

**The Jews in Poland after the Second World War.  
The Most Recent Contributions to Polish Historiography.**

*by Carla Tonini*

**Abstract**

*In recent years Polish historians have shown a growing interest in the history of the Jews in Poland after 1945. Studies on this topic had started – although in a sporadic way - in the 1960s, intensified in the 1980s and at the turn of the twenty first Century they have focused on three main issues: post-war anti-Semitism; emigration and the creation of the State of Israel, and the restitution of property. The aim of this article is to set these studies in the Polish political and cultural context in which they were written in order to highlight elements of change and continuity within the historical debate.*

Since 1989, Polish scholars have taken a growing interest in the history of the Jewish community in Poland after Second World War.

The first studies date back to the 1960s when, thanks to the liberalization following Stalin's death, both the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) and the Jewish Social and Cultural Associations (TSKŻP) were able to publish works on the economic and social conditions of the Polish Jews in post-war Poland. Most of these were occasional publications dealing with regional realities, particularly those of Lower Silesia and Western Pomerania, the main resettlement areas for the Jews in the aftermath of the war. Their chief aim was to emphasize the positive role which the Jews had played in the creation of Polish Socialism, for instance through Jewish cooperatives and factories<sup>1</sup>. They were works written by Jewish historians for the Jews themselves, often in the Yiddish language: a sort of parallel historiography which had no relevance for Polish historiography based on the idea of a country inhabited exclusively by Poles.

These studies tackled topics like religion, the development of Zionism after 1945, even the situation of the Jews under the Stalinist regime, provided that Polish anti-Semitism wasn't mentioned. Nevertheless, the 1960s studies give important information on the activities of the

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Bat, "Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku", Rocznik Wrocławski, (1961): 50-80; Id. "Badania ankietowe ludności żydowskiej Dolnego Śląska. Problematyka demograficzna", Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (BŻIH) 47 e 48, part one (1963): 52-78; Id, BŻIH, 50 part two (1964): 44-70; A. Goldstein, "Powstanie skupiska ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945-1947", Sobótka, 1 (1967); Szejja Bronsztein, "Uwagi o ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku w pierwszych latach po wyzwoleniu", BŻIH 75 (1970): 31-54.

Committee of the Polish Jews (CKŻP) – the organisation that held sway over social and political life between 1944 and 1949 – the demographic structure of the Jewish community and the migratory trends<sup>2</sup>. As late as the 1990s, some of these studies were among the very few sources on subjects like the school system or the professional structure of the Jews in Pomerania<sup>3</sup>. Inside the TSKŻP a group of scholars could debate and research; since 1989 their regional studies have helped to correct a historiography almost exclusively focused on the Jews of Warsaw.

The post-Stalinist thaw was short-lived. The anti-Semitic campaign launched by the communist government in 1968, forced about 20.000 Jews to flee the country, thus bringing the Jewish presence in Poland down to 12.000 people. Several Jewish historians were fired whilst others were imprisoned; the Jewish Historical Institute, which was placed under strict control and deprived of most of its scholars, was forced to revert to old subjects such as the Jews' "class struggle from the tenth to the nineteenth century" or their "martyrdom and resistance during Second World War". The ŻIH Bulletin contributed to the wave of nationalist publications, which, glorified the help the Poles had given to the Jews during the war<sup>4</sup>.

In 1980, the birth of *Solidarność* paved the way for the debate on post-war anti-Semitism. Warsaw University organized a conference on 'March '68' at which the leading figures of the student's protests, both witnesses and victims of the anti-Semitic campaign and now mostly professional historians, related their personal experiences. Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, Jerzy Jedlicki discussed the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign, the way the competing factions in the Communist Party had made use of the Zionist issue in the internal struggle for power, and the role of anti-Semitism in Polish society. At the same time, however, they placed part of the blame for anti-Semitism on the Jews themselves, who "had joined en masse the Communist Party", thus endorsing the stereotype of the Żydokomuna (all Jews are Communist and all the Communists are Jews)<sup>5</sup>. The following year, historian Krystyna Kersten, going against a well-established taboo, published in the weekly *Solidarność* an article on the pogrom of Kielce, the town where on the fourth of July 1946 a mob of hundreds of Poles murdered forty two

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<sup>2</sup> Izrael Białostocki, "Wojewódzki Komitet Żydów w Szczecinie, 1946-1950", BŻIH, 71-72 (1970): 83-105.

<sup>3</sup> J. Pluciński, "Ludność żydowska na pomorzu zachodnim w latach 1946-1949", *Przegląd Zachodnio Pomorski* 3, (1969): 51-63; Kazimierz Wasiak, "Szkolnictwo i kultura grup narodowościowych w Polsce Ludowej", *Przegląd Zachodni* 4 (1972): 35-47; Józef Orlicki, "Wstęp do monografii o ludności żydowskiej w latach 1945-1949", *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 4 (1970): 41-56; Szejja Bronsztejn, "Uwagi o ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku", BŻIH, 75 (1970): 31-54.

<sup>4</sup> See BŻIH, 1970, n. 73-76.

<sup>5</sup> Marzec '68: sesja na Uniwersytecie warszawskim (NOWA, Warszawa 1981).

Jews and injured eighty. The author describes the massacre, which was triggered by the rumour that a Christian child, who had disappeared, had been ritually murdered by the village Jews. The mob, made up of ordinary Poles - policemen, soldiers and workers” - beat to death all the Jews, men women (including those who were pregnant) and children. Kersten also reports that the returning survivors of concentration camps and gulags were greeted by a wave of assaults throughout the country, most which were caused – as in the case of the Kielce pogrom- by rumours of ritual murder. Yet, the author doesn’t question the die-hard persistence of this medieval belief and the role of the Church in this regard. She seems mostly interested in proving the existence of some kind of ‘provocation’ and, to sustain this theory, writes that the “actual people responsible for the massacre” (senior officers of the secret police and the army, who did nothing to avoid the murders, as well as the policemen who played an active part in it) had been released at the end of the 1946 trials of the pogrom. The Communist Party made political use of the pogrom, accusing, without any evidence, the anticommunist opposition of being the real instigator. According to Kersten, the ‘provocation’ was aimed at drawing people’s attention away from the falsification of the June 1946 referendum results and from the subsequent wave of repression<sup>6</sup>. The ‘provocation theory’ was supported also by official historiography, as shown by an anti-Semitic pamphlet published by a secret service officer in 1983, in which the responsibility for the pogrom is attributed to the Zionists, whose goal was getting permission to leave the country<sup>7</sup>. After the Jaruzelski coup of December 1981 and the following ban on *Solidarność*, the debate on anti-Semitism continued in the clandestine press.

In the late 1980s, thanks to the loosening of censorship, historians were able to openly discuss subjects that had until then been considered taboo. The publishing house Puls edited the research that ethnologist Alina Cała had carried out in the villages of eastern Poland at the end of the 1970s. Her work demonstrated the persistence of strong anti-Jewish imagery and the continuing recurrence of the ritual murder myth. However, Cała’s book didn’t spark any public debate<sup>8</sup>.

In autumn 1988 the previously underground weekly *Respublica Nowa* began publishing legally with a series of articles about “March 1968”, which was one of the main topics of post-communist historiographical debate.

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<sup>6</sup> Krystyna Kersten, “Kielce, 4 Lipca 1946” , *Tygodnik Solidarność*, 4. 12. 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Józef Orlicki, *Szkice z Dziejów stosunków polsko-żydowskich, 1919-1969* (KAW, Warszawa 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Alina Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda w Polskiej kulturze ludowej* (Puls, Warszawa, 1987).

### Post-war anti-Semitism

In Poland, then, 1989 did not represent a radical turning point for the historiographical debate on post-war anti-Semitism. The three most important books on the Kielce pogrom, published in 1992, were based on research carried out in the 1980s<sup>9</sup>. Bożena Szaynok's work is a detailed description of the pogrom, while Tadeusz Wiącek's one is a collection of press articles, reports and memories of those events. The two volume book edited by Stanisław Meducki and Zenon Wrona is made up of documents of great value: the statements of the Catholic hierarchy which, with the exception of the bishop of Częstochowa, Teodor Kubina, not only did not condemn the pogrom but also pinned the responsibility for the pogrom on the Jews, because of "their support for Communism"; the articles by some Polish intellectuals expressing horror at such a dreadful crime and offering a reflection on the persistence of anti-Semitism in Polish society "even after the Holocaust". The core part of Meducki and Wrona's book contains documents of the trials held in the summer 1946 against those responsible for the pogrom; it is noteworthy how candidly the witnesses and the accused described the massacre and how often they used anti-Semitic stereotypes of a religious nature.

Although the materials presented are very significant, none of the authors seems interested in a discussion of anti-Semitism and its effects on Polish society. The questions they try to answer – who was behind the Kielce pogrom, and who profited from it – show that these historians view historical research more as a police investigation than an effort to understand what really happens. Even when they acknowledge that some inhabitants of Kielce killed the town Jews, they play down their responsibility: "the perpetrators", they say, "were outcasts, people who would have not killed anybody without being "provoked", most probably by the Soviet or the Polish security services". Only Krystyna Kersten, in her book on "Polish-Jewish relations from 1939 to 1968", had the courage to call things by their real name: "causes aside, both the way the pogrom developed and the number of people involved - not only in the town, but also in the neighbourhood – show that part of the Polish society was ready to kill [...] and that the "provocation"- provided that a provocation really existed - triggered off a social dynamite"<sup>10</sup>.

In the early 1990s the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes

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<sup>9</sup> Bożena Szaynok, 4 Lipca 1946 (Wyd. Bellona, Wrocław, 1992); Tadeusz Wiącek, Zabić Żyda. Kulisy i tajemnice pogromu kieleckiego (Temax, Kraków, 1992); Antyżydowskie wydarzenia kieleckie 4 lipca 1946 roku. Dokumenty i materiały, edited by Stanisław Meducki, Zenon Wrona (KTN, Kielce, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Krystyna Kersten, Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd, 1939-68 (NOWA, Warszawa, 1992), 130.

against the Polish Nation (GKBZPN) investigated the Kielce pogrom<sup>11</sup>. Its conclusions basically confirmed the view, generally accepted by the Polish society, that “the pogrom had been instigated by the Polish security forces, whose membership was mainly Jewish”<sup>12</sup>. It is hardly surprising, then, that early researches on the Kielce pogrom did not spark any historiographical debate. In fact, in the late 1990s, openly anti-Semitic books were published, like Marek Chodakiewicz and Tadeusz Kąkoleski’s ones, which put the blame for Polish anti-Semitism on the Jews themselves, due to their support to Communism<sup>13</sup>.

In the early 1990s, however, it was not the Kielce pogrom that attracted the attention of Polish historians; their interest was mainly focused on the events of 1968. The first monograph on this subject discussed the intraparty struggle of the Communist Party, the students’ protest (provoked by the censorship of a theatre play), and its repression at the hands of the security forces. Only cursory attention is paid to the “anti-Zionist” campaign of that year and its effects on Polish society<sup>14</sup>.

For a different historical approach one has to wait until the late 1990s and the arrival of a new generation of historians, free of the weight of ideological constraints and more receptive towards new methodologies, like social history or the history of the elites.

The publication of the proceedings of the conference held on the thirtieth anniversary of March 1968, is an example of this changed approach<sup>15</sup>. Besides essays based on a political view of the events, there are others which analyse the positive response of the society to the anti-Semitic campaign, which, as Felics Tych writes: “at a local level exceeded the expectations of the very organizers”. According to this historian, to understand Polish society’s response to the anti-Semitic campaign, we should take into account the Poles’ moral condition after the war in which they had witnessed the Holocaust, the silence later imposed by the Communist Party on anti-Semitism and the attitude of the Catholic Church, which did not condemn post-war anti-Jewish violence. After Second World War, anti-Semitism was the glue between political power

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<sup>11</sup> The Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish Nation (GKBZHWP-IPN), established in 1945, was the heir to the Commission for Investigations of Nazi Crimes in Poland (GKBZHWP) and preceded the Institute of National Memory (IPN), founded in 1998. The changes occurred in the 1990s were aimed at extending the Commission’s scopes for investigation to the Communist crimes.

<sup>12</sup> *Wokół pogromu kieleckiego*, edited by Łukasz Kamiński e Jan Żaryn (IPN, Warszawa, 1992) vol. I.

<sup>13</sup> Krzysztof Kąkolewski, *Umarły cmentarz* (Warszawa, s. d); Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Żydzi i Polacy, 1918-1955. Współistnienie-Zagłada-Komunizm* (Frona, Warszawa, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Eisler, *Marzec 1968. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (PWN, Warszawa, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później*, edited by Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba (PWN, Warszawa, 1998) vol. I and II.

and society, between right-wingers and left-wingers. This made it possible for the Communist Party to resort to anti-Semitism in what Tych defines “the greatest anti-Semitic campaign after Second World War, carried out in Nazi style and with open references to Nazi propaganda”<sup>16</sup>.

Tych’s approach is taken over by Marcin Zaremba, who claims that only a very small part of society supported the students’ protest, while the vast majority approved both the role played by the security forces in its suppression and the anti-Semitic campaign<sup>17</sup>. Support for the “anti-Zionist” campaign, Zaremba writes, was a mixture of the Polish society’s traditional authoritarian culture, its widespread anti-Semitism, and a general feeling of frustration with a situation that did not offer chances for social improvement. This book also contains one of the very few analyses of the stand taken by the Catholic Church, which publicly defended the students on strike but didn’t take side for the Jews who were being fired on and expelled from the country. According to Primate Wyszyński it was better not to attack Zionism “as an aspiration of the Jewish nation for its own state”; besides, “the existence of a Jewish national homeland, able to attract the Diaspora”, was an important way of “lessening anti-Semitism”<sup>18</sup>.

Since the late 1990s, the ‘anti-Zionist’ campaign has attracted the growing interest of Polish historians; an instance of it are the monographs by Piotr Osęka, Dariusz Stola and Agnieszka Skalska. The former analyse the language of the 1968 propaganda and its impact on Polish society. For her part, Skalska studies the satirical drawings in the press of the period, pointing out that Zionists/Jews are portrayed with a mixture of old and new stereotypes: the Jews are parasites, exploiters, devils, besides being Fascists, imperialists and Nazis<sup>19</sup>.

The publication of the collective work *Contemporary History of the Jews in Poland* has been a real event in post-1989 historiography. The last chapter, by Józef Adelson, reconstructs the Jewish political life of the years 1945-50: the activity of the Religious Congregations and the Jewish Committee (CKŻP), the Polish government’s policy towards the Jews, anti-Semitism, and Jewish emigration. In hundred pages the author

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<sup>16</sup> Feliks Tych, “Kilka uwag o marcu 1968”, *Ibidem*: 17-30. See also Id, *Długi cień Zagłady* (ŻIH, Warszawa, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Marcin Zaremba, “Biedni Polacy 68. Społeczeństwo polskie wobec wydarzeń marcowych w świetle raportów KW i MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR”, *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później*, cit.: 144-170.

<sup>18</sup> Andrzej Friszke, “Trydny egzamin. Koło Znak w okresie Marca 68”, *Ibidem*: 183-206.

<sup>19</sup> Piotr Osęka, *Syjniści, inspiratorzy, wichrzyciele. Obraz wroga w propagandzie marca 1968*, (ŻIH, Warszawa, 1999); Dariusz Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967-1968* (ISP, Warszawa, 2000); Agnieszka Skalska, *Obraz wroga w antysemitkich rysunkach prasowych Marca ’68* (NCK, Warszawa, 2007).

renders the dynamism of this community in the political, the economic and cultural fields: eleven Jewish parties were functioning, there were a great number of Jewish cooperatives and more than seventy periodicals (most of them bilingual, written in Polish and Yiddish)<sup>20</sup>. Adelson's chapter has become a point of reference for later research, mainly devoted to post-War Jewish political life, to the activities of the CKŻP, to the conflicts among different Zionist groups, and to those between these and the Bund on one side and the Jewish section of the Communist Party (Fracja) on the other. Fracja's role and, in general, the one of the communist movement among the Polish Jews, are the subject of several studies, especially by Polish Jewish historians. They aim at contesting the myth – quite widespread in the Polish society – according to which all the Jews are Communist and every Communist is a Jew (*żydokomuna*). These works point out that the Jews supported the communist regime because it promised equality and social mobility, that, after 1945, they were allowed to hold offices once forbidden (in the secret police or the army), that the Communists were just a small percentage of the Jewish community and that their political influence was negligible. Finally, even Fracja had played a positive role in the Jewish cultural field<sup>21</sup>.

In fact, this insistence in explaining the Jews' support for the communist regime tells us that even Polish Jewish historians accept an ethnic-biased criterion: the Jews are not citizens with the same standing as the Poles; their membership in the Communist Party, in the secret police or the army, needs to be "justified". The same does not apply to the Poles who have the right to be whatever they choose to be; anyway the "Polish nation" is sound as a whole, with the exception of a few who supported the communist regime and are considered as traitors.

More useful to understand the complex nature of the post-1945 Jewish society is the research in local history that since 1960s has focused on the role of the Jews in the economic and cultural life of Poland. The most recent of them, like the ones on the Jewish elites and on very small communities in Pomerania after Second World War, show the Jews' different paths to integration and assimilation in Polish society. Izrael Białystocki, chairman of the Szczecin TSKPŻ, tried to combine Communist and Jewish cultures, while Piotr Zaremba, the first post war mayor of Szczecin, thought it necessary for the Jews to renounce any

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<sup>20</sup> Józef Adelson, "W Polsce zwanej ludową", in *Najnowsze Dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, edited by Jerzy Tomaszewski, (PWN, Warszawa, 1993): 387-477

<sup>21</sup> August Grabski, "Kształtowanie się pierwotnego programu żydowskich komunistów w Polsce po Holocauście", *Studia z historii Żydów w Polsce po 1945*, edited by Grzegorz Berendt, August Grabski e Albert Stankowski (ŻIH, Warszawa, 2000): 67-100; Id., *Działalność komunistów wśród Żydów w Polsce (1944-1949)*, (Trio-ŻIH, Warszawa, 2004); Id., *Żydowski ruch kombatancki w Polsce w latach 1944-1949* (Trio, Warszawa, 2000); *Między emigracją a trwaniem. Syjoniści i komuniści w Polsce po Holocauście*, edited by Grzegorz Berendt, August Grabski, (ŻIH, Warszawa, 2003).

ethnic affiliation and that all enemies of Socialism, whether they were Jews or Poles, should be fought against<sup>22</sup>.

As M. Heiger shows, in an essay based on documents of the Polish secret police, even very small groups could be made of individuals of different background and lives: German speaking Jews, Holocaust survivors and Jews repatriated from the USSR<sup>23</sup> - forty six in 1946, twenty two in the 1950s - lived in Koszalin on the Baltic coast. Their only common feature was to try to get by unnoticed, by hiding their Jewish past or changing their names. The group of Jews, born and raised in communist Poland, interviewed by Joanna Wiśniewicz, tell us the story of their family environment – mostly secular and communist – and of their “broken dreams of belonging”. For them all, 1968 was a dramatic turning point: many emigrated (among them many community leaders), while others stayed on, searching for new forms of assimilation, like mixed marriage<sup>24</sup>.

The growing interest in the life of individuals and in the complexity of their experiences testifies to the intent of Polish historians to break free from an approach to the minorities issue which, in the last 20 years, has studied them only as homogeneous ‘communities’ or ‘ethnic groups’. Examples of this new approach are *The Jewish life in Poland from 1950 to 1956* by Grzegorz Berendt and the collective work on *Jewish Society in People’s Poland before the Anti-Semitic Campaign of 1968*. Both volumes depict the everyday life of the Polish Jews, their different lifestyles, professional choices, cultural aspirations, and contrasting loyalties towards their representative institutions – first of all the TSKŻP<sup>25</sup>.

These new trends notwithstanding, studies on post-war Jews still focus – both at regional and national level – on the anti-Semitic outbursts which accompanied the major political crises in Poland (1956, 1968, 1980).

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<sup>22</sup> Janusz Mieczkowski, “Izrael Białostock jako działacz i historyk społeczności żydowskiej – przyczynek do studium elit żydowskich w Polsce”, *Żydzi oraz ich sąsiedzi na Pomorzu zachodnim w XIX i XX wieku*, edited by Mieczysław Jaroszewica e Włodzimierz Stępiński (Wyd. DIG, Warszawa, 2007); Halina Domanska, „Czołowi działacze gdańskiej społeczności żydowskiej po drugiej wojny światowej”, *Tożsamość kulturowa, Szkice o mniejszościach narodowych na Pomorzu Gdanskim*, series two, edited by Andrzej Chodubski e Andrzej Waśkiewicz, (TPS, Gdańsk, 2002); Janusz Mieczkowski, *Między emigracją a asymilacją. Szkice o szczecińskich Żydach w latach 1947-1997*, (TSKŻ, Szczecin, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> M. Heiger, “Ludność żydowska w województwie koszalankim w świetle materiałów Służby Bezpieczeństwa”, *Żydzi oraz ich sąsiedzi*, cit.: 486-497.

<sup>24</sup> Joanna Wiśniewicz, *Życie przecięte. Opowieści pokolenia Marca* (Wyd. Czarne, Warszawa, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Grzegorz Berendt, *Życie Żydowskie w Polsce w latach 1950-1956. Z dziejów Towarzystwa społeczno kulturalnego Żydów W Polsce* (WUG, Gdańsk, 2006); *Spoleczność żydowska w PRL przed kampanią antysemicką lat 1967-1968 i po niej*, edited by Grzegorz Berendt (IPN, Warszawa, 2009).

Scant attention is devoted to Jewish-Polish relations, while those with other minorities, like the Germans or the Ukrainians, are ignored. Most studies take for granted the 'Jewish traditional separateness' and this prevents them from seeing the many points of contact. The vast literature on post-1945 minorities in Poland, describes each group – German, Ukrainian or Jewish – in separate chapters, where each of them live separate lives without any apparent contact with others or the Poles<sup>26</sup>.

Anti-Semitism, the subject of most historical studies in the last decade, is the only topic that gives rise to public debates<sup>27</sup>. Five years after the publication of the book on the pogrom of Jedwabne<sup>28</sup>, historian Jan Gross's new work *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*, has sparked a new lively debate. After the Second World War, Gross writes, pogroms occurred in the eastern regions of the country and in the district of Krakow, while fifteen hundred were killed while trying to get back their properties<sup>29</sup>. The core of the book centres on the bloodiest of them, that of Kielce. The research does not offer new insights, being based on material already published in the 1990s, but its style and pathos are new, as well as its ability in anthropologic insight and, above all, its outright denouncement of the perpetrators and their accomplices: the Catholic Church and the police. All this makes the book a pillar for post-1945 research on post-war anti-Semitism.

In some way, the lively debate that followed *Fear* recalls the one occurred after the publication of the book on the Jedwabne massacre. Now, as before, some historians maintained that the violence had been instigated by 'others', that only a small group of villagers had taken part in the murders and that the majority of them had simply "been bystanders". However, in the debate over Kielce, the apologetic camp has become even stronger. The defensive reaction of the majority of historians, columnists and Catholic hierarchy - their opponents have pointed out - shows that the relinquishing of the myth of the Poles as 'good people' has yet to be attained. Few stood up in defence of Gross and those that did were mostly Polish Jews. Moreover the group that, during the debate on Jedwabne mediated between the two positions this

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<sup>26</sup> *Żydzi oraz ich sąsiedzi*, cit.; Leszek Olejnik, *Polityka narodowościowa Polski w latach 1944-1960*, (Wyd. UŁ, Łódź, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców 1939-1948* (Uniwersitas, Kraków, 1998); Anna Cichopek, *Pogrom Żydów w Krakowie 11 Sierpnia 1945* (ŻIH, Warszawa, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> In *Sąsiedzi. Historia Zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Pogranicze, Sejny, 2000) historian and sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross gives a detailed account of the mass murder of the Jews of Jedwabne, in the Łomża district. On 10 June 1941, the Polish villagers beat to death and burned alive in a barn the entire Jewish community. Gross' book opposes the sour truth of the Polish complicity in the Holocaust to the myth of the Poles "sole victims and heroes under Nazi occupation".

<sup>29</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Strach: Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie* (Znak, Kraków, 2008).

time didn't speak out<sup>30</sup>.

After the publication of Gross' book, the IPN made further research and issued a second volume of documents about the Kielce events. It definitely demonstrates that there was no provocation and that 'popular violence' broke out spontaneously following rumours of ritual murder. Yet, the documents are introduced by many essays that show no interest in what really happened and that repeat, instead, the old argument that the Jews were responsible for the pogrom "because of their support for Communism"<sup>31</sup>.

### **Emigration and birth of the state of Israel**

Historical demography is a recent addition to studies on Polish Jews after the Second World War. Out of 3.300.000 Jews in 1939, some demographers estimate that at the end of the conflict 216.000 were living in Poland, while others claim that they numbered 243.000 while others conclude 300.000. Holocaust survivors represented but a small part of them (between 30.000 and 80.000), while all the others came back from Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia following the agreements signed by the Soviet and the Polish Governments<sup>32</sup>. The problem in ascertaining the actual number of Jews in Poland in the early post-war years is due to the rate of migration: departures started just after the end of the war, stopped briefly in 1947 and were resumed in the years 1948-51.

The majority of studies on post-war emigration focus on the years 1944-50 and on the departures following the political crises of 1956 and 1968. Only Albert Stankowsky has given an overall account of Jewish emigration from 1944 to 1968, the year that marked the end of the presence of the Jews in Poland. The highest number of Jewish departures (through the so-called Bricha) – 126.000 between 1944 and 1947 – were illegal. The second wave was caused by the anti-Zionist campaign following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and went on until 1951, when only 70.000 Jews were left in Poland. From 1955 to 1960 both Jews who were still resident in the country and the ones who had arrived in the country from USSR after 1956, emigrated. On the eve of 1968, the Jewish community had dwindled to 28.000 people<sup>33</sup>.

After years of neglect, the reasons which were behind the Jews' decision

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<sup>30</sup> For the debate in the press see Wokół Strachu. Dyskusja o książce Jana T. Gross, edited by Mariusz Gądek (Znak, Kraków, 2008)

<sup>31</sup> Wokół pogromu kieleckiego, edited by Łukasz Kamiński, Jan Żaryn (IPN, Warszawa, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Albert Stankowski, "Nowe Spojrzenie na statystyki dotyczące emigracji Żydów z Polski po 1944", in *Studia z historii Żydów w Polsce po 1945 roku*, (ŻIH, Warszawa, 2000) cit.: pp. 103-151.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

to emigrate, have recently become the subject of several studies. Research on the Kielce pogrom had emphasized the role of anti-Semitism in the Jews decision to leave Poland, but not all historians agree. According to Maciej Pisarski, the reasons were different at different times: between 1945 and 1948 they were psychological (the impossibility to live in a country that they considered to be a sort of vast burial ground), political (the diffusion of Zionism), and material (the difficulties experienced in retrieving their properties). Pisarski claims that anti-Semitism was very important, but was not the only factor and that, after 1948, with the onset of Stalinism and the creation of the state of Israel, political motives prevailed<sup>34</sup>. Regional studies present an even more complex picture. Marcin Stefaniak studied Jewish illegal emigration from western Pomerania, and paid special attention to the Szczecin route of escape. The fact that the border split the city and that millions of Germans had crossed it in 1944-45 to escape from the advancing Red Army made Szczecin, at the end of the war, the most important centre in Poland for smuggling people and goods. Jews, as well as Polish and Soviet soldiers, were involved in illegal trading; the main traffic concerned the emigration of Russian Jews, who headed directly to Szczecin after escaping from the Soviet Union<sup>35</sup>. Albert Stankowski's essay on Jewish emigration from western Pomerania reverts to the theory that anti-Semitism was the main factor for leaving. Pomerania – the former German region annexed to Poland in 1945 – had been chosen by the Polish government as a resettlement place for the Jewish survivors, in the hope that relations with the Poles would be different and more positive in a new environment free of old resentments and of property claims. As Albert Stankowski shows, these hopes quickly disappeared: a Polish backlash followed when and wherever a sizeable group of Jews gathered<sup>36</sup>. Similar remarks on the attitude of the local population are contained in the book that Bożena Szaynok has written on the Jews of Lower Silesia in the aftermath of Second World War and in works of other authors on the issue of emigration<sup>37</sup>.

Natalia Aleksiu is the author of the first book on the Zionist movement in Poland from 1944 to 1950<sup>38</sup>. All the Zionist parties – from the right-

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<sup>34</sup> Maciej Pisarski, "Emigracja Żydów z Polski w latach 1945-1951", in *Studia z dziejów i kultury Żydów w Polsce po 1945 roku*, edited by Jerzy Tomaszewski, (Trio, Warszawa, 1997): 13-81.

<sup>35</sup> Marcin Stefaniak, "Nielegalna emigracja Żydów z Pomorza Zachodniego", *Żydzi oraz ich sąsiedzi*, cit.: 437-474.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Stankowski, "Emigracja Żydów z Pomorza zachodniego w latach 1945-1960", *Studia z dziejów i kultury Żydów* (Trio, Warszawa, 1997) cit.: 83-141.

<sup>37</sup> Bożena Szaynok, *Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku* (Wyd. U. W, Wrocław, 2000); Natalia Aleksiu-Mądrzak, *Nielegalna emigracja Żydów z Polski w latach 1945-1947*, BŻIH, n. 3, 1995: 67-90; Id., BŻIH, n. 3, 1996, pp. 33-54; n.1, 1997: 36-48.

<sup>38</sup> Natalia Aleksiu, *Dokąd dalej? Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce, 1945-1950* (TRIO, Warszawa, 2002).

wing Poalé Sion to the democratic Hitachud – supported mass emigration to Palestine, but were divided on the kind of state which should be built and the kind of relations to maintain with the Arab population. According to the left wingers Poalé Sion and Haszomer ha-Cair, Palestine was to be turned into a bi-national state supported by the Soviet Union; while the mainstream Hichud wanted an independent state with minority rights for the Arabs. Aleksion describes the post-war evolution of Zionism and how it took root among Polish Jews. However, the afore mentioned studies show that only a part of them – approximately 100.000 – went to Palestine. Szaynok claims that affiliation to Zionism was not an ideological option; it was rather the outcome of the chance given by Bricha to leave the country and reach Western Europe, or the United States or Canada.

The majority of these studies point out that the Polish Government maintained an ambiguous attitude towards the Jews; on the one hand it stressed the will to fully integrate the Jews into the economic and social life of Poland; on the other hand it spoke in favour of their emigration to Palestine. Bożena Szaynok argues that in the aftermath of the war, Poland was one of the main supporters of the creation of a ‘Jewish national homeland’ in Palestine and, after 1947, of the creation of the state of Israel<sup>39</sup>. Drawing on archival records and on the press of the time, the author follows the evolution of the Polish Government’s stance which, from early enthusiastic support for the ‘Jewish national homeland’, changed into one of hostility that, in 1967, ended in the severing of diplomatic relations with Israel. Behind this change of attitude was Poland’s growing dependence on Moscow: after the creation of a pro-Western Israel the USSR saw its efforts to extend its influence in the Near East frustrated, and thus becoming one of the main opponents of Israel.

According to Szaynok, the Polish Communist Party’s early support for the Palestine project was due to real sympathy for Jewish claims to independence but also to the chance of playing an active role on the international arena, due to the relative freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by Poland in the early post-war years. The analysis of the Polish press shows that the project of a Jewish national homeland was supported by most of the Polish society. What Szaynok omits is that one of the main reasons for this support was the Communist government plan for a mono-ethnic state. This explains why Jewish emigration was a central pillar of Communist Party policy even after the creation of Israel and up to 1968, the year when the anti-Semitic campaign put an end to the Jewish presence in Poland.

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<sup>39</sup> Bożena Szaynok, *Z Historią i Moskwą w tle. Polska a Izrael, 1944-1968* (IPN, Wrocław, 2007).

## Property restitution

Recent research on the restitution of Jewish property is part of the post-1989 debate on “reprivatisation”. The failure, on the part of the post-communist governments, to pass a law which would allow the Polish citizens to regain the properties seized by the Communists after 1945, has led many of them to file their restitution claims in Polish or international courts. In order to get back houses, companies and lands, the claimants have to collect hundreds of documents (death records, inheritance and property titles), which make useful material for historical research.

In 2001 the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Property (FODZ), was established in partnership with the World Jewish Restitution Organisation (WJRO) and the Union of the Jewish Religious Communities in Poland (ZWRwP). The FODZ web portal holds the history of more than four hundred (ultimately there will be 1200) pre-1939 Jewish inhabited villages and cities. It also gives information on private and religious communities’ properties and on their fate both under Nazi occupation and in the aftermath of the war<sup>40</sup>. The Jewish Historical Institute organises seminars on the changes in Jewish property ownership after 1939, while the Warsaw branch of the Washington Holocaust Museum deals with the expropriation of Jewish properties under Nazism and plans to expand this research to post-war years. On the Internet we can find the stories of Jewish families and of the changes in their property during the last seventy years<sup>41</sup>.

The question of Jewish property has gained new impetus thanks to the most recent research on the participation of local populations in the process of expropriating Jewish wealth during the Holocaust. Jan Thomas Gross was the first to investigate this issue in Poland, a country where historians have been most reluctant to raise it. In his book on the Jedwabne pogrom he writes that “in place of atavistic anti-Semitism, or along with it, the actual reasons that led some Poles to begin the massacre were greed and the unexpected opportunity of seizing the Jews’ properties once and for all”<sup>42</sup>. Gross also refers to the post-war destiny of Jewish properties claiming that, in the Jedwabne district, illegal seizure of former Jewish properties “went on until 1949”. Although only a few pages of his book are dedicated to this topic, Gross’ ability to highlight the continuity between robbery under Nazism and restitution under Communism, has certainly contributed to the historical debate.

Jan Grabowski and S. Piątkowski studied the role of the Trustees

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<sup>40</sup> [www.fodz.pl](http://www.fodz.pl), see the portal Polin.

<sup>41</sup> [www.restitution.pl](http://www.restitution.pl)

<sup>42</sup> J. T. Gross, *I carnefici della porta accanto. 1941: il massacro della comunità ebraica di Jedwabne in Polonia*, Mondadori, Milano, 2002, pp. 92-93.

(Treuhand) in the management of confiscated Jewish enterprises during the Nazi occupation. In the Warsaw district one hundred and twenty nine Poles, seventy Germans, one hundred and nine Volksdeutsche and one Russian were entrusted with the management of seven hundred trading and industrial enterprises that were formerly Jewish<sup>43</sup>. Hundreds of Poles – teachers, clerks and judges – applied to the German administration to be appointed Treuhänder in order to administer flats and parcels of land. One of their first tasks was to replace the name of the legitimate owner with that of their own in the land register<sup>44</sup>.

Recent studies have brought to light many cases of post-war abuse and fraud by gangs that specialised in the illegal seizure of real estate that was formerly Jewish above all in the Łomża district. During his archival research on the Jedwabne pogrom, historian Krzysztof Persak found documents on the 1947-49 civil proceedings regarding the illegal seizure of Jewish property, in which some of the Poles responsible for the pogrom were involved<sup>45</sup>. Persak has investigated the activity of gangs in which both Poles and Jews were involved: after identifying former Jewish real estate, the Poles would find a Jew willing to declare himself in court as the sole heir of the deceased and to initiate the restitution procedure. The same Poles would confirm the Jew's statement, thus allowing the fictitious heir to get back the property, sell it and share the earnings with them<sup>46</sup>. The activity of these 'societies' – as a member of one of the gangs referred to them during the 1949 trial – and its ramifications throughout the region are described in an essay of the IPN Bulletin. The Polish members of the gang were able to give false testimony in different courts thanks to the complicity of local officials; a scandal occurred in Białystok when it was made public that the director of the Security Service – Samuel Faber – was the head of the gang<sup>47</sup>. In Jedwabne, Tadeusz Zarzecki played the role of intermediary between the municipality - in which he had contacts – and the gang; for this he was rewarded with a house and a shop in the centre of the town. The frauds

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<sup>43</sup> S. Piątkowski, "O niektórych ekonomicznych aspektach postaw Polaków wobec Zagłady Żydów w dystrykcie radomskim", *Z przeszłości Żydów polskich*, Polityka, gospodarka, kultura, społeczeństwo edited by Jacek Wijaczka and Grzegorz Miernik (IPN, Kraków, 2005): 170-179.

<sup>44</sup> Jan Grabowski, "Żydzi przed obliczem niemieckich i polskich sądów w dystrykcie warszawskim Generalnego Gubernatorstwa", 1939-1942, *Prowincja noc, Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim*, edited by Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka, (IFS PAN, Warszawa, 2007): 75-116.

<sup>45</sup> K. Persak, *Akta postępowań cywilnych z lat 1947-1949 zmarłych żydowskich mieszkańców Jedwabnego*, in P. Machciewicz, K. Persak, *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 2, Documenti, Warszawa, 2002, pp. 375-389.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi: 379.

<sup>47</sup> J. Kułak, "Faber i S-ka. Krótka historia pewnego przekrętu", *Biuletyn IPN*, n. 6, 2002: 80-83.

went on even after the truth came out into the open; in 1948 the gang was still trying to gain ownership of Jewish real estate<sup>48</sup>.

Behind these frauds was, as demonstrated by Monika Krawczyk's essay on the "legal status of Jewish property after 1945", the post-war legislation on 'abandoned' and 'left behind' property<sup>49</sup>. 'Abandoned properties' were those in the possession of the former German Reich; while 'left behind' were assets and real estates that – due to the war – were no longer in the possession of their legitimate owners or their heirs, or that had been entrusted to third parties through "agreements signed, during the war, by the owners or their legal representatives". Post-war legislation annulled these agreements, both those signed with the authorisation of the occupying authorities and those stipulated between private people, and all purchases were declared "mala fide". The State Office for Temporary Administration (T'ZP) was assigned the task to allocate 'abandoned' properties to "social and public institutions, or organisations for the relief of the people persecuted by the occupying forces" and to return 'left behind' properties to legitimate owners. District courts had only a few weeks to decide on the legitimacy of restitution applications. Although the law didn't openly mention the specific case of Jewish property, both provisions regarding agreements which Jews had signed in their hundreds in favour of the Poles before entering the ghettos and the extensions of hereditary rights to very distant relatives, could not but be applied to them. Restitution claimants were not required to produce certificates of citizenship; the heirs of the deceased owner had only to provide a declaration of presumption of death in order to apply for restitution. This, as we have seen, gave way to several embezzlements. The Jewish claimants were very few: 90% of them had been exterminated by the Nazi, the majority of the survivors emigrated soon after the end of the war. The actual beneficiaries of the 1945-1946 legislation were then the Polish state and the Poles. In fact, the 1946 decree, stated that the Polish state and the Poles would forever acquire abandoned and left behind properties after 10 years from its implementation, by "usucaption"<sup>50</sup>.

Any study of the restitution of Jewish property after 1945 should distinguish between the property of private and religious (kehilla) communities. Eleonora Bergman claims that before 1939 about 1500 Polish kehilla owned 100 synagogues, an undefined number of prayer houses and 2000-2500 cemeteries<sup>51</sup>. To these we must add schools,

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Pyżewska, "Losy ludności żydowskiej w województwie białostockim w latach 1944-1949", *Z przeszłości Żydów*, cit.: 278-296.

<sup>49</sup> Monika Krawczyk, *Status prawny własności żydowskiej w powojennej Polsce i jego wpływ na polsko-żydowskie stosunki*, forthcoming by the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>51</sup> Eleonora Bergman, *Co zostało po dawnych gminach żydowskich? Synagogi i*

hospitals, orphanages, hospices and libraries, run by the communities together with several foundations and associations. No nation-wide estimate exists. We only know, from research conducted in 1988, that the Warsaw Jewish community owned more than 300 prayer houses, two cemeteries and twenty five schools or kindergarten<sup>52</sup>. It was a considerable amount of property that was largely destroyed during the war, especially as far as worship buildings were concerned. Destruction and the improper use of the community properties, however, did not end with the war: the Jewish cemeteries became quarries for lime extraction; synagogues went on to be used as private dwellings or were occupied by local institutions<sup>53</sup>.

In theory, the religious communities were the natural heirs of their pre-war property but, having been deprived of legal right after the war, they had not title to apply for restitution. However, both the June 1945 decree and the following laws on restitution allowed the Jewish Religious Unions (later Congregations) to hold in 'usufruct' buildings for worship and charitable activities, provided that there was the minimum number required to establish a community: ten people at first, later twenty five.

Both the Jewish congregations and the CKŻP protested against vandalism and misuse of property, especially where cemeteries and synagogues were concerned. Kazimierz Urban has collected hundreds of official documents that account for the whole post-war process of dispossession/restitution and report the reaction of the Jewish associations. Conflicts on dispossession or destruction of Jewish property grew worse and worse when the ten-year period envisaged by the law expired. In the subsequent years the congregations appealed to the courts but to no avail; most of the synagogues went to ruin while others became museums, libraries, restaurants, storehouses, shops and cinemas. Cemeteries were changed into public parks, building land and kindergarten; in that of Kalisz, which dated back to the thirteenth century, a school, a boarding school and some residential blocks were built<sup>54</sup>.

The post-1989 governments have chosen to deal separately with single groups, instead of passing a law on restitution to all Polish citizens. Firstly it was the turn of the Catholic Church to be given back its properties, then, in 1997, came the law for the restitution of property to the Jewish Religious Communities, thus allowing them to apply for more than 5000 buildings. Half of them were returned, mostly cemeteries and synagogues.

Research on post-1945 changes of Jewish property are just beginning and

cmentarze 1944-1947, forthcoming by the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw (ŻIH).

<sup>52</sup> Krzysztof Krasowski, *Związki wyznaniowe w II Rzeczypospolitej. Studium historyczno-prawne*, (PWN, Warszawa-Poznań 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Kazimierz Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi i domy modlitwy w Polsce w latach 1944-1966* (Nomos, Kraków 2006): 33-39.

<sup>54</sup> Eleonora Bergman, *Co zostało po dawnych gminach żydowskich?*, cit.

it is difficult to forecast their development. Apart from the psychological barriers that lead historians to avoid controversial issues, there are real impediments. Before the Second World War the property census was not ethnic-based. Only during the Nazi occupation property was classified as Jewish and after the war the T'ZP followed up by applying the 'post-Jewish' label to properties once owned by the Jews.

The most difficult problem is to define 'Jewish' property and quantify it. This is a huge task that historians are just beginning to tackle<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> The Warsaw branch of the Washington Holocaust Museum, directed by Alina Skibinska, deals with the cataloguing of Jewish property under the Nazi rule and after 1945.