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Why we stayed: Polish Jews' reasons for remaining in Poland during two waves of postwar emigration

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Abstract

Although Poland's Jewish presence had been widely considered to be near-obsolete in 1980s, since the 1990s a small but visible revival of Polish-Jewish life has been taking place as many Polish Jews have opened up about and embraced their origins. By interviewing five Polish Holocaust survivors who never left their country of origin, I attempted to answer the question of why they remained while many others fled.

Keywords

Poland, Jews, 1968 events in Poland, communism, Holocaust, antisemitism, emigration, oral history



Introduction

Of the more than three and a half million Polish Jews [before the Second World War], about five thousand are left. They are mostly old, lonely, ill people. The average age of the members of the Jewish communities is seventy. There are no children or young people: there is no middle generation. The fates of the majority of these people have been both unusual and astoundingly varied. But they all share the consciousness that something is irrevocably coming to an end, which gives their lives a tragic dimension. "We are definitely the last," we heard more than once, and also from the very young. "Jews as a community, or even as a mini-community, will no longer exist in Poland. We are on the way out."¹

So wrote Polish journalist Małgorzata Niezabitowska in her 1986 book *Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland*. During the previous several years, Niezabitowska and her husband, photographer Tomasz Tomaszewski, had traveled across Poland, interviewing the last known Jews who had remained in the country after the most recent wave of Jewish emigration had taken place in 1968.

However, their dire predictions turned out to be excessively pessimistic. Antony Polonsky, a leading scholar of the history of the Jews of Poland, writes that presently, although Poland's Jewish community "is small, it has shown remarkable dynamism since 1989."² In Polonsky's words,

according to Michael Schudrich, chief rabbi of Poland, there are at least 30,000–40,000 Jews in Poland. The number of people with some connection to the Jewish world is even larger. With the end of communism and the decline in hostility to Jews, more people have been willing to acknowledge their Jewish identity, while significant numbers of 'hidden children' were now told by their Christian foster-parents of their Jewish roots.³

Indeed, by all measures there is a Jewish revival in present-day Poland. Even if the estimates that Antony Polonsky cites are too optimistic, more cautious ones nonetheless mark a significant surge in Poland's Jewish population since the dire situation of the 1980s. The *American Jewish Yearbook* estimated Poland's Jewish community in 1979 at just 6,000.⁴ By 2008, however, Poland's Jewish population stood at 20,000 according to the *Yearbook*.⁵ The results of Polish censuses in recent decades provide

1 M. Niezabitowska, T. Tomaszewski, *Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland*, trans. W. Brand, H. Dobosiewicz, New York 1986, pp. 14–15.

2 A. Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia: Volume III – 1914 to 2008*, Portland–Oxford 2012, p. 813.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 M. Fine, M. Himmelfarb (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book 1979*, New York 1979, p. 256.

5 D. Singer, L. Grossman (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book 2008*, New York 2008, p. 108.

a more modest number of Poles self-identifying as Jewish, albeit an upward trend is also clearly visible: in the 2011 census, about 7,000 Polish citizens declared Jewish nationality,⁶ but that number more than doubled by 2021, exceeding 15,700.⁷

While 20,000, 30,000, or even 40,000 Jews represent a tiny fraction of Poland's population of 38 million, this is a remarkable increase from the population of 5,000 in 1980. Unlike in neighboring Germany, where the large growth in the Jewish population since 1991 has been primarily the result of immigration from the former Soviet Union,⁸ in Poland the growth of the Jewish community is almost exclusively due to growing numbers of formerly closeted Jews publicly embracing their origins.⁹

These include individuals whom Polonsky refers to as 'hidden children.' Some Jewish children were smuggled out of ghettos during the German occupation and brought up by Christian families or raised in convents and orphanages. According to historian and Holocaust survivor Szymon Datner, in Warsaw alone 600 Jewish children survived the Holocaust in this way.¹⁰ Many of these children have never learned about their true origins or did so as adults.

Luisa Passerini writes "oral sources refer to and derive from a sphere which I have chosen to call subjectivity," which she defines as "an area of symbolic activity which includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects."¹¹ Subjectivity, she explains, "has the advantage of being a term sufficiently elastic to include both the aspects of spontaneous subjective being (*soggettività irriflessa*) contained and represented by attitude, behavior and language, as well as other forms of awareness (*consapevolezza*) such as the sense of identity, consciousness of oneself, and more considered forms of intellectual activity."¹²

Later in this article, we will see that a key element of my narrators' subjectivity is a strong sense of identification with Poland and with Polishness, a factor that undoubtedly contributed to their decision to stay in Poland, especially when they were adults and had greater control over their destinies.

6 *Jak w Polsce żyje się mniejszościom, zwłaszcza Żydom?*, 'Polityka,' 15 April 2018, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/spoleczenstwo/1744958,1,jak-w-polsce-zyje-sie-mniejszościom-zwlaszcza-zydom.read>; <https://www.ekai.pl/narodowy-spis-powszechny-jaka-czesc-mieszkancow-kraju-stanowia-polacy/> (accessed: 28.08.2023).

7 *Narodowy Spis Powszechny – jaką część mieszkańców kraju stanowią Polacy?*, eKai.pl (accessed: 11.04.2023).

8 For a detailed study of Jewish migration to Germany since the 1990s, see B. Dietz, U. Lebok, P. Polian, *The Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany*, 'International Migration,' vol. 40, no. 2, June 2002.

9 M. Dzierżanowski, *Chcę być Żydem*, 'Wprost,' 17 April 2013, <https://www.wprost.pl/tylko-u-nas/396074/chce-byc-zydem.html> (accessed: 4.05.2018).

10 S. Datner, *Las sprawiedliwych. Karta z dziejów ratownictwa Żydów w okupowanej Polsce*, Warszawa 1968, p. 70.

11 L. Passerini, *Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism*, 'History Workshop Journal,' vol. 8, no. 1, 1979, p. 85.

12 *Ibidem*.

In 2017 and 2018, I sought to answer the following questions based on my interviews with five Polish Jews who never left Poland who were born between 1932 and 1940 and who consequently are survivors of the Holocaust (and Soviet deportations). Why did they stay in Poland when so many other Jews had left? Even if they were not directly affected by persecution, why did they decide to go against the grain and stay in Poland?

Historians have noted that Polish-Jewish relations varied on a large scale during the German occupation of Poland, and this was often determined by geography, with positive relations prevalent in some regions of Poland, while negative ones dominated in others. There was much variation even within regions themselves.¹³ One preliminary conclusion is that after the war there were significant variations in Polish-Jewish relations as well. From interviews with my narrators, I have found that during the two waves of postwar Jewish emigration motivated by growing antisemitism, one in 1945–1946 and one in 1967–1968, there were certain areas of Poland – not only geographic regions, but also specific institutions and social milieus – where Polish Jews felt safe enough that they did not consider emigrating. I define antisemitism as either openly expressed, popular prejudice against Jews (which occurred in 1945–1946, taking the form of physical violence, which claimed hundreds of Jewish lives immediately after the war and, to a lesser extent, in 1967–1968) or official discrimination against them (in 1967–1968).

There were several waves of Jewish emigration in postwar Poland: between the end of the Second World War and 1946; following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948; in 1956–1960, after the thaw under Władysław Gomułka in post-Stalinist Poland led to a liberalization in emigration policies; and during the communist regime's antisemitic campaign in 1967–1968.¹⁴ However, I am most interested in the relationship between Polish-Jewish relations and the decision to emigrate or stay, and that relationship was most pronounced in the two waves under study.

Narrators' background

In selecting my narrators, I decided to focus on the last generation of Holocaust survivors. In part, this was because the generation of Polish Jews who survived

13 See, for example, J. Zimmerman, *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945*, Cambridge 2015. In his study, Zimmerman has found that the reactions of the Polish resistance to the Holocaust during the Second World War echoed local attitudes towards Jews. For example, in northeastern Poland, where antisemitism was already strong before the war and where in the summer of 1941 the local Polish population participated in bloody pogroms of Jews, the Polish underground was openly hostile to the Jews. By contrast, in the province of Volhynia (in present-day Ukraine), Poles and Jews faced two mortal enemies, German Nazis and Ukrainian nationalists, which led to largely positive relations between the two groups. In Volhynia, the Polish Home Army was protective of the Jews.

14 E. Węgrzyn, *Wyjeżdżamy! Wyjeżdżamy?! Alija gomułkowska 1956–1960*, Kraków–Budapeszt 2016. For an overview of the waves Jewish emigration from Poland between the end of the war and 1948 as well as the so called “Gomułka Aliyah” following the 1956 thaw, see: D. Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski, 1949–1989*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 49–65, 129–140.

the war will soon no longer be around to narrate their experiences. Indeed, in the five years since I conducted my interviews, two of my narrators have passed away. I also chose to focus on the generation of 'children of the Holocaust' because I was interested in exploring the hypothesis of whether there was a relationship between a Polish Jew's treatment by Polish Gentiles during the war and the likelihood that he or she would remain in Poland after 1968.

I was also interested in narrators with a strong sense of Jewish identity, as I was interested in the notion of Jewish life being strong in Poland and offering an alternative to the pessimistic predictions on the future of Polish Jewry offered by Małgorzata Niezabitowska more than thirty years earlier. All of my narrators were active in Jewish organizations at the time the interviews were conducted: Joanna Sobolewska, Katarzyna Meloch, and Zofia Radzikowska were all active in the Polish Association of Children of the Holocaust; Jan Woleński was a founding member of the revived B'nai B'rith Poland;¹⁵ and Zofia Radzikowska and Fryda Zawada participated in the activities of the Jewish Community Center in Kraków multiple times a week. These are all secular Jewish organizations and so membership and activity in them is not necessarily an indicator of one's relationship with Judaism; however, I did ask my narrators about their religious identity.

With the exception of Fryda Zawada, all of my narrators were, to an extent, public figures. Jan Woleński is a noted Polish philosopher and a commentator for Poland's biggest weekly, *Polityka*; Katarzyna Meloch and Joanna Sobolewska occasionally appear in the Polish media as representatives of the nation's Holocaust survivors; and Zofia Radzikowska was a member of Krakow's city council from 1994 to 2002.

My interviews lasted from about an hour and a half to three hours; they lasted as long as the narrators wanted to speak. My interview with Katarzyna Meloch, for instance, took place over two sessions. At one point in our first conversation, Meloch said that she was tired, but would like to continue after a good night's rest; thus, I immediately booked a hotel room to spend one more day in Warsaw where she lived.

One could reasonably ask if the titular question in my project – that of why specific persons 'chose to stay' when so many other Polish Jews did not – was a bit insensitive. Yet none of my narrators objected, as they all knew that they were a minority in having stayed in communist Poland after the 1967–1968 antisemitic purge. When I posed them this question, I encountered no protests.

All of my five narrators came from assimilated families. I use the definition of assimilation provided by the Jewish Virtual Library: "[T]he sociocultural process

15 B'nai B'rith is an international fraternal and philanthropic Jewish organization founded in the United States in 1843. The oldest continuously functioning Jewish organization in the world, the Polish branch of B'nai B'rith was founded in 1922 but dissolved in 1938 due to a law banning Masonic organizations in Poland. B'nai B'rith Poland was revived in 1938.

in which the sense and consciousness of association with one national and cultural group changes to identification with another such group, so that the merged individual or group may partially or totally lose its original national identity.”¹⁶

In the context of 20th century Poland, I understand assimilation as a sense of identification with Polish culture and the Polish nation and, to a lesser extent, with Roman Catholicism. Thus, for the sake of this research project, traits of assimilation include speaking Polish at home, self-declared identification with Polish culture, having numerous Gentile social contacts, and secularism or conversion to Catholicism or the adoption of nominally Christian symbols (such as having a Christmas tree at one's home), while characteristics of a lack of assimilation include speaking Yiddish rather than Polish, declaring feeling Jewish rather than Polish, having insular social contacts limited to one's ethnic group, and close ties to Judaism.¹⁷ Bożena Szaynok notes that after the Second World War, the scale of Jewish conversion to Catholicism in Poland is difficult to estimate due to the limited access to Church archives, although it does not appear large. She notes that between 1945 and 1951, a total of 116 and 68 Jews converted to Catholicism in Łódź and Katowice, respectively. Meanwhile, in the late 1940s, according to one study, almost 60 percent of Polish Jews claimed no religion. Some of these neophytes were motivated by both genuine religious conversion (in many cases, this involved Jews who survived the war by being hidden by Catholic families or nuns) and pragmatic concerns, such as marrying a Gentile.¹⁸

To a significant extent, this determined their survival during the Holocaust; indeed, assimilated Jews were more likely to have non-Jewish Polish friends who would be willing to hide them, while their knowledge of Polish language and customs made them more likely to successfully pass for Gentiles.

Katarzyna Meloch's (1932–2021) father was a historian, and her mother was a teacher of Greek and Latin who, after losing her job because of her communist views, later became a civil servant. She says of her parents:

They were part of the Polish intelligentsia that was of Jewish descent. They wanted to be two-hundred per cent Polish; not one-hundred per cent, but two-hundred per cent. In my home, I never heard anything about the Jews before the war, even though I was seven [when it broke out]. We never celebrated any [Jewish] holidays or traditions, and there was a tree in our house on Christmas.¹⁹

¹⁶ See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/assimilation> (accessed: 21.08.2023).

¹⁷ For a recent study on the assimilation practices and strategies of Polish Jews, see: E. Koźmińska-Frejlik, *Po Zagładzie: Praktyka asymilacyjne Ocalałych jako strategię zadomawiania się w Polsce (1944/45–1950)*, Warszawa 2022.

¹⁸ B. Szaynok, *Konwersje (na katolicyzm) Żydów w Polsce po Zagładzie (1944–1950)*, in A. Kaźmierczyk, A. Maślak-Maciejewska (eds.), *Żydzi polscy w oczach historyków. Tom dedykowany pamięci Profesora Józefa A. Gierowskiego*, Kraków 2018, pp. 231–247.

¹⁹ Interview with Katarzyna Meloch, 7 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

Next, Fryda Zawada's (1936–2022) father was a tailor, while her mother worked in a shop. Her parents spoke Polish rather than Yiddish, but they did practice Judaism.²⁰

Meanwhile, Joanna Sobolewska (b. 1939) knows little about her biological parents, because she was adopted by a non-Jewish Polish family as an infant and did not know that the mother and father who had raised her were not her biological parents until she was eighteen. However, from the information she was able to piece together, she has learned that her biological parents were young people, also assimilated: her mother came from a family of physicians, for example, which meant that her parents were immersed in the Polish language and culture.

Another of my narrators, Prof. Jan Woleński (b. 1940), came from a highly assimilated family. His mother and grandparents had converted to Catholicism, and his grandfather was a senator representing the right-wing Christian Union of National Unity party. Later, when discussing his postwar experiences, Woleński says that his mother "did not consider herself to be Jewish, and even if she did, she felt it was her private matter," and that the same was true of his grandparents. He claims that while his family was not antisemitic (the very fact of being a Jew does not make one immune to antisemitism), topics related to Jews and Judaism were never discussed at home. In fact, Prof. Woleński was completely unaware of his Jewish origins until 1980, when he was forty, several years after his mother had died.²¹

By contrast, among my narrators, Zofia Radzikowska's (b. 1935) family had strong links to the Jewish culture and religion. Her father was a furrier who owned a shop in the center of Kraków, and her mother worked for a company that sold dental products. Radzikowska's earliest childhood memories include seeing her father praying in a Jewish prayer shawl. Her mother explained to her that "this is how we, Jews, pray."²² After the war, Radzikowska's mother enrolled her in a Hebrew school in Kraków (one that, she notes, was secular and promoted Zionism) until it closed. Radzikowska's mother's second husband, whom she met after the war, was also Jewish and served in the Polish Army, while most of her mother's postwar friends were also Jews.²³

However, while maintaining a clear Jewish identity, Radzikowska's parents were also assimilated. They solely spoke Polish with her at home, only speaking Yiddish with each other when they did not want her to understand what they were saying. She remembers being upset at this and yelling at her parents, "asking them to speak in

20 Interview with Fryda Zawada, 11 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

21 Interview with Jan Woleński, 29 December 2017 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

22 Interview with Zofia Radzikowska, 9 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

23 *Ibidem*.

a human language.” She notes that her parents did not live in Kazimierz, traditionally the Jewish quarter of Kraków, which she says symbolized “the process of leaving the *shtetl*.”²⁴

In our interview, Katarzyna Meloch put forward a compelling hypothesis. In our pre-interview talk, before I had turned on my recorder, she told me that those Polish Jews who stayed in Poland after the communist regime’s anti-Jewish campaign of 1968 were more likely to have received assistance from non-Jewish Poles during the Holocaust. “This is my theory, but not only my theory,” she says. She mentions the Polish Association of Children of the Holocaust (*Stowarzyszenie Dzieci Holocaustu w Polsce*), an association of 600 Jews living in Poland who survived the war and were thirteen or younger in 1939 or were born during the war,²⁵ of which Meloch was a member, largely were saved by non-Jewish Poles. In the organization, she says,

there are people who were somehow rescued by Poles in very different ways. Sometimes they came from [ethnically] mixed families. [...] Usually, there was a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father, or something like that. And the [non-Jewish] grandparents did everything in their power to save their grandchildren. [...] Many children were in orphanages run by nuns. The contributions of Polish nuns are still underappreciated. They were great rescuers [...] because they knew that saving another person was the key to going to heaven. And they were afraid of nothing. [...] Where I was, there was a nun who would hide circumcised Jewish boys in some container when the Germans came.²⁶

Meloch’s belief that Polish nuns played a crucial role in saving Jews during the Holocaust conforms to what historians write: Antony Polonsky estimates that two-thirds of female religious communities in German occupied Poland sheltered Jews, saving at least 1,500 of them from certain death.²⁷

Naturally, my cohort of five narrators is much too small to draw conclusions about the veracity of this hypothesis. However, of the five Polish Jews who stayed

24 *Ibidem*. The Jewish Virtual Library defines a *shtetl* as follows: “Yiddish diminutive for *shtet* meaning ‘town’ or ‘city,’ to imply a relatively small community; in Eastern Europe a unique socio-cultural communal pattern. The real criteria for the size of a *shtetl* were vague and ill-defined, as the actual size could vary from much less than 1,000 inhabitants to 20,000 or more. When the community was very small it would be called a *klaynshtetl* or even a *shtetele*; however, both terms could also carry the connotation of a parochial lack of sophistication or, at times, a feeling of warmth or nostalgia.” See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/shtetl> (accessed: 4.10.2023).

25 Association of Children of the Holocaust, <https://dzieciholocaustu.org.pl/szab1.php> (accessed: 26.01.2023).

26 Interview with Katarzyna Meloch, 7 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher’s private archive.

27 A. Polonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

in Poland throughout the postwar era whom I interviewed, three, possibly four, survived the Holocaust thanks to the altruistic help of Poles.

Apart from Meloch, Joanna Sobolewska also survived the Holocaust thanks to Polish aid. From the information that Sobolewska was able to piece together after the war (she did not know she was Jewish and that her parents were not her biological parents until she was eighteen), in 1943, one day before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising broke out, a Polish 'Blue' policeman²⁸ helped to smuggle her out of the ghetto. She says that her grandfather's brother was a Catholic convert and her parents had contacts with the prewar police. Eventually, she was taken in by Mrs. Wanda Niczowa, her grandfather's wife's cousin. Later, Sobolewska was handed over to Anastazja and Walerian Sobolewski, who raised her as her adopted daughter.²⁹

Meanwhile, Prof. Jan Woleński came from a family of Jewish converts to Christianity. Additionally, he and his parents spent the bulk of the war far from their city of origin. Woleński's mother and father were from Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine), but he was born in Radom in 1940, where he was baptized, and shortly thereafter they fled to Warsaw. Being in a city far from their hometown made the likelihood of their being recognized as Jews by an acquaintance virtually nil. Additionally, they all had authentic baptismal certificates, which made it much easier to pass for non-Jewish Poles.³⁰ However, he and his family still received help from Poles during the Holocaust. Although he did not mention this in my interview with him, he wrote in his book that two Polish families helped his family in occupied Warsaw.³¹

With Zofia Radzikowska, things are less straightforward. She and her mother survived the Holocaust hiding on the outskirts of Kraków – in Borek Fałęcki, and Łęg – while her father died during a transport to a death camp. Radzikowska and her mother rented apartments there. One time, a Polish 'Blue' policeman threatened to denounce them to the Gestapo, although he left after her mother paid him a bribe. Eventually, he returned. Again, Radzikowska's mother succeeded in paying

28 In the General Government, the Germans excluded Poles from all positions of higher authority, but for the sake of convenience they maintained low level authorities (such as village elder) and the prewar police force after brutally purging it of 'racially undesirable elements.' The Polish 'Blue' police were used to aid the Germans in repressions against Jews, Roma, and Polish partisans, although the extent of their participation in such activities is subject to debate, and a large proportion of them served as double agents for the Polish underground. For a good overview of the history of this organization, see A. Hempel, *Pogrobowcy klęski. Rzecz o "policji granatowej" w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1990. A more recent publication, focusing on the participation of the 'Blue' Police in the Holocaust, is J. Grabowski, *Na posterunku. Udział polskiej policji kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów*, Warszawa 2020.

29 Interview with Joanna Sobolewska, 4 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

30 Interview with Jan Woleński, 29 December 2017 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

31 J. Woleński, *Szkice o kwestiach żydowskich*, Kraków-Budapeszt 2011, p. 54.

him to leave them alone (in addition to money, she gave the policeman, himself a father with children, some of the young Zofia's clothes), although her financial resources eventually began to run out, so she decided to move to another village where it would be difficult for him to find them.³²

When I asked her if she and her mother received aid from Poles during the occupation, she replied that she did not know. In response to my question if the local villagers knew of her Jewish origins, she explained that it was very likely. She notes that in rural Poland, people gossip a lot, and she was baptized at the age of seven in the local parish church; it was rare for Polish children to be baptized so late. She suspects that the policeman came to threaten her and her mother because he was tipped off by a local. The fact that only one policeman threatened them could indicate that most of the villagers were passively protective of Radzikowska and her mother or were at least indifferent, although of course we can never know that for certain.³³

The case of Fryda Zawada cannot be tested in light of Katarzyna Meloch's suggestion that Jews who survived the Holocaust thanks to the aid of Poles were less likely to emigrate. Unlike my four other narrators, Zawada fell victim not to the Third Reich, but to Poland's other occupier. Along with her parents, she was deported to Siberia by the NKVD in 1939. There, her parents died of cold and starvation. The dominant theme of my interview with Fryda Zawada is survival amidst cold and hunger. When she was taken into a Soviet orphanage, she above all remembers being happy that she could have a bowl of soup and bread every day. At the end of the war, she was repatriated to Kraków, where she was placed in an orphanage.³⁴

Anti-Jewish violence in postwar Poland, 1945–1946

Although most Polish Jews perished during the war, between 350,000 and 400,000 remained alive by 1945.³⁵ However, liberation did not signal the end of Polish Jewry's

32 Interview with Zofia Radzikowska, 9 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

33 *Ibidem*.

34 Interview with Fryda Zawada, 11 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive. For an overview of the deportation of Polish citizens, including Jews, to the Soviet Union during Second World War, see M. Nesselrodt, *Dem Holocaust entkommen: polnische Juden in der Sowjetunion, 1939–1946*, Berlin–Boston–Oldenbourg 2019; W. Marciniak, *Powroty z Sybiru: repatriacja obywateli polskich z głębi ZSRR w latach 1945–1947*, Łódź 2014; J.T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Princeton 2002. Omer Bartov writes that after the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland, 315,000 Polish citizens were deported into the interior of the Soviet Union. Of the deportees, ethnic Poles made up 60 percent, Ukrainians were 10 percent, and Belarusians constituted 8 percent; the remaining 22 percent were Jews. As Bartov notes, the Jewish share of Poland's population was 10 percent, which meant that they were overrepresented among victims of Soviet deportations. See O. Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: Life and Death in a Town Called Buczacz*, New York 2018, p. 152.

35 G.N. Finder, *Judenrat on Trial: Postwar Polish Jewry Sits in Judgment of Its Wartime Leadership*, in L. Jockusch, G.N. Finder (eds.), *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel After the Holocaust*, Detroit 2015, p. 85.

problems. In 1945–1946, after the Germans had left Poland, a wave of ethnically motivated, oftentimes murderous violence against Jews swept the country; similar phenomena occurred in several other countries in East-Central Europe. The most shocking and notorious example was the 1946 Kielce pogrom, during which forty-two Jewish Holocaust survivors were killed by their Polish neighbors.

Various scholars provide different estimates of the number of victims and causes of this wave of violence. David Engel believes that the number of victims was between 650 and 750 and situates the violence within the greater context of the armed conflict in Poland between the anti-communist underground, part of which was openly antisemitic and in its propaganda stereotypically linked Jews to the Stalinist regime, and the new communist regime,³⁶ while Jan T. Gross puts the number of victims at 1,500 and argues that anti-Jewish violence in postwar Poland resulted from antisemitism fueled by a feeling of guilt for the misdeeds of some Poles during the war and for the acquisition of their property.³⁷ A more recent work by Polish historian Julian Kwiek estimates the number killed at between 1,074 and 1,121.³⁸

Meanwhile, in his work *Wielka trwoga. Polska, 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (*The Great Fear: Poland, 1944–1947 – The People's Reaction to Crisis*) Marcin Zaremba provides a multifaceted view, arguing that several years of German Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda made antisemitism increase among a large part of Polish society, while the war had led to a general brutalization of Polish society.³⁹

Regardless of the causes of this violence, it understandably made many Polish Jews feel unwelcome in Poland and want to emigrate. In the aftermath of the Kielce pogrom in July 1946, 100,000 Polish Jews emigrated.⁴⁰ Dariusz Stola offers a lower estimate of more than 70,000 Polish-Jewish emigres in the first months after the pogrom.⁴¹ The proclamation of the State of Israel was also a major factor that accelerated Jewish emigration from Poland: the communist regime quickly recognized the new Jewish state and allowed Polish Jews to move to it without any obstacles. Consequently, according to Grzegorz Berendt, 40 to 45 percent of Polish Jews applied to leave the country.⁴²

36 D. Engel, *Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944–1946*, 'Yad Vashem Studies,' vol. 26, 1998, pp. 43–85.

37 J.T. Gross, *Fear: Antisemitism in Poland after Auschwitz – An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, New York 2006.

38 J. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944–1947*, Warszawa 2021.

39 M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska, 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Kraków 2012, pp. 584–615.

40 A. Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948*, Cambridge 2014, p. 233.

41 D. Stola, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

42 G. Berendt, *Emigracja ludności żydowskiej z Polski w latach 1945–1967*, 'Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały,' vol. 7, 2006, pp. 25–60.

However, as Antony Polonsky argues, the horrors of Kielce proved shocking to many Poles and led to an abrupt halt in anti-Jewish violence. While many Jews emigrated, other stayed; by 1952, there were still between 70,000 and 80,000 Jews living in Poland.⁴³ Anna Cichopek-Gajraj notes that in neighboring Slovakia, anti-Jewish violence lasted longer than in Poland (until 1948) and led to a much higher rate of Jewish emigration: after 1948, Poland's Jewish community shrank by forty per cent as a result of emigration, compared to eighty per cent in Slovakia.⁴⁴

One conclusion from my narrators is that a factor that prevented some Polish Jews from emigrating as a result of the anti-Jewish violence in post-war Poland was not only that it abruptly ended in 1946, but also that it was geographically limited. While the Kielce pogrom was undoubtedly a shocking example of anti-Jewish violence and aroused fear in many Polish Jews, nonetheless in some regions of Poland Jews did not feel directly threatened by this violence.

Most surprising are the observations of Zofia Radzikowska and Jan Woleński. After the war Radzikowska lived in Kraków with her mother and stepfather. By late 1945, 8,961 Jews were living in Poland's former royal capital. On August 11, 1945, a pogrom broke out in Kazimierz, the historically Jewish neighborhood of Kraków. Five Jews were seriously injured, four of whom were hospitalized, and there was one confirmed death.⁴⁵

Zofia Radzikowska, whose family background was the most culturally and religiously Jewish of my narrators, says that she did not feel threatened by the violence. She recalls being a precocious girl and reading about the pogrom in a local newspaper. However, she says: "Only one victim was documented, and everything occurred around Plac Nowy ['New Square'], and [the anti-Jewish violence] never occurred outside Kazimierz; it was not as if it had all flooded [*rozlało się*] the entire city."⁴⁶

Furthermore, Radzikowska presents the dominant atmosphere in postwar Kraków with regards to the Jews as tolerant. She claims to have personally never experienced any antisemitism and to have never hid her Jewish origins; in the immediate postwar era she inherited a characteristically Jewish last name from her stepfather, yet never suffered any ethnic prejudice, either at school or at the Jagiellonian University, where she first was a student and later a law professor. In fact, the only bullying she ever experienced was at Hebrew school from children from religious households who knew aspects of the Jewish religion she was ignorant about.⁴⁷

43 A. Polonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 607–608.

44 A. Cichopek-Gajraj, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–230.

45 *Ibidem*, pp. 122–125.

46 Interview with Zofia Radzikowska, 9 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

47 *Ibidem*.

Like Radzikowska, Jan Woleński lived in Kraków after the war. Then oblivious to his Jewish origins, he likewise describes postwar Kraków as being rather tolerant towards the Jews:

In school or at university, it was very rare that someone said something like, 'It was good what Hitler did. It's too bad that he didn't slaughter them all.' [...] When I heard a statement like that in school, the teacher threatened the student with expulsion if he said something similar again. The same happened at university. So, there was an atmosphere, let's say, of certain sympathy for Jews in Kraków. Cracovian Jews were probably the most assimilated in Poland. [...] Again, I'm talking about Kraków. I was probably too young to understand this, but when you look at these things now, they were quite different. Some of the police apparatus was antisemitic, as was part of the security services, as we know now. Part of the working class in Radom went on strike in protest against the prosecution of the perpetrators of the Kielce pogrom.⁴⁸

In a follow-up interview with Prof. Woleński conducted several years after our initial conversation, however, he provided a more nuanced view. He says that he does not remember the years 1945–1946, as he was a small child then. He does, however, recall numerous instances in the 1950s and 1960s, before the 1967–1968 anti-Jewish campaign, when he heard on numerous occasions tasteless antisemitic jokes or the use of the Polish word for Jew (*Żyd*) as an insult, as well as offensive diminutive forms such as *Żydek* or *Żydzisko*. Woleński notes, however, that compared to other parts of Poland, such as Warsaw, Łódź, or Lower Silesia this prejudice was more subdued and limited to the verbal sphere; in his words, antisemitism in Kraków was not 'oppressive' like it was elsewhere. He qualifies, however, that in all of Poland the Holocaust was commonly seen as a tragedy; it was emphasized that "three million Poles of Jewish descent" were depicted as its victims. Everything would change with the 1967–1968, naturally, which led to the unleashing of more overt expressions of antisemitism, such as "Get out of Poland" painted on the doors to Jewish homes.⁴⁹

Conscious of the 1945 Kraków pogrom, I was very surprised by Jan Woleński's and Zofia Radzikowska's accounts of a climate of relative tolerance for Jews in postwar Kraków. Furthermore, in her overview of Jewish memoirs of postwar Kraków, Monika Stępień notes that the accounts she surveyed greatly differed in their presentations of encounters between Jews and Gentiles. Some, such as those of for instance, Rita Blattberg-Blumstein, recall much animosity from her peers

48 Interview with Jan Woleński, 29 December 2017 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

49 Telephone interview with Jan Woleński, 3 February 2023 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

in school.⁵⁰ However, reading an interview with my third narrator from Kraków made me think of a working hypothesis.

Radzikowska and Woleński, both retired university professors, belong to Kraków's intellectual elites. My third Kraków narrator, Fryda Zawada, was the only one of working-class origin. Orphaned by the war, she did not have the opportunity to receive a postsecondary education and finished a vocational school, working at a chemical plant. Unlike Radzikowska and Woleński, she experienced significant antisemitism in postwar Poland. Her mother-in-law frequently insulted her, imploring her to move to Palestine, while Zawadzka constantly experienced unpleasant harassment from a co-worker.⁵¹

Might class have been a factor in influencing postwar attitudes towards Jews in Poland? She notes that the head of the chemical plant where she worked was Jewish. Although this is impossible to verify, it could be that the antisemitism of Zawada's co-worker was economic in nature and resulted from a power relationship.⁵²

While Zawada describes antisemitism as "terrible" [*straszny*] under communism, she also had positive relations with many non-Jewish Poles. She says that most of her girlfriends were Catholics who treated her well, taking her to cafes or the theater and never harassing her; this conforms to Woleński's and Radzikowska's image of Kraków as a tolerant city. Whereas Zawada's mother-in-law insulted her ethnic origins, her father-in-law and sister-in-law treated her well, defending Zawada from her mother-in-law's barbs. Furthermore, in the immediate postwar era, when the pogrom erupted in Kraków, she was in an orphanage, where many, but not all, of the children were Jewish. Yet she claims to have witnessed no ethnic tensions there.⁵³

Like Zofia Radzikowska and Jan Woleński, my two Varsovian narrators, Katarzyna Meloch and Joanna Sobolewska, never directly experienced antisemitism in the postwar era. Once again, class could be a factor; Meloch is a retired journalist, while Sobolewska worked as a sociologist. Sobolewska was six and seven years old during the wave of anti-Jewish violence in 1945–1946, and furthermore she did not know about her true origins until she was eighteen. However, while she herself never suffered antisemitic attacks, one time when she was on a farm doing sociological research, the son-in-law of the farmers she was visiting told her: "The occupation was terrible, the Germans and the war were bad, but they did one thing right: they cleansed Poland of the Jews." Nobody reprimanded him.⁵⁴ This stands

50 M. Stępień, *Miasto opowiedziane. Powojenny Kraków w świetle żydowskiej literatury dokumentu osobistego*, Kraków–Budapeszt–Syrakuzy 2018, pp. 166–230.

51 Interview with Fryda Zawada, 11 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

52 *Ibidem*.

53 *Ibidem*.

54 Interview with Joanna Sobolewska, 4 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

in contrast to the environment among Kraków's intellectual elites that Woleński and Radzikowska describe. Again, this demonstrates that class may have influenced postwar Polish attitudes towards Jews. In order to draw conclusions on the relationship between class and antisemitism in postwar Poland, however, a larger sample size is needed.

When I asked Katarzyna Meloch about the wave of postwar antisemitism in Poland, she says that she never experienced it firsthand. Unlike Zofia Radzikowska, she did not read newspapers and was not aware of the anti-Jewish violence. Furthermore, she says that she lived under her adopted identity and name after the war, so many people were unaware of her origins. She explained that her school was entirely free of antisemitism and recalls that during the war her principal cancelled classes during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to express solidarity with the Jews who were being killed. However, Meloch claims that she did not talk about her wartime experiences and used her wartime last name at this time because the stereotype of Jews passively accepting their fate during the war, which stood in stark contrast to the Polish insurrectionary tradition, was common in postwar Poland, which made her feel ashamed of who she was.⁵⁵ In other words, while Meloch describes her school and the district of Warsaw where she was living as free of ethnic prejudice, there was clearly a fear of 'soft' antisemitism.

My second interview with Meloch invited another logical and compelling hypothesis. When we discussed the fact that Meloch did not experience antisemitism in 1945–1946, she says: "I lived in *Saska Kępa*. There was no wave of antisemitism there, because during the war nobody there betrayed Jews [to the Gestapo]. There were two districts of Warsaw where there were no Poles who blackmailed Jews: *Saska Kępa* and *Żoliborz*."⁵⁶

Meloch's comments on *Saska Kępa* suggest a correlation between wartime and postwar attitudes towards Jews in Poland. My narrators indicate that although there was some antisemitism in postwar Kraków, as evidenced by the 1945 pogrom, the fact that Fryda Zawada experienced harassment on the part of her mother-in-law and co-worker, and the antisemitic comments Jan Woleński recalls hearing, postwar Kraków was overall tolerant towards the Jews.

Historians agree that Polish-Jewish relations in Kraków were largely positive during the war, despite some negative elements. Emanuel Ringelblum, the famous chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote in 1943: "There are many Jews hidden in Kraków, despite the large number of police contacts and informers who hunt the Jews down mercilessly. In the territory of Lesser Poland, Polish-Jewish relations had been friendly for a long time, and this naturally had an effect on the rescue of

55 Interview with Katarzyna Meloch, 8 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

56 *Ibidem*.

Kraków Jews.”⁵⁷ He is echoed by contemporary historian Andrzej Chwalba, who writes that “[c]ompared to the cities of the former Congress Poland and Eastern Galicia, Kraków was considered to be a city that was friendly towards the Jews.”⁵⁸ By contrast, the Kielce region, where the biggest outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in postwar Poland occurred, was, in the words of Antony Polonsky, “a long-standing stronghold of the nationalist Right.”⁵⁹

The Anti-Jewish Purge of 1967–1968

As in 1945–1946, in 1967–1968 a wave of antisemitism swept Poland, leading many Jews to emigrate. Whereas the antisemitism right after the war led to hundreds of Jewish deaths and was popular, rather than official (in fact, Anna Cichopek-Gajraj notes that Poland’s communist regime strongly crusaded against antisemitism at this time, particularly in the press⁶⁰), in 1967–1968 it was non-violent and came from the top.

While in Polish society this anti-Jewish campaign is frequently referred to as “the March [1968] events” [*wydarzenia marcowe*], in earnest it began one year earlier. In 1967, Israel defeated its Arab adversaries in the Six-Day War. Poland’s Jewish community welcomed this development with relief, while many non-Jewish Poles were likewise enthusiastic about the Israeli victory. Many Poles were proud of the fact that quite a few Polish natives, ‘our Jews,’ had contributed to the Arab defeat. Furthermore, the communist regime was never popular in Poland, and the fact that the Soviet Union and its allies had sided with the Arabs had the unintended consequence of making many Poles’ sympathies pro-Israel. Finally, many Poles saw parallels between Israel’s struggle and the Polish fight for independence in the 19th and 20th centuries, while Polish society identified the Israelis with the West, democracy, and civilization, as opposed to the ‘backward’ Arabs.⁶¹

Although the communist regime had recognized the State of Israel shortly after its proclamation, it ‘gradually came to take on a negative view of it, seeing it as ‘nationalistic’ and “bourgeois.” The Ministry of the Interior increasingly became alarmed by the interest Israeli intelligence displayed in Poland, while reports that many Polish Jews identified with Israel during the Six-Day War and were ready to emigrate made the regime see them as disloyal and ‘traitors;’ this proved to be a segue for harassment in 1968.⁶²

57 E. Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War*, trans. D. Allon, D. Dąbrowska, D. Keren, Evanston 1974, p. 139.

58 A. Chwalba, *Okupacyjny Kraków*, Kraków 2011, p. 153.

59 A. Polonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 607.

60 A. Cichopek-Gajraj, *op. cit.* pp. 130–134.

61 W. Rozenbaum, *The March Events: Targeting the Jews*, ‘Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry,’ vol. 20, 2009, p. 68.

62 P. Osęka, M. Zaremba, *Wojna po wojnie, czyli polskie reperkusje wojny sześciodniowej*, ‘Polska 1944/45–1989 Studia i Materiały,’ vol. 7, 1999, pp. 205–239.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and all of its allies except Romania broke off diplomatic ties with Israel. The Polish communist regime did so on June 12, 1967.⁶³ In addition to the backdrop of Middle Eastern politics, a struggle for power between two factions was unfolding in Poland's Communist Party. This schism took place in 1956 but would intensify in the coming decade. One group was the so-called Natolin group (its name deriving from the district of Warsaw where its members had meetings), which consisted of ethnically Polish communists who were pro-Soviet and dogmatic. Meanwhile, the Puławski group (its name is a reference to Puławska Street in Warsaw, where its meetings were held) was relatively reformist and advocated for greater Polish independence from the Soviet Union. Many among the latter group were Jewish.⁶⁴

In 1964, Mieczysław Moczar, the head of the Natolin group, became the minister of the interior. Moczar was known to be an antisemite, and he opposed the Puławski group, believing it had an agenda inimical to Polish interests. The Six-Day War and the enthusiastic reaction of many Polish Jews to the Israeli victory gave Moczar the perfect pretext to present the Jews as being loyal primarily to Israel rather than Poland. The conflict between the Natolin and Puławski groups had already begun in 1956; however, it resurfaced in the 1960s and would then have major consequences for Polish Jewry.⁶⁵

The communist regime began to crack down on Poland's Jews who received threatening letters and phone calls. In the fall of 1967, Jewish editors of the communist press lost their jobs, and an anti-Jewish purge swept the Polish Army: hundreds of Jews, including fourteen generals and 200 colonels, were ousted. By the end of 1967, 500 Jews had left Poland.⁶⁶

The anti-Jewish campaign really took off in early 1968, however. In January, Soviet pressure led to the closing of a Warsaw production of *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*), an anti-Tsarist play by Adam Mickiewicz, Poland's national bard. Parts of the play criticizing Russian control over 19th century Poland were loudly applauded. In March, more than a hundred protests by university students and the intelligentsia erupted across Poland. The regime's reaction was harsh: 2,591 people, including 597 students, were arrested, while many students were conscripted into the army, expelled from their universities, or beaten.⁶⁷

The fact that many of the protesting students and intellectuals were of Jewish origin was seized by the regime. The official press blasted the protesting students

63 J. Eisler, 1968: *Jews, Antisemitism, Emigration*, 'Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry,' vol. 20, 2009, p. 45.

64 J.B. Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*, Lincoln 2008, pp. 235–236.

65 A. Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History*, New York 2010, pp. 192.

66 J. Eisler, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–49; P. Wróbel, *Historical Dictionary of Poland, 1945–1996*, London–New York 1998, p. 15.

67 A. Polonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 699–700.

as a Zionist fifth column disloyal to Poland. Some reformist writers, not all of them Jewish, were beaten, probably the work of the communist secret police. About 9,000 people lost their jobs; again, they were largely, but not exclusively, Jewish. The purge above all affected the intelligentsia and the state administration: nearly 500 university lecturers lost their jobs, about a fifth of whom were at Warsaw University, as did 40 per cent of senior and mid-level officials at the Foreign Ministry.⁶⁸ To leave Poland, Jews had to submit an application according to which they were going to Israel (regardless of their intended destination) and were stripped of Polish citizenship (which they could reclaim after the fall of communism). Between 1968 and 1971, 12,927 such applications were granted. These years were the apex of this wave of Jewish emigration from Poland: between 1972 and 1975, only 853 Jews left the country.⁶⁹

Historian Dariusz Stola calls the 1968 events in Poland a 'symbolic pogrom.' He writes that although some protestors were beaten by the police and militia, the campaign did not focus on physical aggression but on large-scale propaganda that increased hostility against Jews. According to Stola, the communist regime in Poland had previously stigmatized specific groups (such as the Polish bishops during Stalinism and in 1965 following their letter of reconciliation to their German counterparts), but previously the Polish communist had not employed antisemitic tropes on such a scale, unlike their Czechoslovak counterparts during the Rudolf Slánský trial, for instance. On the contrary, in the preceding decades it was the militant anticommunists who most frequently employed antisemitic hate speech. Thus, Stola calls the 1968 campaign a 'mutant' of antisemitism and communism that would appeal to certain groups previously hostile to the communist regime.⁷⁰

During the Holocaust, Polish responses to the Jewish tragedy varied on a wide scale, from hostility and collaboration through indifference and altruistic aid at the risk of one's life. Similarly, in 1968 Polish responses to the anti-Jewish purge varied. The prominent Polish dissident writer Jan Józef Lipski wrote that most Poles were indifferent to the campaign. Meanwhile, some showed solidarity with their Jewish neighbors, openly protesting against the purge and parting with their Jewish friends at Warsaw's Gdansk Station (from which many Jews left Poland), although for others the campaign only increased their pre-existing anti-Jewish prejudices.⁷¹

One salient preliminary conclusion from my interviews with my narrators about this period is that, like in 1945–1946, in 1968 antisemitism did not affect all Polish Jews. Among those unaffected by the anti-Jewish campaign are both those

68 *Ibidem*, pp. 699–703.

69 D. Stola, *Emigracja pomarocowa*, 'Prace Migracyjna,' no. 34, March 2000, pp. 8–9.

70 *Idem*, *Kampania antyżydowska w Polsce, 1967–1968*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 145–150.

71 *Ibidem*, pp. 704–705.

who knew they were Jewish and those who did not. The anti-Jewish purge focused on the intelligentsia, military, and state apparatus. Furthermore, it varied geographically. Academics at Warsaw University were particularly affected. Jerzy Eisler writes that Łódź was another city where the official antisemitism was strong: he notes that in the eye clinic at the Military Medical Academy, doctors were required to present baptism certificates (an odd requirement from an atheist, communist regime).⁷²

Just as during the Second World War Polish-Jewish relations in Kraków were more positive than elsewhere, my narrators indicate that in 1968 antisemitism was also relatively muted there.

Jan Woleński was unaware of his Jewish origins in 1968. However, he did observe the anti-Jewish campaign and was well aware of what was going on, more so than most other Poles. "I was in a unique situation," he says, "because I was then a member of the Polish United Workers' Party [later, Woleński recanted communism and became active in 'Solidarity' movement in the 1980s – F. M.], so I was in the center of these events that other people did not always know about."⁷³ At that time, Woleński worked for the Chair in the Theory of the State and Law, so he received a special bulletin "where there were translations of reprints from the Western press. There we could, for example, read the famous speech by [Egyptian President Gamal Abdel] Nasser in which he said that he'd drive the Jews into the sea. Thus, we knew the real reasons behind this war, at least my colleagues and I knew them, but we did not believe in them [the motives for the war]."⁷⁴

Woleński notes that for Jews, Kraków, and the Jagiellonian University in particular were relative oases of peace in 1968:

The propaganda and the press or television were the same in Kraków as elsewhere, but things were a little different at the universities, maybe not at all of them, but at the Jagiellonian University in particular. Only two professors left the university, and they did so voluntarily: [Stefan] Ritterman whom I mentioned [...] and a certain Prof. Jan Górecki. Nobody even knew that he was Jewish, and people thought that he had left Poland to achieve success, but then it turned out that he had spent the whole war in hiding, changed his name, and told someone that he no longer wanted to go through the same thing. There were two or three more people who left.⁷⁵

Furthermore, he notes that the communist party tried to tone down everything at the Jagiellonian University, because any repression of professors in

72 J. Eisler, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.

73 Interview with Jan Woleński, 29 December 2017 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

74 *Ibidem*.

75 *Ibidem*.

Kraków would inevitably be compared to the 1939 arrest of nearly 200 Jagiellonian University professors by the Gestapo, and their subsequent deportation to the Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps.⁷⁶

Indeed, the authorities of the Jagiellonian University did not take the side of the regime in 1968. When, on 13 March 1968, two thousand students from various Kraków universities protested in solidarity with Warsaw students, the Citizens' Militia entered the premises of the Jagiellonian University and beat and arrested students. In response, the rector filed an official complaint against the militia.⁷⁷

While Kraków was not spared of student protests in 1968, Jan Woleński notes that the regime's response there did not take on an anti-Jewish nature. "In the Party organization, two students were caught handing out flyers, but this had nothing to do with the Jews," he recalls. Woleński also notes that the militia's response to the student upheaval was much less violent than elsewhere in Poland.⁷⁸

Radzikowska, who also worked at the Jagiellonian University as a law professor in 1968, confirms Woleński's account, especially with respect to the university:

Of course, people lost their jobs, but this above all concerned the army, the militia, the secret police, and the high-ranking party apparatus. [...] In 1968, things were very bad in some institutions [...] but there was nothing at the university. [...] In Kraków, there were student protests that were broken up with the aid of teargas, but there were no anti-Jewish excesses here. One of my friends left for Sweden, not Israel, but only because he had achieved success very early on. He was very gifted, worked in Katowice, headed a [university] chair, but his wife worked at the prosecutor's office, where there was a bad atmosphere.⁷⁹

Even if a Polish Jew did not directly experience persecution on account of his or her origins in 1968, the outburst of official and, to an extent, popular antisemitism would still have made immigrating to a safer country an attractive prospect. As I told Zofia Radzikowska, "If you wanted to leave then, I'm sure that the [communist] authorities would have not tried to prevent you from doing so."⁸⁰ Why, then, did my narrators not consider voluntary emigration?

I recalled Radzikowska's words that she strongly considered herself to be a Zionist under communist rule, both as a child in the late 1940s and two decades later; for a Zionist, 1968 would be the perfect time to immigrate to the Jewish state. "Yes, but

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ A. Plocker, *The Expulsion of Jews from Communist Poland: Memory Wars and Homeland Anxieties*, Bloomington 2022, p. 143.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ Interview with Zofia Radzikowska, 9 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

at the time I had a very strong Polish identity," she replied, adding that "in particular people in Israel cannot understand this at all." She continues:

I grew up in Polish culture, Polish history, and the Polish language, so what should I have identified with? I had assimilated the Hebrew culture and considered it to be absolutely a part of me, but this does not mean that it took the place of what I had grown up in: Polishness. I always somehow was able to reconcile [being a Pole and being a Jew], and I still reconcile this today. All Polish Jews are Polish patriots, but that's a normal truth, right? Nobody is surprised that a French Jew is a Frenchman or that an American Jew is an American. Only in Poland does the notion that a Jew is a Pole arouse great emotions. Who was I supposed to be? After all, I was born here and have spent my whole life here.⁸¹

In addition to a strong sense of attachment to Poland and to Polish culture, Radzikowska also mentions the practical inconveniences of moving abroad as discouraging emigration in 1968. Emigrating, she says, "would have been a one-way ticket. I would have had to give up my apartment and all my property. [...] It was very difficult for people who went through all this. Later, I read what people went through. It was horrible."⁸² In other words, staying in Poland sometimes was motivated, at least in part, by convenience.

There are strong parallels between the experiences of Zofia Radzikowska and those of Joanna Sobolewska in 1968. First, both worked at institutions that had evaded the anti-Jewish campaign. Radzikowska worked at the Jagiellonian University, which was largely untouched by state antisemitism. Meanwhile, Sobolewska says of her employment at the time: "I worked at the National Library, which was a unique place. It was like a museum. There were no problems there. Furthermore, there were very few people of Jewish origin working there. I worked in the institution of books and literacy, and we did research on literacy there."⁸³

Additionally, Sobolewska was insulated from the rising current of antisemitism thanks to her milieu. The majority of her friends were of Jewish origin. Regarding her non-Jewish friends, they expressed solidarity with Poland's Jews: "My friends' opinion was that horrible things were happening, but they were my friends, so they were well-mannered and met high intellectual and moral standards and had particular views."⁸⁴

Furthermore, in addition to not being directly affected by the anti-Jewish campaign, Sobolewska did not want to voluntarily emigrate also because of a strong attachment to Poland and because of possible hardships related to emigration. When

81 *Ibidem.*

82 *Ibidem.*

83 Interview with Joanna Sobolewska, 4 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

84 *Ibidem.*

I asked Sobolewska about why she did not consider leaving Poland in 1968 after she told me most of her (largely Jewish) friends left the country after the dramatic events that had taken place that year, she replied in a similar vein as Radzikowska: "I'm a Pole. Why should I have wanted to emigrate? Life as an immigrant is difficult. I found some family in Israel; they would have probably helped me, but the thought never even crossed my mind. It's as if I were to explain to you why I don't want to move out of my house."⁸⁵

The strong sense of identification with Poland and self-identification as Poles is a recurring theme in my interviews with my narrators. For all of them, their identification with Jewishness – cultural, religious, or otherwise – was much weaker under communism than today. However, even today Polishness is a more salient element in all of my narrators' identities with the exception of Zofia Radzikowska. I asked all of my narrators how they would describe their national identities. Radzikowska said: "This was said most beautifully by Aleksander Wat [a prominent Polish writer of Jewish origin and convert to Catholicism – F. M]. [...] When asked [about his identity], Aleksander Wat said: "I am neither a Polish Jew nor a Jewish Pole. I am a Polish Pole and a Jewish Jew. And I like that definition the most."⁸⁶

Even the narrator with the strongest sense of a Jewish identity identifies as a 'Polish Pole.' The other four, however, identify themselves as Poles first and Jews second. This is most colorfully described by Jan Woleński. When I asked him if he considers himself to be a Polish Jew, a Pole of Jewish origin, or something else, he replied: "I am a Pole of Jewish origin; what more can I say? There are Poles of German, Czech, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Belarusian origin, and there are also Poles of Jewish origin, German origin, and so on. [...] I am a fan of sports. If Poland were to play Israel, then naturally I cheer for Poland. But if Israel plays someone, then I cheer for Israel."⁸⁷ Naturally, Woleński did not know about his Jewish origins in 1968, but his explanation of his identity and the fact that he was not personally affected by that *annus horribilis* for many Jews suggest that even if he did know who his ancestors were he would not have been particularly interested in leaving.

Once again, Fryda Zawada's status as my only narrator of working-class origin provides a unique perspective on staying in Poland during major waves of Jewish emigration. When I asked her if the 1968 campaign affected her, she said with a laugh: "Me? No, I wasn't an engineer or a lawyer." She describes Gomułka, the head of Poland's communist party at the time, as "kicking out all the Jewish lawyers, engineers, and

85 *Ibidem*.

86 Interview with Zofia Radzikowska, 9 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

87 Interview with Jan Woleński, 29 December 2017 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher's private archive.

doctors.”⁸⁸ The 1968 anti-Jewish purge in Poland above all affected the intelligentsia and state functionaries. Polish historian Jerzy Eisler writes that “March ’68 remains predominantly a pogrom against the intelligentsia. It was in March ’68 that the mass media attacked individual writers and scientists with particular viciousness.”⁸⁹

Traditionally, Jews have made up a large part of Poland’s intellectual elites. In the interwar era, for example, 56 per cent of Polish physicians in private practice and 33.5 per cent of attorneys were of Jewish origin.⁹⁰ However, many Jews, like Fryda Zawada, did belong to the working class. This group was less targeted by the state persecutions in 1968. Consequently, 1968’s effects on the Jewish working class in Poland merit greater research.

However, in addition to a state sponsored campaign, the 1968 events did succeed in arousing anti-Jewish sentiments among part of Polish society, particularly in rural areas. I asked Zawada if she herself experienced greater discrimination as a result of her ethnic origins then. She says that she hated Gomułka, although she did not experience greater antisemitism, except for her co-worker who for years harassed her for being Jewish.⁹¹

Katarzyna Meloch has brought to my attention the fact that although intellectuals were one among the chief victims of the communist regime’s anti-Jewish policies in 1967–1968, the Polish intelligentsia has traditionally been among the forces most opposed to antisemitism in Polish society. For example, the Polish intelligentsia openly expressed its horror to the wave of violent antisemitism in 1945–1946.⁹²

Jerzy Eisler writes the majority of the young Polish intelligentsia in 1967–1968 identified with the student protests and were disappointed by the lack of support from other sectors of society.⁹³ As Meloch, Radzikowska, and Sobolewska were all young intellectuals at the time, they could have counted on support from their milieus.

In 1968, a Pole of Jewish origin who was part of the intelligentsia might have been targeted, according to Meloch, but at the same time he or she would have been more likely to receive support from his or her surroundings than people in other sectors of society, which makes being a Jewish intellectual in Poland in 1968 to a degree a mixed blessing. Meloch says: “My life was easy because I lived in an exclusive Polish milieu that organized, for example, institutes on literary research. My friends held a Party meeting against antisemitism and often subsequently received

88 Interview with Fryda Zawada, 11 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher’s private archive.

89 J. Eisler, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–38.

90 J. Michlic, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

91 Interview with Fryda Zawada, 11 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher’s private archive.

92 J.T. Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

93 J. Eisler, *Polski rok 2006*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 625–626.

punishments from the party. [...] Living in such an environment gives us the privilege of isolating us from the rest of society.”⁹⁴

Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

In the 20th century, Polish Jewry – which had long been one of the most dynamic and largest Jewish communities in the world – was decimated twice, first by the Holocaust, during which 2,710,000 Polish Jews, or 81 per cent of the country’s Jewry, perished,⁹⁵ and again through several waves of postwar immigration. By the 1980s, Poland’s Jewish population had plummeted to just 5,000 mostly elderly people; it seemed destined to die out.

After the fall of communism, however, a growing number of Poles began to discover and embrace their Jewish origins; presently, the Jewish population of the country could be as high as 40,000, eight times its size in the 1980s. This demonstrates that many more Polish Jews had stayed in the country than had been previously supposed.

During my interviews with five Polish Holocaust survivors who never left Poland, I asked about the external regions and motivations for remaining, focusing on two periods of mass Jewish emigration marked by popular and official antisemitism: the immediate postwar period, which coincided with hundreds of Polish Jews being killed in popular violence, and 1967–1968, when the communist regime forced 13,000 Polish Jews to leave.

Several themes emerge from my interviews. First, it is clear that popular antisemitism in 1945–1946 and official anti-Jewish persecutions more than two decades later were not uniform; there were some regions of Poland and some milieus, particularly the intelligentsia, that were immune to such prejudices. Also, the working class was less affected by the 1967–1968 purge. Next, my narrators expressed close connection to Poland which made them unwilling to emigrate; one of my narrators expressed the hypothesis that Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust through Polish aid were more likely to stay.

However, given my small sample size of five interviewees, more research needs to be conducted. Sadly, the number of Holocaust survivors – both in Poland and elsewhere – is shrinking each year. Thus, apart from interviews with a dwindling population of potential narrators, scholars interested in testing these hypotheses could, for example, study the memoirs of Polish Jews who remained in Poland after these waves of emigration and compare them with those of Polish-Jewish emigres.

Also, conducting interviews with Polish Jews with different life trajectories – for example, those who, unlike Katarzyna Meloch or Joanna Sobolewska, experienced harassment rather than aid from non-Jewish Poles or who indeed left Poland after 1968 – could allow for the further validation or rejection of these hypotheses.

94 Interview with Katarzyna Meloch, 8 January 2018 (recorded by F. Mazurczak), researcher’s private archive.

95 Quoted in: A. Cichopek-Gajraj, *op. cit.*, p. 19.



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**Summary**

In 2017 and 2018, I interviewed five Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivors who remained in Poland during two major waves of postwar emigration caused by popular and state-sanctioned antisemitism, in 1945–1946 and 1967–1968, respectively. In trying to understand not only the external circumstances that led to their not leaving the country as well as their motivations, I used the approach of Luisa Passerini, who argued that oral history can help us to understand the subjectivity of narrators absent from the archives (in this case, the narrators' sense of Polish identity was a major determining factor). Because Polish Jews were subjected to a purge and antisemitic campaign by the communist regime in 1967–1968 and their contributions to Polish culture were later downplayed by communist censors, they are a perfect example of a non-hegemonic class. Tentative conclusions are that a strong sense of identification with Poland as well as the relative absence of antisemitism from certain regions and milieus were major factors in their decision to not emigrate.