “haven” for Jewish exiles from Western Europe. The resulting increases to the numbers of Jews in Poland made Poland the “cultural and spiritual center” of the Jews of the whole of Europe. Polish Jews enjoyed more autonomy than anywhere else in Europe. The *Council of the Four Lands* was organized to represent the interests of Jews in all matters—economic, legal, cultural, and political in Poland (Hundert, 2004). The Chief Rabbi of the British Isles stated: “Poland belongs to priority among European peoples in religious and cultural toleration....”

However, the favorable circumstances of Jewish life would soon change. In the 16th century, several Polish towns enacted laws, termed “*De non tolerandis Judaeis*,” **forbidding Jews from living within their borders (Teller, 2017). Laws were designed** to prevent competition in business with non-Jews and were not strictly related to religious factors (see Levine, 1991). These laws resulted in the segregation of Jews in separate quarters (called *ghettos*) or settlements outside of city walls (such as Kazimierz in Krakow, described in “*Schindler's List*”), or in small villages in the Polish countryside. These small villages became known as *shtetls* (from the Yiddish word) in which Jews would maintain their own culture, traditions, and religious practices, as well as their unique language (Bar-Gal, 1985; Tornquist-Plewa, 2018).

Despite these contradictions, in the 16th and 17th centuries, Poland continued to welcome Jewish immigrants from Italy, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, and also Jews migrating from the Ottoman Empire.

1.2 The Partitions

Through the mid-point of the 1700's, Polish kings generally remained in support Jews, although Poland itself was subjected to a series of dismemberments or partitions in 1772, 1793, and 1795 by its neighbors Austria, Russia, and Prussia (Lukowski, 1999). The partitions initially resulted in a loss of one-third of its lands, and later during the Third Partition, to the complete dismemberment of the Polish state. The period of Polish Partitions lasted 123 years, during which Poland was literally wiped from the map of Europe, only to reemerge largely through the intervention of American President Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles Peace Conference at the conclusion of World War I. Parafianowicz (2018) notes:

“President Wilson’s addresses – the one of January 27, 1917 to the Senate, and especially that of January 8, 1918 to Congress, were of great importance for the internationalization of the Polish cause. The latter address and its 13th point, which postulated the need to recreate the Polish state, played a particularly important role. Its shape was influenced to a large extent by Ignacy Paderewski’s efforts and the sympathetic support of Col. Edward M. House, although it was Wilson himself who carried out the final changes. The American president’s address of 1918 had an enormous impact on his popularity in Poland, which, in the following years turned into a specific cult of his person and the myth of America. In 1922 he was awarded the Order of the White Eagle for merits in the reconstruction of Polish independence, and each year on July 4 Poles recalled the debt of gratitude they owed to him and America. In 1931, his monument, funded by Master Paderewski, was unveiled in Poznań.”

As a result of the Partitions, the position of Polish Jews became severely compromised. Polish Jews were now subjected to the rule that in some cases of states were openly hostile to Jewish interests (generally Rosman, 1990; Vital, 2001).

Jews were most numerous in the territories that fell under the control of Austria (an area which became known as *Galicja*) and Tsarist Russia, although a smaller Polish state was preserved in the form of Congress Poland from 1815-1831 (see Leslie, 1955). Austria was a rather “benign” and disinterested occupier and showed little interest in its Jewish population. The lands that had once been Poland or a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Hundert, 2004), but were now a part of the Russian Empire, were to remain the home of a large number of Jews (Polonsky, 2009a, 2009b).

Official Russian policy, however, would eventually prove to be substantially harsher to its Jewish population than that under independent Polish rule. In 1772, **Tsarina Catherine II** instituted policies which resulted in Jewish confinement to an area termed “*The Pale of Settlement*” (Pipes, 1975; Deutsch & An-Ski, 2011), which restricted Jews to the western parts of the Russian empire, and which would eventually include much of pre-partition Poland. Near the beginning of the 20th century, over four million Jews would live in the area of the Pale. The Pale encompassed approximately 20% of the territory of “European Russia,” covering much of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, and western Russia.

Tsarist policy towards the Jews of Poland alternated between the imposition of harsh policies, and at other times providing “inducements” meant to break the resistance of Jews to large-scale assimilation within the Russian Empire. In 1804, **Tsar Alexander I** issued a “*Statute Concerning Jews*,” meant to accelerate the process of assimilation of Russia’s Jewish population (see Domnitch, 2004). Jews were still able to own land in the territories annexed from Poland. However, while Jews could own property, they were *restricted from leasing property* to others, teaching in Yiddish, and from entering any Russia territory outside of the Pale. Coincidentally, Jews were banned from taking part in the brewing industry, prominent in the Russian area. Harsh measures, designed to compel Jews to assimilate, called for their expulsion from small villages, forcing them to move into larger towns. Once the resettlement began, thousands of Jews lost their only source of income.

The assassination of the Russian Tsar **Alexander II** in March 1881 in a bomb attack carried out by members of the terrorist revolutionary organization *Narodnaya Volya* (“People's Will”) (Poland, 1988), was falsely blamed on Jews. The assassination prompted a large-scale wave of anti-Jewish riots or *pogroms* throughout 1881–1884. These attacks continued until 1884, with at least tacit government approval.

The pogroms proved a turning point in the history of the Jews in the Russian portion of partitioned Poland. The pogroms carried on in Tsarist Russia prompted a great wave of Jewish emigration to the United States (Stanislawski, 2022)—mainly to the lower East Side of New York City. The Jewish Virtual Library (2022) reported that “Between 1840 and 1860 the Jewish population of this country ballooned from 15,000 to 150,000.” Jews also emigrated to the United Kingdom. The British National Archives (2022) reports that “The most significant period of Jewish migration to the UK was not, as you might expect, during or just before the Second World War but between 1870 and 1914 when, it is estimated, some 200,000 Jewish immigrants arrived, mostly from Russia and Eastern Europe.”

A bloodier wave of pogroms broke out in the period 1903 to 1906 in Russia, at least some of them were claimed to have been organized by the Russian secret police, the *Okhrana*. According to Jewish survivors, ethnic Poles living in the Russian partitioned area of Poland did not participate in the pogroms, and instead sheltered Jewish families from Russian provocations.

By the late 19th century, a growing number of political movements within the Jewish community were evolving, covering a wide range of views on political and economic matters. **Zionism**, which argued for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, became extremely popular. Many Jews also adopted socialism as an economic philosophy, forming the **Bund** or the Jewish labor union, which supported assimilation of the Jewish population and fought for the rights of labor in general (Zimmerman, 2004). The Bund was especially strong in Warsaw and Lodz (Samus, 2001).

The period of the Polish partitions also led to a series of violent insurrections among the Polish populations—most especially against Russian rule in which many Jews took part. The Kościuszko Insurrection (1794), the November Insurrection (1830–31), the January Insurrection (1863), and the Revolutionary Movement of 1905 all saw significant Jewish participation in the cause of Polish independence and restoration of Poland as an independent state (see Castle & Taras, 2002).

The period of the Partitions and subsequent actions aimed at restoring Poland to the “Map of Europe” has spurred much historical debate. It has been argued that while most Polish Jews were “neutral” or “indifferent” to the idea of the resurrection of an independent Polish state, many in fact played a significant role in the fight for Poland's independence both during the Partitions and during World War I: around 650 Jews joined the *Legiony Polskie* formed by Józef Piłsudski, more than all other Polish minorities combined (Galeczowski, 2012). Others openly opposed Polish aspirations for independence and decided to “take their chances” in a post-war Europe.

In the aftermath of World War I, in the newly constituted Polish State, Poland's Jewish community was the largest in Europe, constituting fully **10% of the Polish population**. Most Polish Jews, as opposed to Russian Jews, lived in cities such as Warsaw, Lodz, and Wilno- although a quarter continued to live in small villages or shtetls. Most Jews continued to be unassimilated; 80% considered “Jewish” as their nationality, and Yiddish as their language. World War I saw the destruction of the great empires of Europe (the Hohenzollerns, Hapsburgs, and Romanovs), and as a result, localized conflicts between populations with strong national identities engulfed Eastern Europe between 1917 and 1919. Although many of the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution were Jews, attacks were specifically launched against Jews during the Russian Civil War, the Polish-Ukrainian War, and the Polish-Soviet War (Davies, 1983; Piotrowski, 1997), which ended with the Treaty of Riga, stopping the Bolshevik Revolution and the Red Army under the command of Leon Trotsky from launching into Western Europe – literally at the “Gates of Warsaw.”

It has only come to the attention of historians that just after the end of World War I, the West became increasingly alarmed by reports alleging massive pogroms in Poland against Jews – mostly in the eastern part of the country.

Pressure for government action reached the point where U.S. President Woodrow Wilson sent an official commission to investigate the matter. Shockingly, a commission, led by Henry Morgenthau, Sr., concluded in its **Morgenthau Report** that allegations of pogroms were “exaggerated” (see generally Pease, 2003).

The number of Jews immigrating to Poland from Ukraine and Soviet Russia during the interwar period grew rapidly. According to the Polish national census of 1921, there were 2,845,364 Jews living in the Second Polish Republic. According to the 1931 National Census there were 3,130,581 Polish Jews, measured by the self-declaration of their religion. By late 1938, that number had grown by over 16% to approximately 3,310,000.

As a result, the newly independent Poland state after the conclusion of the War had a large and vibrant Jewish minority. By the time World War II began on September 1, 1939, Poland had the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, although many Polish Jews continued to maintain a unique and separate culture and ethnic identity from the dominant Roman Catholic Polish population. It appears that only about 10% of Polish Jews during the interwar period could be considered fully “assimilated,” while more than 80% could be readily recognized as Jews (Tec, 1987).

As of 1 September 1939, approximately 10% of the total population of Poland were Jews, primarily with 77% living in cities and 23% in the villages. Jews made up about 50%, and in some cases even 70%, of the population of smaller towns, especially in eastern Poland. Prior to World War II, the Jewish population of Łódź (the center of textile manufacturing in Poland) numbered about 233,000, roughly one-third of the city's population. The city of Lwów (now Lviv in Ukraine) had the third-largest Jewish population in Poland, numbering 110,000 in 1939 (42%). Wilno (now Vilnius in Lithuania) had a Jewish community of nearly 100,000, about 45% of the city's total. In 1938, Kraków's Jewish population numbered over 60,000, or about 25% of the city's total population. In 1939 there were 375,000 Jews in Warsaw or one-third of the city's population. Only New York City included more Jewish residents than did Warsaw.

During the inter-war period, the major industries in which Polish Jews were employed included manufacturing and commerce—especially in the textile industry. In many areas of the country, the majority of small retail businesses were owned by Jews, who were sometimes among the wealthiest and most prominent members of their communities. Many Jews also worked as shoemakers and tailors, doctors (56% of all doctors in Poland), teachers (43% of all Polish teachers), journalists (22% of all Polish journalists), and lawyers (33% of all Polish lawyers). Social, communal, political, educational and religious organizations blossomed in inter-war Poland and made it possible for Jewish cultural and intellectual life to become “richer and more interesting” than anywhere in Europe. Interestingly, according to the 1931 census (the last official conducted in the inter-war period), 79% of the Jews declared Yiddish as their first language, and only 12% listed Polish, with the remaining 9% being Hebrew. The number of Yiddish speakers rose to 87% by 1931.

Jewish youth and religious groups, diverse political parties, unofficial and semi-official groupings and Zionist organizations, newspapers, and Yiddish theatre flourished. The Jewish cultural scene was particularly vibrant in pre-World War II Poland, with numerous Jewish publications and more than one hundred periodicals. Yiddish authors, most notably Isaac Bashevis Singer, born Icek Hersz Zynger, went on to achieve international acclaim as classic Jewish writers. Singer, who emigrated to the United States in 1935, won the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature, always writing in the Yiddish language.

In inter-war Poland, Jews owned land and other real estate, participated in retail sales and manufacturing, and in the export industry. Their religious beliefs spanned the range from Orthodox Hasidic Judaism to Liberal Judaism and several variations in between (see Wodzinski, 2016).

This is not to suggest that there were not serious incidents of anti-Semitism at the same time in Poland (Wynot, 1971; see Hagen, 1996), many perpetrated by supporters of Poland's *National Democracy Party* under **Roman Dmowski**, who openly argued desired a “homogeneous, [Polish-speaking](#) and [Roman Catholic](#)-practicing nation,” as opposed a multi-ethnic Poland reminiscent of the [Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth](#). The International Encyclopedia (2022) notes that “After [Józef Pilsudski](#) ousted Dmowski's party from all political power in 1926, Dmowski concentrated on writing articles in which he used antisemitism to rally right-wing opposition to

Pilsudski's regime. With Hitler's rise to power Dmowski anticipated the collapse of world Jewry which in his view had hitherto depended on Germany. His "Downfall of Jewry" (1934) expresses the opinion that the 20th century will seal the fate of the Jewish people, which he considered to be an historical anachronism."

This viewpoint marginalized other ethnic groups living in Poland as well, particularly those in the [Kresy](#) or Poland's Eastern borderlands, which included [Jews](#), [Lithuanians](#), and [Ukrainians](#) (see Glowacka-Grajper, 2015). As the general economic situation worsened with the world-wide Depression of the 1930's, restrictive immigration laws enacted in the United States and elsewhere limited the ability of Polish Jews to immigrate. Welch (2014) notes: "Roosevelt's policies of speaking out against Hitler's atrocities, but yet doing nothing to facilitate more Jews to enter the United States as refugees, reflected the complexities of Americans' opinions about Jews here and abroad but led to failure to provide a safe haven for those thousands of Jewish refugees who might have fled before the war."

In fact, the position of Polish Jews began to deteriorate most significantly after the death of Marshall Pilsudski, the leader or rather, dictator, of inter-war Poland in May of 1935 Many Jews regarded the death of Pilsudski as a "tragedy"; however, in reality, Pilsudski had at best a very "spotty" record on Jewish matters. Under Pilsudski in 1931, for example, restrictions were placed on Jewish economic and social life, and Pilsudski did little or nothing to curb Poland's overtly anti-Semitic right wing. On the political side, in 1934, the Pilsudski government had signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler's Germany—which portended tragic results for the Jewish community in subsequent years (Cienciala, 1967).

On the commercial side, Jewish industries were especially negatively affected by the development of mass production and curiously by the advent of "department stores" which offered ready-made manufactured products. The traditional sources of livelihood for the estimated 300,000 small Jewish family-run businesses in Poland began to vanish, contributing to a growing trend toward isolationism and forced internal self-sufficiency of Poland's Jewish population.

At the same time, the inter war period also saw a dramatic enrolment growth in higher education and in the Polish professional class by its Jewish population. In 1923, Jewish students constituted 62.9% of all students of dentistry, 34% of medical sciences, 29.2% of philosophy, 24.9% of chemistry, and 22.1% of law (26% by 1929) at all Polish universities.

Although many Jews were well educated, they were nonetheless excluded from most of the governmental bureaucracy (Marcus, 1983). After the death of Marshall Pilsudski in 1935, anti-Jewish sentiment in Poland reached its zenith in the years leading to the Second World War. Between 1935 and 1937, seventy-nine Jews were killed and 500 injured in anti-Jewish "incidents." National policy provided that Jews who largely worked at home and in small shops were excluded from state welfare benefits even as the economy continued to deteriorate.

A national boycott of Jewish businesses and advocacy for their confiscation supported by Dmowski's *Endecja Party* introduced the term "Christian shop" into Poland. A national movement to prevent the Jews from kosher slaughter of animals, with animal rights as the stated motivation, was also organized (see Kopstein & Wittenberg, 2018). Violence was also aimed at Jewish stores, and many Jewish businesses were looted. These actions, coupled with the effects of the worldwide Depression on all Poles, reduced the standard of living of Poles and Polish Jews alike to the extent that by the end of the 1930s, a substantial portion of Polish Jews lived in "grinding poverty."

A main strain of anti-Semitism in Poland during this time was largely attributed to extreme positions taken by some members of the Polish clergy (Modras, 1994). Cardinal Augustus Hlond, the Polish Primate, although not counseling violence against Jews, had issued a pastoral letter in 1936 which said that "a Jewish question exists and there will be one so long as the Jews remain Jews," and which attacked Jews as enemies of the Catholic Church (see Fox, 1997).

"It is an actual fact that the Jews fight against the Catholic Church, they are free thinkers, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, Bolshevism and revolution," the Cardinal wrote. "The Jewish influence upon morals is fatal, and the publishers spread pornographic literature. It is also true that the Jews are committing frauds, practicing usury, and dealing in white slavery. It

is true that in the schools, the Jewish youth is having an evil influence, from an ethical and religious point of view, upon the Catholic youth." He added, at this point, that "not all the Jews are, however, like that."

The same pastoral letter advocated a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses. It said: "One does well to prefer his own kind in commercial dealings and to avoid Jewish stores and Jewish stalls in the markets, but it is not permissible to demolish Jewish businesses. One should protect oneself against the evil influence of Jewish morals, and particularly boycott the Jewish press and the Jewish demoralizing publications, but it is inadmissible to assault, hit, or injure the Jews."

This religious-based anti-Semitism was sometimes joined with an ultra-nationalistic stereotype of Jews as being disloyal to the Polish nation. On the eve of World War II, many Polish Catholics believed that there were far too many Jews in the country, and the Polish government became increasingly concerned with the "Jewish question." Some politicians openly favored mass Jewish emigration from Poland.

In January of 1937, Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck declared that Poland could house no more than 500,000 Jews, and hoped that over the next 30 years, 80,000-100,000 Jews a year would leave Poland voluntarily (see Goda, 2016). As the Polish government sought to lower the numbers of the Jewish population in Poland through mass emigration, the government "embraced" **Ze'ev Jabotinsky**, the founder of the New Zionist movement, encouraged the formation of a distinct Jewish army to fight Nazi Germany, and pursued a policy of supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine as an outlet for Poland's Jewish population (Marcus, 1983).

By the time of the German invasion in September of 1939, anti-Semitism was certainly escalating, and hostility towards Jews was now a foundation principle of the right-wing political forces in the post-Piłsudski regime, as well as in the Polish Roman Catholic Church. Discrimination and violence against Jews had rendered the Polish Jewish population increasingly destitute. Despite the impending threat to the Polish Republic from Nazi Germany, there was little effort seen in the way of reconciliation with Poland's Jewish population.

In July 1939, the pro-government *Gazeta Polska* wrote, "The fact that our relations with the Reich are worsening does not in the least deactivate our program in the Jewish question—there is not and cannot be any common ground between our internal Jewish problem and Poland's relations with the Hitlerite Reich" (Quoted in Eibuszyc, 2015). Escalating hostility towards Polish Jews and an official Polish government desire to remove Jews from Poland continued until the German invasion of Poland.

2. World War II and the Destruction of Polish Jewry (1939–45)

The number of Jews in Poland on September 1, 1939 amounted to about 3,474,000. One hundred thirty thousand soldiers of Jewish descent were serving in the Polish Army at the outbreak of the Second World War, and thus were among the first to launch armed resistance against Nazi Germany (Krakowski, 1977). During the brief "September Campaign," some 20,000 Jewish civilians and 32,216 Jewish soldiers were killed, while 61,000 were taken prisoner by the Germans. Private property—crucial to Jewish economic life—and private businesses were nationalized; political activity was delegalized, and thousands of people were jailed, many of whom were later executed by Nazi authorities.

As a result of the secret **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**, Russian troops entered Poland in September of 1939 (see Benn, 2011). In the eastern part of Poland, now occupied by Soviet forces, any discussion of Zionism, which was designated by the Soviets as "counter-revolutionary," was also forbidden. In just one day, all Polish and Jewish publications and media were shut down and replaced by the new Soviet press. Within weeks of the invasions by Germany and Russia, 61.2% of Polish Jews were under German occupation, and 38.8% were in Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union.

Initially, synagogues and churches in the Russian-controlled area of eastern Poland were not immediately closed, but were instead heavily taxed. Since the Jewish communities tended to rely more on commerce and small-scale

businesses, the confiscation of property affected the Jewish population to a greater degree than the general Polish populace.

The issue of supposed Jewish collaboration with the Soviets in the Russian occupied part of Poland remains controversial. Some commentators and historians have noted that while not pro-communist, many Polish Jews saw the Soviets as the lesser threat to Jewish interests compared to the German Nazis (Polonsky, 2011). Many, however, stress that stories of Jews welcoming the Soviets on the streets with bouquets of flowers, vividly described by many Poles living in the eastern part of the country, have been found to be exaggerated or simply not reliable proof of the level of Jewish support for the Soviets. Whatever initial support for the Soviet occupation Jews might have initially felt was soon dissipated upon feeling the impact of the suppression of the Jewish population by Russian occupiers.

It is certainly true that a number of younger Jews were sympathetic to communism on philosophical grounds, accepting Marxism as an organizing principle in society. As a result, many found it easy after 1939 to participate in the Soviet occupation administration in eastern Poland, and briefly occupied prominent positions in industry, schools, local government, police and other Soviet-installed institutions. The concept of "Judeo-Communism" was reinforced during the period of the Soviet occupation (Michlic, 2007). The tensions between Poles and Jews generated as a result of this period has, according to some historians, taken a toll on relations between Poles and Jews, creating until this day, an impediment to Polish-Jewish "rapprochement" in the minds of many Poles (Piotrowski, 1997).

On the other hand, there were also many Jews who assisted Poles during the Soviet occupation, among them the future Prime Minister of Israel **Menachem Begin**. The Cemetery of Polish soldiers who died during the Battle of Monte Cassino includes many headstones bearing a Star of David. A number of Jewish soldiers also died when liberating the Italian city of Bologna (reported in Meirchak, 1995).

Around **6 million Polish citizens perished during World War II: about one fifth of the pre-war population**. The official Polish government report on war damages prepared in 1947 put Poland's war dead at 6,028,000; 3.0 million [ethnic Poles](#) and 3.0 million Jews, not including losses of Polish citizens from [Ukrainian](#) and [Belarusian](#) ethnic groups.

While Poland's non-Jewish community was certainly subjected to atrocities during German occupation, Poland's Jewish community suffered the most in the Holocaust or the **Shoah** (in Hebrew). Poland was the location of the German program of extermination of Jews, where the "Final Solution," enunciated at the infamous *Wannsee Conference* held in January 1942, was to be carried out (Longerich, 2022). The Germans ordered that all Jews be registered, and the word "*Jude*" was stamped in their identity cards. Numerous restrictions and prohibitions targeting Jews were introduced and brutally enforced. For example, Jews were forbidden to walk on the sidewalks, to use public transport, and to enter places of leisure, sports arenas, theaters, museums and libraries. On the street, Jews had to lift their hat to passing Germans. By the end of 1941 all Jews in German-occupied Poland had to wear an identifying badge with a blue Star of David. Rabbis were humiliated in "spectacles organized by the German soldiers and police" who used their rifle butts "to make these men dance in their praying shawls."

Sadly, all but some 300,000 of the Jewish population were murdered at Nazi extermination camps at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibór, and Chełmno (see Arad, 2018) or starved to death in the ghettos. By war's end, almost all the synagogues in Poland had been completely destroyed.

Some historians have written of the negative attitudes and outright hostility of some Poles towards Jews during the Holocaust. A book published by Jan Gross (2002), referred to as "*Neighbors*," recounted the murder of Jews by their Polish neighbors in the city of Jedwabne in 1941. Whether such incidents were widespread among the general Polish population or isolated to a few hooligans or social miscreants remains controversial until today (Polonsky & Michlic, 2003; Cienciala, 2003).

While members of Catholic clergy certainly risked their lives to assist Jews, their efforts were sometimes made in the face of anti-Semitic attitudes from the church hierarchy. Anti-Jewish attitudes also existed in some of the members of the London-based Polish Government-in- Exile (Engel, 1993; Pulawski, 2012) – although on 18 December 1942 the President-in-exile Władysław Raczkiewicz wrote a dramatic letter to Pope Pius XII, begging him for a public defense of both murdered Poles and Jews. In spite of the introduction of death penalty extending to the entire families of rescuers, the number of Polish **“Righteous Among the Nations”** (7,117) testifies to the fact that many individual Poles were willing to take risks in order to save Jews (Bauminger, 1990; *The Righteous Among Nations*, 2010).

2.1. *Ghettos and Death Camps*

Between October 1939 and July 1942 a system of ghettos was established for the confinement of Jews. The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest in all of World War II, with 380,000 people crammed into an area of 1.3 sq mi. The Łódź Ghetto was the second largest, holding about 160,000 prisoners. Other large Jewish ghettos in leading Polish cities included the Białystok Ghetto, the Częstochowa Ghetto, the Kielce Ghetto, the Kraków Ghetto, the Lublin Ghetto, the Lwów Ghetto in present-day Lviv, the Stanisławów Ghetto also in present-day Ukraine, the Brześć Ghetto in present-day Belarus, and Radom Ghetto, among others. Ghettos were also established in hundreds of smaller settlements and villages around the country. “The overcrowding, dirt, lice, lethal epidemics such as typhoid, and hunger resulted in countless deaths.”

During the occupation of Poland, German authorities used various official laws and edicts to separate ethnic Poles from Jews. The population was separated by putting the Poles into the "Aryan Side" and Jews into the "Jewish Side." According to laws promulgated by German occupiers, any Pole found giving aid to a Jew was subject to the death penalty (see Niewyk & Nicosia, 2000). In fact, Poland was the *only* occupied country during World War II where the Nazis imposed the death penalty for those found sheltering or aiding Jews (Polonsky, 2002). Another edict implemented by the Germans was that Poles were forbidden from buying from Jewish shops, and if they did, they were subject to execution (Pogonowski, 1998).

Since Nazi terror reigned throughout the Aryan districts as well, the chances of remaining alive depended on fluency with the Polish language and on having close ties with the non-Jewish community (see, e.g., Holmgren, 2014). Many Poles were reluctant to hide Jews who had escaped the ghettos or who were in hiding due to fear for themselves and for their families.

Hiding in a Christian society in which the Jews were only partially assimilated was a “daunting” and often impossible task (Facing History and Ourselves, 2022a; 2022b). Jews needed to quickly acquire not only a new identity, but also a whole new body of knowledge. Many Jews spoke Polish with a distinct Yiddish accent, used an entirely different nonverbal language, exhibited different gestures, and even recognizable facial expressions. These “quirks” were exploited by Nazi authorities when searching for Jews. Yet, it is estimated that 90,000 Polish Gentiles nevertheless aided Jews.

It is certainly true that some Poles blackmailed Jews and non-Jewish Poles hiding them (Flaws, 2011), and took advantage of their desperation by collecting money, or worse, turning them over to the Nazis for a reward. The Gestapo provided a bounty to those who informed on Jews hiding on the 'Aryan' side, consisting of cash, liquor, sugar, and cigarettes. Jews were robbed and handed over to the Germans by "*szmalcowniki*" or blackmailers (the 'shmalts' people, from shmalts or *szmalec*, Yiddish and Polish words for 'grease') (Piotrowski, 1998). The extortionists were officially condemned by the Polish Underground. The fight against informers was organized by the Armia Krajowa (the Underground State's military arm), with the death sentence being meted out on a scale unknown in the occupied countries of Western Europe.

2.2. *The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*

The 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising represents what is likely the most well known chapter of the wartime history of the Polish Jews (Gutman, 1998). The Warsaw Ghetto was established by the German Governor-General Hans

Frank on 16 October 1940. Initially, almost 140,000 Jews were moved into the ghetto from all parts of Warsaw. At the same time, approximately 110,000 Poles had been forcibly evicted from the area. The Germans selected **Adam Czerniakow** to take charge of the Jewish Council or *Judenrat* made up of 24 Jewish men (see Trunk, 1996). The *Judenrat* was ordered to organize Jewish labor battalions as well as the Jewish Ghetto Police which would be responsible for maintaining order within the Ghetto walls (Michman, 2007). Soon the Nazis demanded even more from the *Judenrat* and the demands grew much crueler. Death was the punishment for the slightest indication of noncompliance by the *Judenrat*. When individual refused to cooperate further, they were consequently summarily executed and replaced by a new group. Czerniakow committed suicide when he was forced to collect daily lists of Jews to be deported to the Treblinka extermination camp (Halasz, 2011).

The population of the Warsaw Ghetto had reached 380,000 people by the end of 1940, about 30% of the total population of Warsaw, although the Ghetto itself was only 2.4% of the size of Warsaw. The Germans closed off the Ghetto from the outside world, building a wall around it by 16 November 1940. During the next year and a half, Jews from smaller Polish cities and villages (“*na wsi*”) were brought into the Warsaw Ghetto, while diseases (especially typhoid) and starvation kept the inhabitants at about the same number. Life in the Warsaw Ghetto was chronicled in the movie “The Pianist” starring Adrian Brody.

In 1942, the Council for Aid to Jews—known by the cryptonym *Zegota*—was created and it received substantial aid from the Polish Government-in-Exile in London (see Kermish, 1977; Engel, 1987; 1993). *Zegota*’s assistance consisted of providing shelter, food and medical assistance, false identity cards, work cards, employment certificates, birth certificates, and marriage certificates. Stated Kermish (1977):

“Shortly after its establishment in December 1942, the Council for Aid to Jews (known by its code-name “*Zegota*”) became one of the most active and dedicated organizations operating in the underground in occupied Poland. In spite of the grave dangers which its workers faced daily, and the frequent crises as a result of the discovery of the Council’s clandestine apartments, the arrest of its leaders and workers, and the constant fear of the Gestapo, the Council was able to extend aid to Jewish survivors, and the cooperation between the Polish and Jewish members of the Council was very close. Thousands of Jews were saved from death as a result of the systematic and ramified work carried on by the Council until the liberation, and its cooperation with the Jewish National Committee and the Bund.”

Zegota also carried on an active campaign against blackmailers, informers, and propagandists and the Justice Department of the Polish Underground severely punished anyone who betrayed Jews.

On 22 July 1942, the mass deportation of the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto began. During the next fifty-two days (until 12 September 1942) about 300,000 Jews were transported by freight trains to the Treblinka extermination camp, often departing from the now infamous Umschlagplatz train station, escorted by the Jewish Ghetto Police. The Ghetto Police were temporarily spared from the deportations until September 1942 in return for their cooperation, but afterwards shared their fate with families and relatives who were sent to Auschwitz or Treblinka.

The decision to begin the Uprising was not met with universal support. Opposition to an active uprising was voiced by some who argued that resistance would mean the destruction of the entire population of the Warsaw Ghetto. Said one individual, “I believe in God and in a miracle. God will not let his people be wiped out”—while passivity would at least save a core of Jews from destruction. On 18 January 1943, a group of militants rose up and resisted German attempts at additional deportations to Auschwitz and Treblinka. The final destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto came four months later after the crushing of one of the most heroic and tragic battles of the war.

The Uprising was led by *Jewish Fighting Organization* or ZOB and the *Jewish Military Union*. More than 750 Jewish fighters participated, but the fighters lacked weapons: they had only 9 rifles, 59 pistols and a few grenades. A network of bunkers and fortifications were formed. Jews were forced to use home-made “Molotov Cocktails” and detonated crudely made mines. Jewish fighters also received support from the Polish Underground. The Polish Home Army (*Armija Krajowa*) supplied the resistors by providing 2 heavy machine guns, 4 light machine guns, 21 submachine guns, 30 rifles, 50 pistols, and 400 grenades. [The Poles themselves would take part

in the Warsaw Uprising in the summer of 1944, where an estimated 166,000 Poles were killed, including as many as 17,000 Polish Jews. Warsaw was almost completely razed to the ground and more than 150,000 Poles were sent to forced labor or concentration camps (see Kmetova & Symy, 2020).]

German forces, which included 2,842 Nazi soldiers and 7,000 security personnel, were not able to crush Jewish resistance in open street combat, and after several days, decided to switch their strategy by setting buildings on fire in which the Jewish fighters were hiding. The commander of the ŻOB, **Mordechai Anielewicz**, died fighting on 8 May 1943 at the organization's command centre on 18 Mila Street. **Aryeh Wilner**, who represented the Jewish National Committee, stated: "We do not wish to save our lives. None of us will come out alive. We wish to save our human dignity." Some 6,065 Jewish fighters were reportedly killed during the uprising.

The fate of the Warsaw Ghetto was similar to that of the other ghettos in which Jews were concentrated. With the decision of Nazi Germany to begin the "Final Solution," the destruction of the Jews of Europe, known by the code name **Aktion Reinhard**, began in 1942, with the opening of the extermination camps of Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, followed by Auschwitz-Birkenau, where people were murdered in gas chambers and mass executions. Many died from hunger, starvation, disease, torture or by pseudo-medical experiments—most notable those conducted of the infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele at Auschwitz. The mass deportations of Jews from ghettos all over Poland to these camps soon followed. More than 1.7 million Jews were killed at the camps by October 1943 alone. For historical context, an important question has been raised: Why didn't Western powers do more to prevent this catastrophe? Many of President Roosevelt's closest advisers (including Robert Morgenthau and Samuel Rosenman, themselves Jews) were initially skeptical of German intentions and were later preoccupied with opening a second front in the West against Germany. However, after the mission of Jan Karski who infiltrated the Warsaw Ghetto in October of 1942, and who also managed to sneak into the Belzec Death Camp, there was no doubt as to the intentions of the Nazis (Huttenbach, 2001; Wood & Jankowski, 2014).

Jewish leaders in London asked for direct action against German cities, including bombing rail lines, and even urged the public execution of German prisoners-of-war. While allied leaders now publicly acknowledged the Nazis' plans to exterminate the entirety of the Jewish population of Europe, the fate of Europe's Jews had already been sealed. Whatever was done was certainly "too little, too late" (see Rosen, 2006). The exterminations would continue and accelerate until early in 1945. The ovens at Auschwitz now operated 24 hours a day.

3. Communist Rule: 1945–1989

From a pre-war population ranging from slightly under 3 million to almost 3.5 million, the number of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust is difficult to ascertain. The majority of Jewish survivors were individuals who were able to find refuge in the territories of Soviet Union that were not overrun by Germans, and thus safe from the Holocaust. It is estimated that around 200,000 Polish Jews survived the war, out of which around 100,000 were survivors from occupied Poland, and the remainder from the Soviet Union (approximately 136,000).

Following World War II, as a result of the deliberations conducted at the **Yalta Conference**, Poland became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, with its eastern regions annexed to the Soviet Union (actually to Belarus and the Ukraine), and its western borders expanded to include former German territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers. This forced millions of Poles to relocate. Jewish survivors returning to their homes in Poland found it nearly impossible "to reconstruct their pre-war lives." Due to shifting borders, some Polish Jews found that their homes were now located in the Soviet Union or in Belarus or the Ukraine; in other cases, returning survivors were German Jews whose homes now fell under Polish jurisdiction. Jewish communities and Jewish life as it had existed was gone, and Jews who somehow survived the Holocaust often discovered that their homes had been looted, destroyed, or taken over by others.

Some returning Jews were met with anti-Semitism in employment and education (Engel, 1998; Gross, 2007). Post-war labor certificates contained markings distinguishing Jews from non-Jews. Anti-Jewish violence in Poland took the form of a series of incidents that immediately followed the end of World War II in Europe. These attacks occurred in an atmosphere of violence, instability, and near anarchy across the country, caused by the resistance of

some Poles to the Soviet-backed communist takeover of Poland and unfortunately to lingering anti-Semitism among some in the general population. The exact number of Jewish victims during this period is a subject of debate (see Chodakiewicz, 2003) – however, 327 cases were officially documented. The incidents ranged from individual attacks to more organized pogroms.

The best-known case is the **Kielce pogrom** of 4 July 1946 (Pogram Kielecki, 2022), in which thirty-seven Jews and two Poles were murdered after a rumor spread that Jews had “killed a Polish boy to use his blood in religious rituals.” The Kielce rioters killed 41 people and wounded 50 more. Following an investigation, the local police commander was found guilty of inaction. Nine participants of the pogrom were sentenced to death; three were given lengthy prison sentences. In a number of other instances, returning Jews met with threats, violence, and murder from their Polish neighbors, occasionally in a deliberate and organized manner. Polish residents frequently were shown to have had knowledge of these actions and turned a blind eye or held no sympathy for the victims. Jewish communities responded to these incidents by reporting the violence to the Ministry of Public Administration, but were granted little assistance or protection.

Even though very few Jews remained in postwar Poland, many Poles believed that Jews dominated the communist authorities—a belief expressed in the term *Żydokomuna* (Judeo-communist), a popular anti-Jewish trope (Shore, 2005).

It is true that some Poles of Jewish descent actively participated in the establishment of the communist regime in the People's Republic of Poland between 1944 and 1956. These individuals were hand-picked by Joseph Stalin and were consequently isolated from the general Polish population. Prominent Jews held posts in the Politburo of the Polish United Workers' Party, most notably Jakub Berman, head of state security apparatus, and Hilary Minc responsible for establishing a communist-style centrally-planned economy (see Hunter & Ryan, 1997). But the great bulk of communist authorities were not Jews. Constant tensions led to a decision by many Polish Jews to leave the country in the immediate post-war period. In fact, in the midst of these contradictions, between 1945 and 1948, it is estimated that 100,000–120,000 Jews left Poland.

A second wave of Jewish emigration (about 50,000 in number) took place during the limited liberalization of the communist regime between 1957 and 1959 in the period following the death of Stalin and the public denunciation of Stalinist crimes by Nikita Khrushchev. After 1967's “Six-Day War,” in which the Soviet Union supported the Arab side, the Polish Communist Party engaged in a ferocious “Anti-Zionist Campaign” (Kunicki, 2015) which in the years 1968–1969 led to the last mass migration of Jews from Poland (Rozenbaum, 1978; Stola, 2006). In fact, the campaign resulted in the expulsion of Jews from the Polish United Worker's Party (Poland's version of the Communist Party) and from teaching positions in Polish schools and universities—although First Secretary Gomulka's wife was herself Jewish.

During the late 1970s, as a prelude to the Solidarity Movement, some Jewish activists were engaged in anti-communist oppositional groups. Most prominent among them, Adam Michnik was one of the founders of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) and was later active in the Solidarity Movement as well.

By the time of the fall of communism in Poland in 1989, however, only 5,000–10,000 Jews remained in Poland, many of them, including Adam Michnik, preferring to conceal their Jewish origin or who claimed to be non-religious (see Michnik, 2001; Berendt, 2006).

A second more mercenary reason for Polish antipathy towards Jews may have stemmed from the fear expressed by many Poles that Jewish survivors of the war would undertake legal actions to recover properties that had been confiscated by Nazis or communist authorities (see Beker, 2001; Weizman, 2015). While a law was enacted to allow the Catholic Church to reclaim properties confiscated by communist authorities, Denberg (1998, p. 233) writes; “Unlike the restitution of Church property, the idea of returning property to former Jewish owners has been met with a decided lack of enthusiasm from both the general Polish population as well as the government.”

In 1997 the **Law on the Relation of the State to Jewish Communities** was enacted, which allowed Jewish communities to apply for restitution of communal properties until the deadline in September of 2002. Once approved by the Regulatory Commission on Jewish Restitution, which had the final say on communal applications, properties were designated as “common heritage” and would be managed by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland. However, a member of the Regulatory Commission, Monika Krawczyk, noted: “After a difficult application process demanding lengthy research of state archives and substantial funds, this from local Jewish communities with very limited resources, only 22% of the 5,814 communal cases have been settled. Roughly half of this 22% have been historic cemeteries, half have been cash compensations” (quoted in Minckier & Mitura, 2008).

Decades later, efforts at reclaiming private property (including valuable works of art) by Jewish citizens would lead to a number of heated controversies, and the matter is still debated by media and scholars in Poland. The United States and several other nations have voiced serious concerns about the process (United States Department of State, 2021). From the Jewish perspective: “We expect that a nation like Poland, which suffered so much during the Nazi and Communist eras, would understand the suffering of other people,” said **Jehuda Evron**, Chairman of the Holocaust Restitution Committee, in 2005. He continued: “The passage of 15 years since Poland has achieved democracy without addressing the basic human right of ownership is inexcusable. Poland still doesn’t understand that for us, the survivors, restitution is not an issue of money, but of justice, and we have waited long enough” (quoted in Minckier & Mitura, 2008).

In fact, Poland remains as the only country in the European Union that has not passed comprehensive national legislation to return or provide compensation for private property confiscated by the Nazis and later nationalized by the communist regime in Poland. Rather, “a patchwork of laws and court decisions promulgated from 1945-present” exists (Stola, 2008; Bazler & Gostynski, 2018). Individual cases may be litigated but major problems relating to authentication of property deeds, the validity of any sale, and the identification of proper ownership have proved to be major obstacles. Ironically, the boyhood apartment of John Paul II in Wadowice was one of the properties returned to its original Jewish owners but was later purchased by the state to serve as a museum (Tzur, 2012; Scammell, 2015).

Two other events have damaged Polish-Jewish relation: the planting of more than 300 crosses and the erection of a Convent on the edges of the Auschwitz Concentration camp by Carmelite nuns. The Carmelites maintained that their only purpose was to provide a place of contemplation and prayer for all of the victims who perished at Auschwitz. It is important, however, to try understand the nature of the controversy from the Jewish perspective. The fact that so many Jews survived Auschwitz (58,000 inmates were evacuated on January 18, 1945 and another 5 to 6,000 sick inmates and children were left in the camp and were liberated by the Soviet Army on January 27, 1945), and the fact that so many Jews perished in the crematoria and ovens at Auschwitz have contributed to the emergence of Auschwitz as the main symbol of the Jewish nation as the “graveyard of European Jewry.” These seemingly benign actions blossomed into great controversies and were only resolved through extensive international pressures, the intervention of the Polish Catholic Church, and the personal intervention of Pope John Paul II, amid much negative comment in the Polish press (Suchecky & Dobie, 1994; Perlez, 1993) .

4. Polish-Jewish Relations Today

Despite this tragic history and recent events, with the fall of communism in Poland, Jewish cultural, social, and religious life has been undergoing a surprising revival (see Krajewski, 2005). Jewish religious life has been revived with the help of the **Ronald Lauder Foundation** and the **Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture**. There are now several rabbis serving the Polish-Jewish community, including Michael Schudrich as Chief Rabbi of Warsaw; several Jewish schools and associated summer camps, as well as several periodical and book series, are sponsored by the above foundations and other similar academic and religious groups. Jewish studies programs are offered at major universities, such as Warsaw University and the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. (I attended one of the first summer school programs in Krakow in Polish-Jewish relations in the summer of 1994.) The Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland was founded in 1993. Its purpose is the promotion and organization of Jewish religious and cultural activities in Polish communities.

The **Stara Synagoga** ("Old Synagogue") in Kraków, which now hosts a Jewish museum, was originally built in the early 15th century and is the oldest synagogue in Poland. There are also several Jewish publications, although most of them are in Polish and no longer in Yiddish. Active institutions include the **Jewish Historical Institute**, the **E.R. Kaminska State Yiddish Theater** in Warsaw, and the **Jewish Cultural Center**. The **Judaica Foundation** in Kraków has sponsored a wide range of cultural and educational programs on Jewish themes for a predominantly Polish audience. Each summer there is a festival of Jewish Cultural Life in Krakow in the Kazimierz District, an area which was featured prominently in the movie *Schindler's List* as well.

Of special note is the **POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews**, on the site of the former [Warsaw Ghetto](#). The museum's cornerstone was laid in 2007, and the museum opened on 19 April 2013. The core exhibition opened in October 2014 and features a multimedia exhibition about the Jewish community that flourished in Poland for a thousand years up to the [Holocaust](#).

Former extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka are open to visitors. At Auschwitz, the **Oświęcim State Museum** currently houses exhibitions on Nazi crimes with a special section (**Block Number 27**) specifically focused on Jewish victims and martyrs. Objects preserved include 800 square feet of shoes, irons and cutlery; 2,479 kilograms of glasses, razors, and buttons; 3,500 suitcases—many with distinctive Jewish names; 29,000 toothbrushes; 460 prosthetic limbs; 150 prayer shawls; and thousands of other objects. At Treblinka, there is a monument built out of many shards of broken stone, as well as a mausoleum dedicated to those who perished there. A small mound of human ashes commemorates the 350,000 victims of the Majdanek camp who were killed there by the Nazis. The Jewish Cemetery in Łódź is one of the largest Jewish burial grounds in Europe. Artifacts from these core places are often loaned to national museums throughout the world to serve as potent reminders of the evils perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust.

There have been a number of specific Holocaust remembrance activities in Poland in recent years that have attracted both old and young—but especially young people—from around the world.

In September 2000, dignitaries from Poland, Israel, the United States, and other countries (including Prince Hassan of Jordan) gathered in the city of Oświęcim (Auschwitz) to commemorate the opening of the refurbished **Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot** synagogue and the Auschwitz Jewish Center. The synagogue, the sole synagogue in Oświęcim to survive World War II, and an adjacent Jewish cultural and educational center, provide visitors a place to pray and to learn about the active pre-World War II Jewish community that existed in Oświęcim. The synagogue was the first communal property in the country to be returned to the Jewish community under the 1997 law allowing for the limited restitution of Jewish communal property described above.

The March of the Living is an annual event in April held since 1988 to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. It takes place from Auschwitz (the administrative camp) to Birkenau and is attended by many people from Israel, Poland, the United States, and other countries.

5. Some Conclusions or Rather Observations

In my view, many of the controversies which have characterized relations between Poles and Jews may be unresolvable—first in our lifetime and perhaps for all times. The immense hurt and the overwhelming evil of the Holocaust is still too present for too many. It has been only a little more than 75 years since “the unspeakable” was done. Memories and stories are still too strong; lives lost are still too present; passions are still too inflamed. What is undeniably true, however, is that the dialogue between Poles and Jews will continue. The history of Jews in Poland can not be eradicated

Let me conclude with the words of a Polish poet and human rights activist, Antoni Slonimski, a man of Jewish origins, but who was baptized as a Christian (quoted in Peck, 1999):

“Gone now are those little towns where the shoemaker was a poet,
The watchmaker a philosopher, the barber a troubadour.

Gone now are those little towns where the wind joined
 Biblical songs with Polish tunes and Slavic rue,
 Where old Jews in orchards in the shade of cherry trees
 Lamented for the holy walls of Jerusalem.
 Gone now are those little towns, through the poetic mists,
 The Moons, winds, ponds, and stars above them
 Have recorded in the blood of centuries the tragic tales,
 The histories of the two saddest nations on earth.”

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