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Another Death of Universalism, or How Communist Poland Destroyed Jewish Communism

Scholars estimate that as many as 250 thousand Jews still lived in Poland just after the Second World War (Cała, 2014, p. 17; Polonsky, 2009, p. 42). A vast majority survived the Holocaust by escaping to the Soviet Union and then returned after 1944. Approximately fifty thousand Jews lived through on the Polish territory by hiding on the “Aryan side,” paying Poles for hideaways and food, buying themselves out when blackmailed, and frequently changing their places of stay. Others survived via using “Aryan papers,” which meant living among Poles as non-Jews with forged documents and risking exposure. Very few were saved by selfless help provided by their prewar friends, neighbors, and underground organizations for aid to Jews. The last group among the discussed 250 thousand consists of those who were staying abroad when the war broke out. They had left in the interwar period due to antisemitic harassment, political persecution, or the impossibility to study or work in Poland because of their Jewish descent. The new political order made them return, willing to join their prewar companions in building a new state governed by the promised equality.

However, a vast majority of Jews left Poland again during the first thirty years of the new system. The processes and events which triggered subsequent waves of Jewish emigration include the infamous 1968 Polish political crisis. Known as March 1968, the crisis involved a state antisemitic campaign conducted in the years 1967–1968. The course

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of those events chronologically and politically intertwined with student protests against censorship, which the state authorities actively suppressed. Consequently, a new group of anti-communist opposition emerged from the big-city intelligentsia and came to play the key role in shaping the political and economic order in Poland after 1989.

The crisis owes its name to particularly intensified oppressive activities by uniformed services in March of 1968, directed specifically against the opposition. The antisemitic violence of that period remained largely dispersed: having begun a year earlier, it quietly proceeded in many spheres of life – often behind the closed doors of workplaces and offices, not in public spaces. The narrative about attempts at liberating Poland from communism has effectively pushed the antisemitism of the time to the background. However, as I try to show below, the years 1967–1968 actually put an end to the phenomenon which had played an important role in the Jewish life in Poland – to left-wing, secular, universalist Jewishness rooted in the discourse of emancipation rather than assimilation, and certainly not in the discourse of difference. By getting rid of the Jewish comrades, the Polish People's Republic (PRL) made room for identity politics. Jewishness other than particular, ethnic, cultural, or religious identity simply became impossible after March 1968.

The diagnoses and theses in this article rely on the sociological-historical qualitative research I have been conducting as part of the project "Jews in Poland in the Aftermath of the 1967–1968 Antisemitic Campaign: Biographic Experience, Identity Changes and Community Dynamics." Since I formulate them for the first time, I am aware that they will need adjustments and greater precision, and that they will provoke polemics. I have tried to outline the process which transformed the Jewish identity of those who stayed in communist Poland. The picture I present remains simplified, and many of those concerned would certainly identify themselves with it only partially. Still, risking a misuse of individual stories, which the participants so generously and selflessly shared with the research team, I attempt to capture tendencies and define the dominant motifs. In so doing, I hope to show the transformation of Polish Jewishness, whose key moment, in my opinion, was the end of the 1960s.

Departures

The 1967–1968 antisemitic campaign has a special status on the map of the Polish collective memory. The discussed events seem the only wave of Polish violence against Jews about which Poles commonly know and whose antisemitic nature they do not question. This is because the contemporary society views March 1968 through the prism of anti-communist

doxa – that is, as the activities carried out by hated communist authorities, with which the Polish collective “us” had nothing in common. Thus, March 1968 enables one to symbolically cleanse the Polish community of antisemitism by projecting this attitude en masse on the communists, with the latter previously defined as strangers who violently imposed inherently non-Polish values on Poland’s territory. The images that keep shaping the memory of March 1968 include the violence inflicted by the state’s repressive organizations, namely Citizens’ Militia and voluntary military groups, the politicians’ speeches at rallies and in the media, and the faces of young people organizing themselves at the grassroots level to demonstrate their opposition to the decision-makers (Dębska, 2008; Kędzierska, 1998). Thus, the dominant imagery of March 1968 lacks a representation of the grassroots, spontaneous, neighborhood antisemitism. If we perceive those events as the authorities’ planned mobilization of antisemitic cultural patterns for political purposes, we must not stop at admitting the political orientation of those authorities. Instead, we need to determine how the patterns became activated, how they manifested themselves, and why referring to them proved so effective.

Today, the memory of March 1968 fulfills significant functions in the sphere of generating national myths and narratives but fails to correspond with the researchers’ findings or Polish Jews’ testimonies. The month in question – which resulted in expelling approximately fifteen thousand people of Jewish descent from Poland (Starnawski, 2016, pp. 160–161) – was the culmination of a process lasting from the 1940s, not a one-time occurrence as presented nowadays. The event formed the third emigration wave of Holocaust survivors within only twenty years of communist Poland’s existence.

The first wave took place in the years 1945–1951 (Grabski & Berendt, 2003, pp. 53–72). Since 1944, the Polish anti-communist underground had waged a civil war guided, among others, by the logic of *żydokomuna* (“Jewish communism”). Jews were murdered based on the assumption that they certainly “collaborated” with the Red Army and then with the new Polish authorities (Łobuszewski & Krajewski, 1994; Grabski & Berendt, 2003, pp. 78–84; Bańkowska, 2005; Gross, 2007, pp. 75–93; Łątka, 2008; Cała, 2014; Zawadzka, 2016; Canin, 2019; Kwiek, 2021). In 1945, Poles effected Jewish pogroms in Rzeszów, Chełm, and Krakow, and a year later in Parczew and Kielce. Simultaneously, the few Holocaust survivors returning to their towns and villages quickly realized that they were no longer welcome, as locals had already occupied their houses and plundered their property. Additionally, the returning Jews remembered who had contributed to the Jewish demise during the war (Bikont, 2004;

Kwiek, 2021). The locals clearly implied that the Jews could never feel safe again in their places of residence (Tryczyk, 2015, 2020). In the same period, the emerging State of Israel encouraged the departure of prewar members of Zionist organizations, along with those who did not cherish the idea of a Jewish state but realized that the Polish authorities – despite their promises – remained unable to guarantee life free of antisemitism, or even to ensure basic security (Grabski & Berendt, 2003; Hurwic-Nowakowska, 1996). Thus, although the exact numbers differ, scholars tend to estimate that approximately 150 thousand people left Poland in the years 1945–1950 (Cała et al., 2000).

The second emigration wave took place in the years 1956–1959. During the period commonly referred to as “the Thaw” following Joseph Stalin’s death and Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech, communists put the blame for Stalinism on Jews. The Communist Party, its leaders, and the party-controlled media more or less openly communicated that investigation violence, convictions without trials, censorship, and terror had ensued because Jews had used communism as a cover for introducing their own order, safeguarding their own interests, and taking vengeance on Poles. Consequently, the authorities presented de-Stalinization as getting rid of Jews and thus beginning the Polish way to socialism. The resulting violence against Jews made approximately fifty thousand people leave Poland in that period (Węgrzyn, 2016).

The third wave happened in the abovementioned period of 1967–1968, when the term “Zionism” became a catchword in Poland (Głowiński, 1991; Osęka, 1999). Immediately after the Six-Day War, the Polish government forced representatives of Jewish organizations and other important persons in the Jewish circles to condemn Israel (Grynberg, 2018; Mieszczanek, 1989). Those who refused to issue relevant public statements lost their jobs. Simultaneously, student protests against the censorship of the press and performances were intensifying. To crush the opposition, the government combined the two factors, accusing the protesters of disloyalty toward Poland and acting to its detriment because of their Zionism, and claiming that Zionists should leave the country. Thus, internationalism – the fight with the alleged Jewish nationalism within the Polish opposition – served as the pretext for a nationalist purge (Tych, 1999). Jews were expelled from the Communist Party and universities, lost jobs, and suffered social isolation. This obviously deprived them of financial means, homes, and friends. Naturally, the Polish state chose not to stop the grassroots wave of violence initiated by the top-down purge because it was favorable to the authorities. Jews received anonymous letters with threats, found Stars of David drawn

on their doors and feces on their doormats, and – typically at night – answered phone calls with antisemitic insults or jokes. All that communist Poland offered Jews was an emigration permission in return for renouncing their Polish citizenship. When they agreed, Poles came to take their belongings and seize their homes – a ghastly echo of the events from just twenty years before.

Assimilation, emancipation, and illusion

To understand the essence of the Zionism charge against the Jews who survived in Poland until 1968, we must consider the biographies and self-identifications of the “accused.” Before the Second World War, many of them were members of communist organizations which waged an ideological war with both the Bund and Zionists. Their values frequently made them suffer ostracism in traditional Jewish families and shtetls. After the war, those people tended to perceive their Jewishness as a reminiscence of the past rather than a present aspect of their lives, and as the need to cultivate the memory of their murdered families. Many had a positive attitude toward the communist system and that was precisely the reason why they refused to leave and build the State of Israel. Instead, they wanted to build Poland – a different Poland than the one they had painfully experienced, full of economic and nationality-based inequalities. This was what they had fought and waited for. Naturally, they did maintain contact with their relatives and friends who emigrated, and sometimes paid visits abroad, Israel included – but they did not view Israel as their home.

In those people’s lives, views, and self-identifications, Jewishness was like a thread which had never broken but often remained invisible. Anyone who pulled it out to light usually had antisemitic motivations, and those willing to break it were mostly their comrades, who demanded proof of true Polishness in an antisemitic act of dominance. In 1967, the Zionism charge became yet another variety of that patriotic agenda. Many of the Jews in question were internationalists in the universalist sense of prewar activism. Thus, they treated the state as a political entity and the nation as an ideological one. To them, neither served as a sacred idea or a community of choice; instead, they viewed both as realities to encounter, question, and transform. In the individual sphere, such Jews entered mixed marriages and established social and private relations – including friendships – with non-Jews. In the collective sphere, they formulated demands for communities which transgressed the political, national, and religious boundaries. Those were the communities they fought for, which even

the contemporary Polish left wing views as their cardinal sin. In short, these Jews prioritized the community of the working class, of the oppressed, and of interest – a community of thought formed around a vision for the future – over the state community.

Another group of Jews in postwar Poland included those devoted to the Yiddish culture – its creators, archivists, and promoters. They wished to save that legacy from oblivion, although they realized that the Holocaust had thwarted the survival of Yiddish as a living language. Still, even those Jews – who sometimes used Yiddish at home or in conversations with one another – had assimilated. Actually, the claim that the Jews who stayed in Poland until 1968 had assimilated is a vast understatement (Auerbach, 2013). This category entails a risk of evoking erroneous associations with the nineteenth-century assimilation, which included religious conversion and erasure of any evidence of one's Jewish ancestors (Cała, 1989; Datner, 2007; Hałas, 2007; Landau-Czajka, 2006). Subordination to a dominant culture and its inherent antisemitism differs from the process of redefining the dominant culture to make it incorporate new narratives of the past and new models of the present. A more apt term for the latter process is emancipation.

Polish communities typically viewed assimilation as rejection of visible orthodoxy and progressive Polonization, defining the latter as everyday use of the Polish language and immersion in Polish culture – understood in the nationalist sense, as non-Jewish culture (Datner, 2007). The Bund and Zionism brought new models of Jewish life. Scholars sometimes term these two movements diaspora nationalisms (Gellner, 1991), but the application of this name to the Bund's idea of *doikayt* ("being local") still provokes disputes. The Bund's ideology had no links to any specific territory and actually questioned the necessity of obtaining one to build Jewish autonomy. When the ideas of communism, Bundism, and Zionism were only developing, Central and Eastern Europe already featured territories perceived as Jewish: shtetls, Jewish districts, and the Pale of Settlement, established in 1791 by Catherine the Great. Still, those were poverty ghettos or closed zones, not autonomous areas with self-government. Incorporating them into the national independence project seems impossible because they resulted from racial and class ghettoization – that is, from oppression instead of its abolition. Both assimilation and emancipation moved *away from* the ghetto, not *toward* the ghetto. However, while assimilation internalized the perception of the ghetto as a worse reality which one needed to abandon at all costs, emancipation attempted to abolish the division into the ghetto and non-ghetto, and to dismantle the symbolic and material foundations for that division. On the declarative level, thus defined emancipation

appeared in Jewish communism, which was Jewish in a double sense: by gathering communist Jews and by putting forward an individual and collective proposal for Jews.

Assimilation carries ambivalent connotations because it constitutes an oppressive requirement imposed by the dominant group and, simultaneously, a strategy of leaving the ghetto. Perceived solely as oppression, assimilation cannot succeed – and yet its frame, shape, and form derive from the circumstances beyond the assimilating people's control. Assimilation always proceeds *toward* something, which makes it rely on the division into a dominant group and a subordinate one. The process in question originates from a promise that one can move upward and join the dominant group: "If you pass the test and become like us, you will obtain the status of a first-class citizen." However, this promise remains impossible to fulfill, as described by Jean Améry (1980, 2019) and Artur Sandauer (1963). In permitting certain forms of emancipation, assimilation increases the individual causative power, but this is not a cost-free or violence-free process. Jewish communism altered and shifted the discussed ambivalence. The Jews who decided to stay in Poland after the war indeed assimilated because they abandoned – either at that moment or much earlier – their separate, Jewish identity. Polish was their first language, and the political community served as their community of choice. On the other hand, those Jews radically reformulated the frame of the culture toward which they were supposed to assimilate. Emancipation requires change from everyone; assimilation puts pressure only on the assimilating group.

The dominant culture slightly resembles the Great Other from psychoanalytic theories: even if nobody in the world embodies that concept in its pure form, it still defines the horizon of requirements and aspirations. The dominant culture provides the normativity which summons individuals and groups to undertake practices that imitate and reinforce that culture. Assimilation succumbs to this call without questioning the demand to make such an effort. Emancipation, however, would try to redefine the horizon. In 1945, the Jewish communists believed that they reformulated the rules of the game instead of succumbing to their old version. Unfortunately, the boundary between assimilation and emancipation was becoming increasingly blurred. Thus, a brief summary of the twentieth-century history of Jewish communism in Poland could read as follows: "We wanted emancipation, and they forced us to assimilate." March 1968 marked a triumphant note of that coercion.

Here begins another tension: the one between old and new cultural patterns. We may perceive the years 1954–1956 as a failed attempt at implementing the new models of community, common good, and good life – models free from antisemitism, nationalisms, and

the racial dimension. In such a framework, the events that followed meant that those new models had lost to nationalist ones, which were much stronger and better rooted, and had a long history in Poland. The old patterns blasted the new frames because the latter lacked sufficient foundation. If we interpret Polish Stalinism as a period of revolutionary terror aimed at stabilizing those changes, then it proved ineffective.

One important factor in the postwar emancipation of Jews was that Poland granted them equal rights on the labor market for the first time in the country's history. In other words, Jews could finally undertake all professions and work in all public services. The law imposed a top-down ban on discrimination, which first appeared in the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (the PKWN Manifesto), proclaimed on July 22, 1944. Then, the Small Constitution of February 19, 1947 recognized and sealed that equality (Aleksiun, 2002; Berendt, 2009; Cała, 2014; Datner, 2016; Grabski & Berendt, 2003). This marked a structural change which opened new paths in the lives of individuals. The change had two motivations: combating antisemitism and pursuing belated modernity, which finally entered the state's economy for good. Planned economy based on urbanization and modernized industry required new professional specializations. The demand streamlined the paths of social advancement by providing common access to free education – including university studies – and rural to urban migration. Although the ideological foundation for the change was egalitarianism, the existing cultural capitals and related distinctions still played a practical role. Children from the old intelligentsia families chose studies which facilitated their future involvement in politics, the media, and culture. In so doing, they filled in the niches typical of their parents' milieu. By contrast, children from socially advancing families formed the new technical intelligentsia – the engineering staff necessary to lead the country through industrialization.

Where were Jews in all this? First and foremost, the Jewish circles showed a clear overrepresentation of high cultural capitals in the sense of Bourdieu's *overselection* (Bourdieu, 2005). In other words, only high economic and cultural capitals entailed a relatively high chance to survive the Holocaust. That was why the Jews who stayed in Poland after the war no longer reflected the social diversity of the pre-1939 Jewish minority in demographic terms. Their political diversity vanished too, because escaping eastward offered the highest chance of survival, and most refugees were communists and their families. Second, anyone who chose not to leave Poland immediately after the war obviously still had some hopes for that country.

In a communist country, social mobility carries ambivalence similar to that inherent in assimilation. After all, social advancement hinders revolution: although modernization and urbanization do necessitate class mobility, advancement fails to abolish the division of society into classes. On the contrary, social hierarchy generates class-related ambitions and aspirations just like assimilation does: “If you make effort, you can climb up the ladder.” Thus, the social advancement paths broaden, but the hierarchy of classes remains. Indeed, communist Poland was seething with the tension between the revolution’s project of a classless society and the advancement society from the very beginning. The class abolition project ultimately went out of date toward the end of the 1960s, suffering the fate of the plans for Jewish emancipation in a spirit of communist universalism. The explicit victory of the advancement model intertwined with subjecting Jews to a test for observing the old patterns of Polish culture (Żukowski, 2011). Both phenomena showed similar dynamics: communism was inevitably fading out in the Polish People’s Republic.

The sociologists who study the Jewish community in the USA tend to agree on one aspect: after the Second World War, the country provided American Jews with access to classes and circles previously reserved for White people, but under certain conditions (Brodkin, 1998; Goldstein, 2006; Kranson, 2017; Moore, 1988). Those included consent to the status quo of liberal democracy, no left-wing excesses, assuming the lifestyle and aspirations of the White middle class, and the right to cultivate moderate cultural separation but without religious orthodoxy. In Poland, the situation adopted an analogous course: the state offered Jews new living conditions, incomparably better than those before the war, but on certain terms. Those included consent to the socialist status quo, the party’s control over Jewish organizations, and the possibility to maintain separate religion and tradition in the private sphere – that is, at home and in Jewish communities.

To make the picture of Jewish life before March 1968 more comprehensive, let me mention the typical transformations that took place in subsequent decades of PRL’s existence, affecting cultural consumption, lifestyles, trends, and peer group preferences. Naturally, it was the youth that spread those changes, and certain young people had Jewish roots. Some of them remained unaware because their parents concealed Jewishness to prevent their children from inheriting the stigma and the resulting threats. Other young people knew about their Jewish roots, but – according to the message at home – did not treat Jewishness as a distinctive feature. Yet others participated in the activities offered by Jewish institutions, such as lectures, sports classes, summer camps, trips, parties, or holiday celebra-

tions – whether by their own choice or encouraged by parents. The main organizer of such events was the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKŻ): a secular, socialist entity with a network of clubs all over the country. The clubs allowed young people to meet others and form Jewish peer groups, but those remained immersed in the contemporary culture. Śliwki and Następcy Tronów, the big-beat (meaning “rock-and-roll”) bands formed at the TSKŻ, served as a good example of this phenomenon. In short, rather than intentionally cultivating the Jewish identity, TSKŻ provided a space where young Jews from each region could socialize, while the old ones could talk, recollect the past, and, importantly, receive social and financial aid.

Such is the simplified picture regarding the synergy of Jewish assimilation and emancipation in postwar socialism. The synergy comprised several elements: (1) the universalist claim for equality and the left-wing values; (2) the feeling of forming a worldview, cultural, and linguistic community, and a community of the past and experiences with prewar and war companions – instead of pursuing a separate identity; (3) Jewishness as a thread connecting one with the past and as the need to cultivate the memory of Holocaust victims; (4) the awareness of Polish antisemitism and the fear of its causative power, resulting from experience; (5) the exceptionally low number of Jewish families due to the Holocaust and migration; (6) non-Zionism rather than anti-Zionism: “This is our homeland and we pursue a good life here because we would feel strangers elsewhere”; (7) participation in Polish culture and its transformations; and (8) susceptibility to the consumption and lifestyle patterns, just like among non-Jews. Such was the post-1945 Jewishness – the new, experimental Jewishness; after all, socialism was an experiment too. With the exception of kibbutzniks (kibbutz members), nobody had implemented socialism in Poland before or used it to pursue opportunities for a good life.

March 1968

If we recognize the Jewish community’s experience as an element of Polish history, including the history of Polish communism, we need to alter the March 1968 narrative proposed by the contemporary historical politics. My thesis is that the “Polish way to socialism” – the famous phrase used by the party’s new leader, Władysław Gomułka, immediately after Stalinism to define the direction of changes – destroyed Jewish communism. March 1968 delivered the fatal blow to the circles of secular, communist Jewish internationalists from

Poland. Until 1968, the vision of the community pursued by those circles remained plausible. Shaped by the communist ethos, the Jewish communists acted for the benefit of a community broader than the Jewish one. That attitude formed part of their emancipation, which they chose voluntarily and often in contradiction with their descent. In 1968, their right to choose proved an illusion: the community they treated like their own threw them out. The environment once again stigmatized them as Jews, thus citing a factor which was not to matter anymore. In so doing, the community sent a clear message: "We still perceive you as strangers; this has never changed. You do not belong here." Thus, March 1968 meant a collapse of a general idea, but the rubble fell specifically on Jews. In 1968, Jews paid the price for the demise of the communist project in Poland.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Jews left Poland as a result of top-down and grassroots antisemitism. Only a handful remained. Estimations are far from precise, but scholars usually mention six to eight thousand people (Cała & Datner-Śpiewak, 1997, p. 176). Some chose internal emigration, while others deeply hid their Jewishness. Until that time, most of those Jews had either approved of communism or at least partially trusted its ideals. They typically cherished the ethos of undertaking joint action in their environment – in their districts, party units, cooperatives, workplaces, and schools, or in their international contacts. Activism was their identity asset, which they also instilled in their children. However, many of those children lost all their hopes for communism and turned into its opponents. And so the similar model came into play, albeit filled with different content: the intelligentsia oppositionists repressed by the authorities in 1968 were young people brought up in communist homes and socialized in communist organizations. Immersed in the ethos of their parents' milieu, they needed a new identification formula which would match their opposition against the existing state of affairs.

Many Jews from urban intelligentsia homes helped build the young opposition, which temporarily provided them with a new community – political, social, and moral (Blumsztajn, 2018; Lityński, 2021; Matyjaszek & Smolar, 2018; Naszkowska, 2019; Toruńczyk, 2018). Nevertheless, some felt they had an increasing problem which resisted attempts to ignore it. Let me quote fragments of two interviews which aptly illustrate the dilemma in question:

First, [the opposition's Catholicism] was not that prominent. Second, the Church evoked entirely different associations than it does [...] today. And third, the division back then was simple: for communism or against communism. [...] Besides, the Church did – I'm sorry to say this – [...] many great things to support the opposition's activity. [...] So

the Church didn't put me off, except that it never really attracted me eschatologically. [...] There was one telling episode in my life, kind of symbolic. It happened on the common of the Tenth Anniversary Stadium during a mass [said by the pope]. I was there with [anonymized name]. At one moment, the homily began. People came to listen to what he [the pope] would say, alluding to political affairs and so on. And then those other things [the Mass] began. So I said to [anonymized name], "Let's go." We were sitting in the stadium bleachers. And [anonymized name] said, "No, I'll stay." So I got up alone. It was crowded like a tram during peak hours. I climbed to the top of the stadium and began to descend on the other side, along some stairs, pushing my way through the thick crowd. And just as I was in the middle of all that sea of people, there was the Elevation of course.

Like the command "down!"

Yes, the holiest "down!" And imagine me standing there like... And I stood the whole time. The only guy standing up in the sea of kneeling people. I felt... Well, the pressure was incredible. But I thought, "I won't fucking kneel down. Why should I?" (Interview 1)

I have never been an activist, but I used to pass or hide some underground publications. I also translated books for underground publishers. But I never had a feeling that they would treat me or other Jews as... as equal citizens. I didn't want to attend the meetings held in churches. I saw that many people got baptized then. To me, it seemed a false gesture. Also, some antisemitic threads appeared within "Solidarity" itself. [...] I remember an image on television, when they were broadcasting the strike in the Gdańsk shipyard. Everyone was kneeling [laughs]. And I remember I said to my partner, who later became my husband, "Luckily I work in a publishing house, not in the shipyard" [laughs]. Just imagine me standing up among that kneeling crowd. Such was the reflection I had. And of course I was a "Solidarity" member in [anonymized name], where we worked, and those meetings sometimes had a perceptible antisemitic and clerical atmosphere, in the negative sense.

What did they say there?

Well, they said that something was too soaked with Jews. Those words kept recurring. It was hard to free yourself from this. [...]

After Popiełuszko's death, someone said – was that Glemp? I don't remember anymore – that nonbelievers or atheists killed him. [...] Something made me stay away and, practically from the beginning [...]. I reckoned that the Church would take a mile if given an inch. [...] But most people, including my own sister, thought that we should win that freedom first, and then we would see. And I agreed with that too. (Interview 37)

This very way, the opposition justified or underestimated antisemitism, or even failed to notice it at all, and then anointed the Catholic Church its symbolic leader and moral authority. Meanwhile, the Church has been the source of antisemitic propaganda for cen-

turies and played an important role in exacerbating the violence against Jews before and during the Second World War. Before the war, the Church remained the ideological giant, generating and spreading antisemitism. This continued after the war, although the Church partially lost its political institutionalization.

In 1977, Adam Michnik issued his book *Kościół, lewica, dialog* (English edition: *The Church and the Left*), which became a foundation work for the opposition. The book first summarizes the original conviction held by Michnik and his colleagues: the further from the Church, the higher the chance for lack of antisemitism and national chauvinism (Michnik, 1998). Then, the author takes the blame and attacks this very conviction. In short, he writes that the opposition had erred in its judgment because the real antisemites were the communists, while the Church became the space for openness and progress. Thus, the Church was the true ally and represented the opposition's important values which the latter had incorrectly associated with secularism and left wing. As Michnik was one of the opposition's leaders, his gesture considerably strengthened the Church's authority in that milieu. Combined with the "March 1968 argument" that the real antisemites were the communists, not the Church, the declaration effectively silenced the opponents.

In the world, the end of the 1960s brought important changes within Catholicism due to the Second Vatican Council. Polish bishops remained obstructive to those changes (Obirek, 2022), but the Council's decisions did influence a part of the secular Catholic circles in Poland. Gathered around the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK), the milieu in question adopted the Council's ecumenical spirit and spearheaded interest in the Jewish affairs. In time, the initiative evolved into the process we currently call the revival of Jewish culture in Poland (Gruber, 2004; Lehrer, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2022). Symbolically, the revival started at cemeteries: KIK began to organize the cleaning of Jewish necropolises across the country. We must realize that the Holocaust and then the subsequent waves of Jewish emigration also killed a vast part of the Jewish culture, including material one. Nobody visited or tended Jewish cemeteries anymore. Local residents turned many such places into scrapheaps, garbage dumps, or carousal sites. Moved by devastated graves, the KIK's members invited their sympathizers to tidy places like the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Then, they organized Jewish Culture Weeks – in the 1970s, those were most likely the first projects after March 1968 that picked up the Jewish thread in public. Those events broke the silence that had fallen after expelling Jews – a silence previously broken only by bulldozers used in the early 1970s to destroy some Jewish cemeteries and memorials of Holocaust victims.

In 1978, Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II. Although the dominant Polish discourse presents him as the patron of the dialog between Christianity and Judaism, his pontificate actually meant a regression in relation to the Second Vatican Council's decisions. The cardinals elected Wojtyła as part of a double political strategy: to support the fight against the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War and the fight against liberation theology in Latin America. John Paul II hindered the changes initiated by Pope John XXIII; after Wojtyła's election, the Church's apparent opening to Jews actually meant enclosing the "admissible" Jewishness in a religious formula. Thus, ecumenism – together with the conditionally pardoned Jewishness – applied to Judaism. The question remained how such attitude related to the real Jewishness in Poland, to various Jewish practices and identities, to the anti-religious stance of many Polish Jews at the time, to the fact that some of them did not even have a religious past, to Poles' perception of Jewishness, and – finally – to antisemitism and its fuel: the "Jewish communism" myth, still sustained by the Church.

Rather than applying to real Jews, the ecumenical formula encompassed a certain representation, which the Polish Church of the time needed to build its own image. The representation in question soon received support from the abovementioned revival: the new formula of Jewish identity, this time defined by difference (Gebert et al., 2009; Krajewski, 2020, 2023; Reszke, 2013). The Jewish milieu drew its spirituality from the Torah and reached for American Jews' rituals to seek difference. The new Jewish institutions – such as foundations, kindergartens, schools, and communities – made difference their foundation. The new model of Polish Jews' identity, which was being born at the time, soon became compatible with the process taking place in the Church, in the opposition, and in the culture of the 1970s.

To the anti-communist opposition, whose bond with the Church was becoming stronger, the above profile of the Jewish revival emerged just in time. Thus proceeding revival allowed the opposition to merge the positive attitude toward Jews with the Polish–Catholic identity without any revision of the latter. Undertaking a revision would inevitably confront one with the fact that inflicting and simultaneously ignoring the antisemitic violence form an inherent part of the Polishness formula. The refusal to carry out such revision permeates the opposition's foundation texts by Adam Michnik (Michnik, 1998), Władysław Bartoszewski (Bartoszewski & Lewinówna, 1966), Jan Błoński (Błoński, 1987), and Aleksander Smolar (Smolar, 1986). Their authors attempt to include anti-antisemitism in the intellectual norm proper for educated people, but without disturbing the status quo. This explains their risky theses that Polish antisemitism did exist but ultimately remained harmless, and that the (German)

homicidal antisemitism that came next made even antisemites help Jews in Poland out of compassion and moral fear. Although these publications still enjoy the reputation of breakthrough texts in the Polish intellectual milieu, they actually pay certain homage to the old patterns of Polish culture. The change they bring is that their authors do admit the existence of Polish antisemitism, take the blame, and state that they have understood their mistakes. But then, drawing credence from such declarations, they retell the Polish past anew – and repeat once again that Poles ultimately passed the moral test in their relations to Jews.

Naturally, a claim that there was no religious Jewishness in Poland from the 1940s to the 1970s would be a misstatement. Jewish communities did exist, and there were synagogues in several cities. However, the dominant character of that Jewishness differed from the one brought by the Jewish revival: religiousness remained dispersed and inconsistent, and tended to follow the logic of practice rather than the rules of faith. This manifested itself in many individual ways, including the relatively frequent attitude “I go the synagogue once a year, at Yom Kippur” – which Jewish nonbelievers also did quite often. Importantly, synagogues, headquarters of Jewish communities and TSKŻ clubs, and Jewish canteens typically operated in close proximity – in the same building or several neighboring buildings. Thus, attending that location sometimes expressed the need for being among Jews rather than for religiousness. Numerous texts of culture devoted to American Jewishness focus on the figure of the rabbi as a peculiar psychotherapist and coach. In pre-1968 Poland, the synagogue fulfilled a slightly different social function, which stemmed from the post-Holocaust nature of the place and the community. For example, participation in Jewish celebrations did not necessarily mean practicing Judaism, pursuing moral guidelines, or seeking emotional support. Instead, visits to the synagogue frequently expressed one’s desire to sustain the thread connecting them with the Jewish world, especially with the past and with the Holocaust victims (Datner, 2023, pp. 226–227; Starnawski, 2016, pp. 202–203, 241–247).

The revival

On the Jewish side, the revival began with an emancipatory gesture which Stanisław Krajewski calls de-assimilation (Krajewski, 2023). After nearly a decade of silence about March 1968, the people from the opposition milieu who had experienced stigma and violence in that fateful time discovered the thread that connected them with one another. They had a mutual experience and felt the need to express it in a safe space, where nobody would underestimate their

feelings or conclude that they were exaggerating. Such perception of one's Jewishness – as trauma and separate identity – coincided with broader social phenomena. First, Poland faced the wave of interest in humanistic psychology, spirituality forms which offered an alternative to Christianity – such as mysticism of the Far East – and the psychological body-work techniques. That direction of spiritual search facilitated the Polish Jews' turn toward Judaism. Second, the 1970s became the period when the cultural changes on both sides of the Iron Curtain finally consolidated. New lifestyles gained momentum, this time finding expression in forms of consumption and individual relationships. The center of gravity for individual identities definitely moved from the various forms of collective life to the private sphere.

The characteristic combination of emerging phenomena in the 1970s – identity politics, therapeutic culture, and spiritual quest – generated conditions which helped shape a new formula of Jewishness. The necessary know-how initially came mainly from the USA: young Polish Jews who spoke English and had passports and money visited their relatives in the West. There, they learned Jewish celebrations, synagogue behavior, and everyday life defined by either orthodox or liberal Jewishness, practiced as a separate religion, tradition, and lifestyle. Then, they used to return with books, textbooks, memories of conversations, and the whole knowledge they sought directly or derived from observation.

Shortly thereafter, the exchange became bidirectional. Driven by the increasing trend of seeking their Eastern European roots, Jews from the USA began to visit Poland (*Polish Jews*, 1977). Others who arrived were Western supporters and researchers of "Solidarity," which they perceived as a grassroots and effective – and hence phenomenal – working class movement (Ost, 2007; Touraine, 1989). Some of them were Jews too, and their interest in working class movements stemmed from their upbringing in left-wing Jewish families in America. Upon returning home, both groups told their friends about a small yet growing milieu of Polish people seeking a formula for their Jewishness, which they had only recently started to cultivate. American Jewish foundations and private donors responded to that need, motivated by their ambition to revive Jewish communities. The experts and funds they sent to Poland largely contributed to workshops on Jewish religion and customs organized in several Polish cities, the establishment of a Jewish kindergarten and school in Warsaw, and visits by rabbis from Israel and the USA. Once in Poland, the rabbis attended social and semi-private meetings, where they laid the foundations for identities and congregations which remained new to Polish Jews at the time.

The new Jewishness originated from the discourse of difference. In the Jewish community, such movement relies on the principles of identity politics. In the broader perspec-

tive of Polish culture and its transformations, we can also speak of a cultural politics which meets a specifically Polish demand. Certain Jewish revival projects – especially Jewish culture festivals – make Jews an esthetic and exotic phenomenon, turning the difference between Jews and non-Jews into an object of fascination and celebration. Poles attending such events acquire an identity of tolerant and open persons, while religious and cultural distance protects their sense of comfort and security defined by antisemitism. Jewishness reduced either to religiousness or to an esthetic and folk-like facade – one built from architecture, monuments, music, dance, cuisine, and customs – allows Poles to act as hosts who express friendly interest in the “Others” and participate in festivals to practice the morally right attitude of hospitality (Janicka & Żukowski, 2021).

In my opinion, the crowning event of the cultural politics known as the Jewish revival was the grand opening of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in 2013. The work on that project began already in 1993, and a huge part of the funds came from private American donors. A team of American experts supervised the nature, shape, and message of the monumental permanent exhibition (Matyjaszek & Polonsky, 2017; Szaniawska & Datner, 2015). Owing to their effort, the museum satisfies both the nostalgia-related needs of Jewish tourists from the West and the collective Polish ego. The Jewishness formula offered by the facility seamlessly merges with Polish culture without disturbing its antisemitic component or forcing any revision. Seen from this perspective, the Jewish revival can serve as a cultural procedure of determining a place for Jews. This majority-controlled process consists in shaping the allowed minority identities – namely those which retain the collective and individual Polish identity intact and reinforce it with a component of readiness for multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Besides forcing – often literally – many Jews to emigrate, March 1968 defined the permissible model of Jewish identity and the Jewish activity of those who stayed. Not all of them fit into the frame of Jewishness understood as a different identity, ethnicity, religion, and milieu. Many remained atheists, identified themselves as Poles or Poles of Jewish origin, and watched the Jewish revival with reserve. The new model of Jewishness, which I have attempted to outline in this article, became a cultural rather than quantitative phenomenon. Such Jewishness remains visible and recognizable, and those who embody and implement this model appear as representatives of the Jewish minority within the dominant culture –

and they do accept this role. Those who remain skeptical have no coherent alternative model at their disposal. After March 1968, the option of secular Jewishness rooted in the tradition of universalism and internationalism became impossible.

The Catholic Church was the first to start filling in the void left behind by March 1968. This produced a simple division: Poles equaled Catholicism, and Jews equaled Judaism. Importantly, Catholics had a chance to join the very first facilitators of post-March Judaism. Had they done so, they would have gained trust because the authority-enjoying opposition of the time provided them with moral and political legitimization among the big-city intelligentsia. After March 1968, the Jewish community completely collapsed – symbolically, materially, institutionally, and in terms of identity and visibility. The people connected with the Church proposed a new solution, and Jews initially remained too weak – both individually and collectively – to resist such a powerful leader. Only in time, and assisted by their Jewish friends, families, and Western donors, did they begin to fill in that model with their own content.

This permits at least two interpretations: (1) The anti-communist opposition walked hand in hand with the Church, and Jews realized the antisemitic component of Polish Catholicism, so the only formula they had at their disposal was a separate identity relying on the foundations provided by the Jewish revival. After March 1968, the opposition's alliance with the Church marked yet another blow to the Jewish community, which responded by seeking a separate path. (2) The Church became a Jewish revival co-facilitator because it needed that revival too. Equipped with authority by the previously secular, left-wing opposition, the Church seized a unique opportunity to shape Jewishness as it deemed fit. Thus, Jews once again received the role they had played before communism abolished that hierarchy: the role of guests. Unlike in the past, the Church chose to act as a good host and treat the guests better – but it still remained the host.

Regardless of how we interpret the causes, we can view this change within Jewishness as a shift from the politics of emancipation to the politics of life (Giddens, 2001). The change had its own dynamics and specificity, related mostly to antisemitism, but it also fitted in the broader political transformation and cultural trends. In 1988, sociologist Jerzy Szacki wrote: "To me, March 1968 ended the century of ideology in the Polish communist movement – at least of seriously perceived ideology, not one treated instrumentally. [...] In general, March served as the funeral of the communist ideology in Poland" (Szacki, 1988). The author means that communism gave way to opportunism, time-serving, and careerism. From his perspective, March 1968 triggered a generational change in the Communist Party: young politicians replaced

the old ones and introduced “techniques of power, manipulation, and propaganda” instead of communist values. However, the funeral bid farewell to more than one idea: March 1968 proved that internationalism and equality – including anti-antisemitism – gained no ground. The old order won, and the authorities that identified themselves as communist did not hesitate to reach for it either. Thus, we can perceive March 1968 as a victory of Polish culture over communism. And the canons and identity patterns that this culture offers include difference from the Jew as a constitutive component of Polishness. In other words, Polish culture entails Polish nationalism with racist and religious connotations. This brings us back to assimilation, making it both required and impossible. In the past, emancipation backed by communist universalism offered a possibility to break this stalemate. Today, the question remains what emancipation potential rests within the Jewishness proposed by the Jewish revival.

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Another Death of Universalism, or How Communist Poland Destroyed Jewish Communism

The dominant Polish historiography presents the 1967–1968 state antisemitic campaign, which led to the exile of approximately fifteen thousand Jewish people from Poland, as an isolated event. Meanwhile, it was the culmination of a process lasting from the 1940s. After waves of Holocaust survivors' emigration in 1946–1948 and 1956–1960, the period commonly known as the 1968 Polish political crisis constituted the third such wave in only twenty-year-old existence of the Polish People's Republic. The ones leaving included people who had initially made a conscious decision to stay in Poland, which often proved unacceptable for the family and friends. Such decisions stemmed from hopes pinned on the communist ideal of equality and the engagement in the construction of a social justice system. March 1968 not only forced many of those people to emigrate but also defined the acceptable models of Jewish identity and activity for the ones who stayed. Referring to both institutionalized and communal Jewish life in post-1968 Poland, Zawadzka argues that the March events meant the end of a leftist, secular, universalist Jewish identity rooted in the idea of emancipation. By expelling Jewish comrades during that time, the Polish People's Republic created space for identity politics, which was simultaneously becoming more and more important on the other side of the Iron Curtain. After March 1968, Jewishness and other minority identities defined outside the framework of a particular, ethnic, cultural, or religious identity proved impossible.

Keywords:

March 1968; antisemitism; Jewish communism; Jewish revival; Jewish history; universalism

Kolejna śmierć uniwersalizmu. Jak PRL zniszczył żydowski komunizm

W dominującej polskiej historiografii państwowa kampania antysemicka z lat 1967–1968, która doprowadziła do wygnania z Polski około 15 tysięcy osób o żydowskich korzeniach, przedstawiana jest jako odosobnione wydarzenie. Tymczasem była to kulminacja pewnego procesu, który trwał od lat 40. XX wieku. Po falach emigracji ocalałych z Holocaustu w latach 1946–1948 i 1956–1960 okres powszechnie nazywany „Marcem 1968” był trzecią taką falą

w ciągu zaledwie dwudziestu lat istnienia PRL. Wyjeżdżali wówczas ludzie, którzy początkowo podjęli świadomą, często nieakceptowaną przez rodziny i znajomych decyzję o pozostaniu w Polsce, pokładając nadzieję w komunistycznej idei równouprawnienia i angażując się w budowę systemu sprawiedliwości społecznej. „Marzec” nie tylko wymusił emigrację wielu z nich, ale także zdefiniował akceptowalny model żydowskiej tożsamości i żydowskiej aktywności dla tych, którzy pozostali. Odnosząc się zarówno do zinstytucjonalizowanego, jak i wspólnotowego życia żydowskiego w Polsce po 1968 roku, autorka dowodzi, że wydarzenia Marca 1968 oznaczały koniec lewicowej, świeckiej, uniwersalistycznej tożsamości żydowskiej zakorzenionej w idei emancypacji. Pozbywając się żydowskich towarzyszy, PRL zrobił wówczas miejsce dla polityki tożsamości, w tym samym okresie zyskującej na znaczeniu po drugiej stronie żelaznej kurtyny. Żydowskość – a wraz z nią inne tożsamości mniejszościowe – definiowana inaczej niż tożsamość partykularna, etniczna, kulturowa czy religijna nie była już po Marcu możliwa.

Słowa kluczowe:

Marzec 1968; antysemityzm; żydowski komunizm; żydowskie odrodzenie; historia Żydów; uniwersalizm

Note:

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