



The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Poland 1944-2010

The Diana Zborowski Center for the Study of the Aftermath of the Holocaust, a part of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem held its inaugural conference between 3 and 6 October 2010. The theme of the conference was 'The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Poland 1944-2010' and the bulk of the papers presented were part of a project organized by Prof. Feliks Tych former Director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, to bring together a research team to investigate the post-war history of the Jews in Poland. The fruits of this research will be published in both a Polish and an English edition in 2011 and Professor Tych at the opening session of the conference gave a comprehensive account of the nature and goals of the project.

The conference was ceremonially opened by Dr. Zeev Mankowitz, head of the Diana Zborowski Center, Mr. Eli Zborowski, who had founded the Center in honour of his late wife Diana, the Polish Ambassador to Israel, Agnieszka Madziak-Miszewska and Avner Shalev--Chairman of the Board of Yad Vashem. This was followed by the keynote address by Professor Jan Gross of Princeton University devoted to 'Cardinal questions in researching the aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland'. In a broad-ranging lecture, Professor Gross showed how our understanding of the holocaust in Poland is being transformed by recent research, above all in Poland itself. The picture of the holocaust we have in Poland is derived from what happened in the large Polish towns, like Warsaw, Łódź, Kraków and Lwów. In these towns, there were a significant number of polonized Jews and considerable contact between the more enlightened sections of Polish and Jewish society (insofar as these two communities were discrete identities). As a result, there was a



fair amount of assistance to the Jews wishing to flee the ghettos established by the Nazis and hide on the 'aryan side'. In addition, although blackmailing took place on a considerable scale, it was rarely murderous. The ghettos were closed from contact with the outside society and the deportations to the death camps were carried out by the Germans themselves, with assistance mostly from Lithuanian and Ukrainian auxiliaries (although the Polish Blue police also played a role).

In the smaller towns and the countryside, the mass murder of the Jews followed a different pattern. When it began the majority of the Jewish population still lived in the largely pre-modern world of the Polish countryside and its market towns. In these towns and in the countryside, the social hierarchy was very different from that in the big towns, or in the country as a whole. Here the Jews constituted the social and economic elite and the non-Jewish inhabitants were mostly their clients or employees. Most Jews lived in the centre of the town around the marketplace, while non-Jews lived in the outskirts. These towns were also economically linked with the surrounding countryside. Peasants and Jews lived in what has been described as a 'pattern of "distant proximity" based on continued economic exchange and mutual disdain'. This was a situation inherently unstable and led to anti-Jewish violence in times when government authority was weak, as in the aftermath of the death of Józef Piłsudski or in after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, as in the case of Jedwabne and scores of other towns in North-eastern Poland.

The ghettos here were more porous and, thus, during the deportation of Jews to death camps, many Jews were able to escape and attempted to hide or seek shelter in the small towns or the countryside. The numbers of such people have been estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000.



Probably less than 35,000 survived until the end of the war. They were hunted down by the Germans, the Polish blue police and the German-organized *Baudienst*. Some were also killed by the various Polish resistance groups, including the Home Army. Others were murdered by their neighbours or those with whom they sought shelter, in some cases out of fear of punishment for hiding Jews, in others because they hoped to benefit from Jewish property, whose significance was greatly exaggerated. These issues are the subject of important recent research in Poland whose findings were clearly set out by Professor Gross in his striking lecture.

The rest of the conference was devoted to the post-war period and was remarkable for the high quality of the papers presented. A number of themes ran through the material discussed. The first was the failure to establish a viable Jewish community in the period of communist rule between 1944 and 1989. In the immediate post-war period the Jewish population of the country numbered between 300,000 and 350,000. It suffered series of haemorrhages resulting in large-scale emigration in the immediate post-war period, in the years 1955-7 and as a result of the 'anti-Zionist' campaign of 1967-8. As a result by 1989, the membership of the two official Jewish organizations was less than 5,000.

The difficulties the Jews faced in establishing themselves in post-war Poland were investigated by Alina Skibińska, Polish Representative of the USHMM and a member of the Center for Holocaust Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences who discussed the return of Jewish Holocaust survivors and the reactions of Polish society, by Professor Andrzej Żbikowski of the Jewish Historical Institute and Warsaw University who investigated the wave of pogroms and killings between 1945 and 1947 and by Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak of the Center for Holocaust Studies of the Polish



Academy of Sciences and of Warsaw University whose presentation dealt with the moral and physical condition of the survivors and their adaptation to post-war Poland 1944-1949. The problems the survivors faced in returning to life in the new Poland were examined by Witold Medykowski, senior specialist in the Yad Vashem archives, while the reasons for the emigration of the majority of surviving Jews from Kraków was the subject of the paper given by Dr. Edyta Gawron, head of the Center for the Study of the history and culture of the Jews of Kraków at the Jagiellonian University.

This was a period in which many Polish Jews, like the rest of society feared for their future, but in which there were also high hopes that it would be possible to establish a juster society in which Jews would find their appropriate place. Among the papers which examined these hopes was that of Grzegorz Berendt of Gdańsk University who described the attempts at rebuilding Jewish institutions and organizations in Poland between 1944 and 1950 and that of Albert Stankowski of the Museum of the History of Polish Jewry who investigated Jewish Religious Life in Poland after the Shoah. Professor Joanna Michlic of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, Brandeis University gave a fascinating account of the complex relationship between those who had been involved in the rescue of Jews during the war and those they had rescued in the immediate post-war period.

At the same time, among those who remained in Poland, the processes of acculturation and polonization proceeded rapidly. This made the revival of Yiddish cultural life difficult to achieve. The attempts to revive it were the focus of the presentations by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Magdalena Ruta of the Jagiellonian University, who also examined the way the holocaust was treated in post-war Yiddish literature.



The context and character of the last Yiddish feature film to be made in Poland, *Unzere kinder* was analyzed by Dr. Boaz Cohen, head of the Holocaust Studies Program of the Western Galilee College in Akko. One index of Jewish acculturation was the large role played in Polish literary life by people of Jewish origin and the emergence of what has been called 'the Jewish School of Polish literature' a group of writers including Julian Strykowski, Stanisław Wygodzki, Henryk Grynberg, Bohdan Wojdowski and Hanna Krall who have explored the main dilemmas faced by Polish Jewry, above all how to record and memorialize the Holocaust and how to go on living in the country where it took place and where the attitude of the majority of the population. Jewish creativity in Polish was investigated by Professor Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska of the Maria Curie Skłodowska University, Lublin.

A third theme was the slow and incomplete revival of Jewish since 1989. The way this has been affected by the memory of the Holocaust was the subject of the presentation by the sociologist Helena Datner. A final topic was the slow posthumous integration of the Jews into Polish history and the attempts to come to terms with the painful legacy of the past. Among those who dealt with different aspects of this larged subject were Dr. Eleonora Bergman and Dr. Jan Jagielski of the Jewish Historical Institute who examined the fate of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in recent years, Robert Kuwałek of the Majdanek Memorial Museum who investigated the role of the museums in former Nazi death camps as places of shared Polish and Jewish martyrdom, Dr. Hanna Węgrzynek of the Jewish Historical Institute who gave an account of what Polish textbooks said about the Holocaust in 1945-1990 and how it is reflected in textbooks today and Dr. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs of the Jagiellonian University who examined Holocaust awareness among the



young generations of Poles today. The question of how the difficult questions of the past are being dealt with was treated by Ewa Kozmińska-Frelak who gave a paper on rescuers and their status in Polish society after the Holocaust, by Dr. Bożena Szaynok of Wrocław University who examined the attitude of the Catholic Church towards Jews in post-war Poland and Professor Antoni Sulek of Warsaw University who gave an analysis of Polish attitudes towards Jews as reflected in sociological surveys from 1992, 1996 and 2002. Professor Joanna Tokarska-Bakir of Warsaw University gave an account of how antisemitic attitudes are still perpetuated in the countryside, while Monika Admczyk-Garbowska and Magdalena Ruta examined the significance of Jewish cultural festivals in contemporary Poland. Monika Krawczyk of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland described the complex and difficult problems inherent in the restitution of private Jewish property.

The participants did not hesitate to discuss the most difficult and controversial topics in an open and honest manner. The discussions were lively and animated and revealed both how much progress had been made in investigating the post-war period and how much still remains to be uncovered. All agreed that this was a most stimulating conference which took place in a warm and collegial atmosphere. Its success bodes well for the future development of the Diana Zborowski Center for the Study of the Aftermath of the Holocaust.

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