

# Polish-Jewish relations: Old stereotypes renewed

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

**C**RACOW—Every day, as they have for months, Poles crowd the Municipal Art Museum to see its exhibit on Polish Jews. Most of those who come are young: university students, novice priests, entire grade school classes. For them, Polish Jewry is a mysterious rumor, an apparently important but almost unknown part of their national past, as though the Jewish absence from Poland could be measured not in decades but centuries.

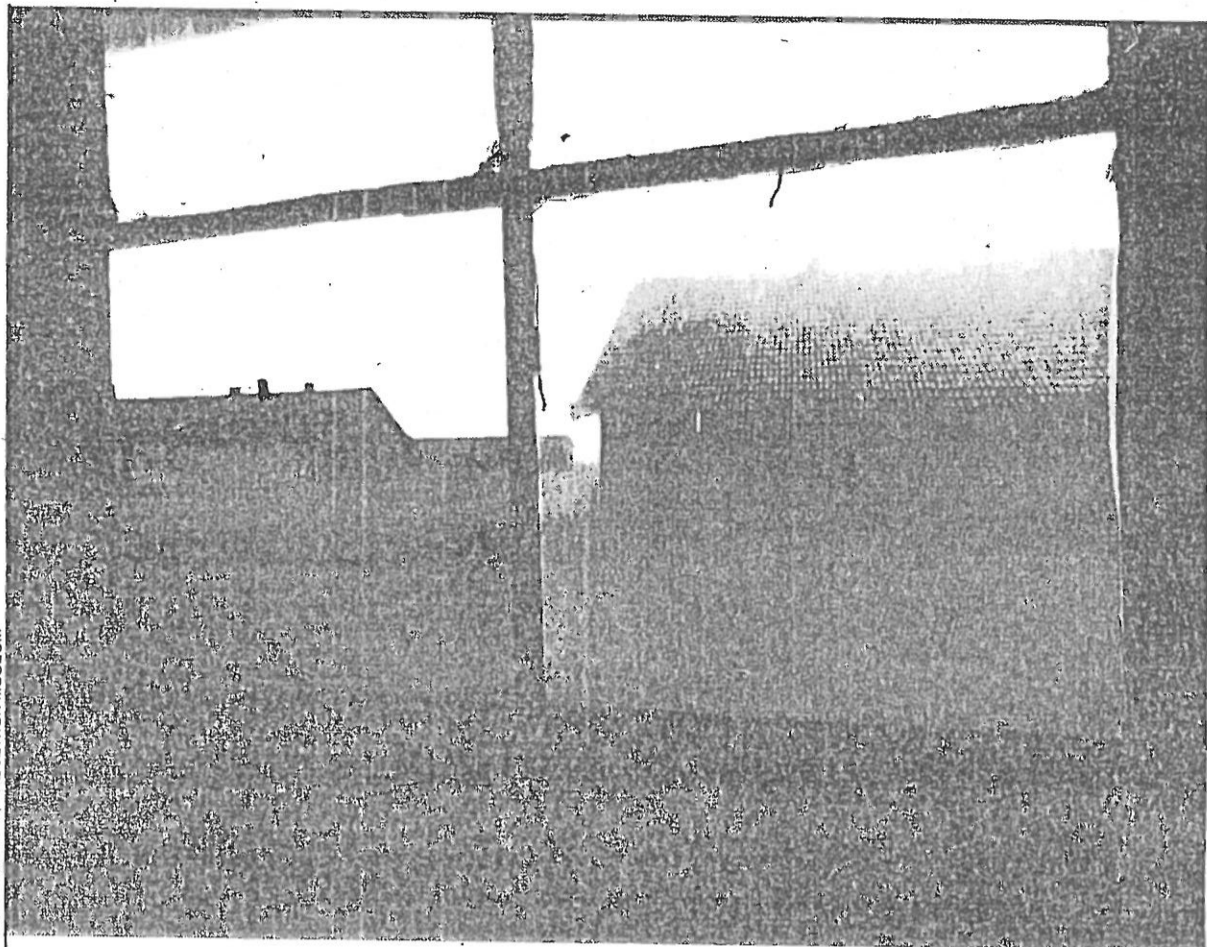
The exhibit is composed of paintings of pre-war Jewish life. One wall of paintings is devoted to Jews at prayer, another to Jewish children. The exhibit, however, doesn't sentimentalize the past but acknowledges the complicated, often tortured nature of Polish-Jewish relations. In its section of paintings by non-Jewish artists, Jews confiscate a peasant family's last goat, illegally extract gold from coins, ritually stab a Christian child.

But those images have come to be expected. Far more intriguing are the paintings which suggest human interaction, even intimacy, between Jews and Poles. In one painting, Jewish klezmer musicians play at a Catholic wedding (the groom is drunk, the musicians impassive). There is a heroic painting of the Jewish general, Berek Joselowicz, who led an all-Jewish unit in Poland's uprising against Russia in 1794; and a painting of a public funeral for Poles killed by Russian troops, presided over jointly by a priest and a rabbi.

Until the dispute over the Auschwitz convent, Polish-Jewish relations seemed finally a subject for art exhibits and historical research. There were, after all, hardly enough Jews still living in Poland to create the possibility for either dialogue or conflict. But the Auschwitz convent has reminded Poles and Jews that they can maintain hostilities long-distance, and that they continue to see in each other a symbol for their own national tragedies. In the absence of a living relationship, Poles and Jews now look to the past, and there find the most negative and distorted images with which to perceive each other.

The convent dispute reinvigorated several of the most potent anti-Semitic stereotypes of Poland's past. Many Poles, who found opposition to nuns at prayer inexplicable, assumed that Jewish protests against the convent must be maliciously motivated. And so the old Christian accusation of the Jews as enemies of the Church was given new emotional life.

The convent dispute also revived a more modern version of that notion. Many Poles believe it was "the Jews" who forced atheist communism on Catholic Poland: perhaps half the members of Poland's pre-war communist party, and some of Poland's leading post-war communists, were Jews. Nor have many Poles forgotten that it was a Jewish-born woman who headed the "religious" section of the



The view from the women's barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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Polish secret police, in charge of suppressing the Church. Jewish attempts to close a nunnery at Auschwitz seemed to many Poles an extension of the anti-Church activities of those Jewish communists.

This past summer, during the most intense phase of the convent dispute, some Polish media commentators warned that Poland could lose large Western investments because of American Jewish pressure. The fear that Poland would be financially punished at its most desperate time revived one more anti-Semitic stereotype: the Jews as capitalist oppressors—an image that managed to coexist with the stereotype of Jews as communist oppressors.

In his now-famous speech attacking the Jews, Poland's Primate, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, drew on precisely that image of the capitalist Jew when he warned Jews not to use "your power with the media in numerous countries" to stir anti-Polish resentment. It is also likely that Glemp—who reportedly once complained that the Solidarity movement contained too many "Trotskyites," a code word for Jewish radicals—saw in the convent dispute a continuation of the anti-Church activities of Jewish communists in the Stalinist era.

## Fighting the Devil

**K**rzysztof Sliwinski (pronounced: Shlivinski) is foreign affairs and religious correspondent for the Solidarity-affiliated daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The day after Glemp made his anti-Jewish speech, *Gazeta* published a front-page editorial, written by Sliwinski, expressing "sorrow and regret" over the Primate's remarks. "One should not doubt at all the sincerity of Jewish feeling," the editorial said, "and see in their protest only a political or media manipulation."

The editorial shocked many Poles. It was the first time that Solidarity—which has depended on Church support for its legitimacy in this intensely religious nation—publicly disassociated itself from the head of the Polish Church.

*Gazeta Wyborcza* received hundreds of letters in response to Sliwinski's editorial. "About two thirds were opposed," says Sliwinski. "Of those, a third were simply expressions of Polish nationalist indignation, rather than specifically anti-Semitism. 'Who are these foreigners to tell us where we can put a convent on Polish soil?' For many of these people, it didn't matter if these

foreigners were Jews; they simply had no business telling us what to do."

About one-third of the letters were openly anti-Semitic. "These were often crudely expressed and misspelled," says Sliwinski. "It was obvious that they were coming from the lower section of the population. People in the West forget that anti-Semitism in Poland has often been a class matter, a pretext for a general attack on intellectuals."

In fact, hundreds of artists and academics contacted *Gazeta Wyborcza* to support Sliwinski. "They included some of Poland's best-known intellectuals," he says. "Even some priests privately congratulated me."

Sliwinski is a large man with greying hair. On his bookshelf, beside a rosary, are books about the Holocaust and Jewish history. Sliwinski, a religious Catholic, is among those Polish intellectuals who have tried to explain the Jewish position on the convent to a suspicious, often outraged, Polish public. He speaks with the weariness of a man constantly repeating arguments whose truth he considers self-evident.

Sliwinski: "At the newspaper, we received many letters from readers saying that if we don't make a stand

on the convent, the Jews will start shutting down other convents and churches. Of course Jews had no such intention; but this irrational fear was there. Both sides saw in the convent issue something larger than the convent itself. The Jews were afraid that the Christians were imperialistically trying to Christianize the Holocaust, and that the Auschwitz convent would be just the beginning. Some Poles felt the same way about the convent: it would be the beginning of a Jewish assault on the Church."

The Polish fear of Jewish hostility to the Church even revived one of the most insidious anti-Semitic charges of medieval Christianity: the Jew as collaborator with the devil.

"The sisters came to Auschwitz to fight the devil," Sliwinski says. "After all, only the devil could have built such a place. And how does a Catholic fight the devil? With prayer and fasting."

"But the devil can fight back. When the Jewish protests began, some of the sisters saw in it the devil's work. The devil was even using French cardinals [who supported moving the convent]. The sisters decided to dig in even deeper; to give in would mean giving a victory to the devil."

"The poor sisters came to Auschwitz with the best intentions. But the difference between religious zeal and religious fanaticism is that fanaticism closes your eyes to the feelings of others."

Sliwinski has written articles trying to sensitize Poles to Jewish feeling over the convent. "The main argument I used was that creating this monastery didn't conform to the Christian religious ideal. When you are going to make a religious sacrifice—as the sisters wanted to do—first you must reconcile with your neighbor. Only then can you approach God. In the case of the convent, this was not done. Had there been peace between Jews and Poles, so many of these emotions over the convent would not have come up."

## Jewish Stereotypes

**J**ust as the convent issue reinvigorated old Polish stereotypes about Jews, so did it seem to confirm the Jewish stereotypes of Poles as a nation of anti-Semites. One must be careful, however, not to take this symmetry too far: Jewish animosity toward Poles has never been lethal; the same can hardly be said about Polish animosity toward Jews.

Still, there is this irony in the most recent phase of hostility between Jews and Poles: each side now justifies its hatred as an emotional self-defense against the presumed hatred of the other. Jews say they hate Poles because Poles hate Jews. And, as Cardinal Glemp said in his anti-Jewish speech, if there is anti-Semitism in Poland, it is only because of the "anti-Polonism" of the Jews.

Polish-Jewish relations took their worst turn—from which they have yet to recover—after World War I, when



A Jewish protest at the the Auschwitz convent.

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count symbolizes the experience of many Jews in post-war Poland.

For Jews, the persistence of anti-Semitism among a people that had intimately witnessed the Final Solution was unbearable. Not surprisingly, Poland became for Jews a symbol of their continuing precariousness in a world which, after everything, would still not leave them in peace.

Yet nearly all Poles—including Poles without hostility toward Jews—believe that accounts of Polish anti-Semitism, and especially of alleged Polish complicity with the Nazis, have been unfairly exaggerated. The most compelling Polish argument is a fact that most Jews probably don't know: Poland was the only Nazi-occupied country where hiding a Jew was punishable by death. And yet, some Poles did take that risk. In Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, there is the "Avenue of the Righteous," a path lined with trees, each one in honor of a "righteous gentile" who saved Jews. Thirty percent of the trees bear plaques with Polish names. It is true, as Jewish cynics like to say, that the "Avenue of the Righteous" is hardly a blossoming forest; still, each Pole honored there took a risk greater than non-Jews faced anywhere else in Europe.

Poland was the only Nazi-occupied country not to produce a collabora-

tionist party. Even Poland's extreme nationalists—whose counterparts in other occupied countries were often enthusiastic Nazi collaborators—fought against the Germans. The reason was not a sudden conversion of the Polish right wing to philo-Semitism. Simply put, the Nazis weren't interested in coopting the Poles—as they were, say, the French—but in turning them into slaves. For that same reason, there were no Poles—as there were Ukrainians and Latvians and Lithuanians—serving as guards in the concentration and death camps.

One young priest said to me: "The National Democrats [Poland's pre-war nationalist, anti-Semitic party] were more pro-Polish than they were anti-Semitic. The Poles were trying to consolidate a nation. At its beginning, nationalism always exaggerates, and has little tolerance for minorities. But once the Nazis came, there were even National Democrats who hid Jews. One priest, whose church was next to the Warsaw Ghetto, was considered an anti-semiter before the war. But, during the war, this same priest used his church to hide Jews.

"I'm not trying to take the blame off of certain [pre-war Polish] excesses, but it is very easy to confuse German atrocities with Polish attitudes before the war. I can certainly understand a Jew who saw Polish

boys throwing snowballs at a Jewish store, fusing that in his mind with the coming of the Nazis. But it was hardly the same thing."

**Breaking a Taboo**

The Polish tendency to minimize the virulence of pre-war anti-Semitism—"boys throwing snowballs"—was challenged by a Polish journalist named Jan Blonski. In a now-famous article that appeared a few years ago in the Catholic newspaper, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Blonski broke a national taboo by publicly analyzing Polish defensiveness toward charges of anti-Semitism. Blonski attributed that defensiveness to the Polish fear "that one might be counted among the helpers of death. It is so strong that we do everything possible not to let it out, or to dismiss it. We read or listen to discussions on the subject of the Polish-Jewish past and if some event, some fact which puts us in a less-than-advantageous light emerges, we try our hardest to minimize it, explain it away."

Blonski didn't mean to suggest that "the Poles" had actively helped the Nazis murder Jews; instead, he meant a more subtle guilt: "This particular Abel [Polish Jewry] shared our home, lived on our soil. His blood has remained in the walls, seeped into the

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# Poland

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soil. It has also entered into ourselves, into our memory. So we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth."

Though Blonski had intended no such indictment, many Poles reacted to his article as though he had accused them of genocide. Blonski's article caused furious debate; even today, his article is invoked in discussions about Polish-Jewish relations.

Accusations of Polish complicity in the Holocaust challenge the most

basic foundation of Polish self-identity: that of a crucified nation. If Poles were not only victims but also in some way—either actively or by silent approval—complicitors in the genocide of another people, then their own identity as victims is diminished.

Staszek Krajewski (pronounced: Staszek Krayevski), a young Jew living in Warsaw, may be trusted to objectively assess the question of Polish guilt, for this reason: he is one of the few people left in the world for whom being Jewish and being Polish are both cherished identities.

Staszek, a mathematics researcher at the Polish Academy of Science, grew up in a communist family; as a university student, he became active in dissident circles. Later, studying

entirely on his own, he found his way to Judaism. In his tiny study lined with Jewish books from floor to ceiling, Staszek writes essays on Jewish philosophy and identity, a lone attempt at reviving the Polish Jewish intellectual tradition.

Staszek—slight, bearded, very serious—spends much of his time trying to explain the Jews to the Poles and the Poles to the Jews. He speaks dispassionately of even the most difficult aspects of the Polish-Jewish relationship, trying to make peace between the two parts of himself.

He says: "It is quite common to hear Poles say about Polish anti-Semitism: 'People do these things everywhere against strangers, it's nothing specific about Poland.' Or

people will say: 'The Polish nation was suffering for generations. It had to develop defensive attitudes toward outsiders for survival.'

"Often these arguments are not meant as a justification, but an explanation. It's much less frequent to find people who feel there is something specific, deeper, about anti-Semitism that is connected not only to Polish history but also the Church.

"Certainly Polish anti-Semitism was different from Nazism. Poles before the war never meant murder. It is true that in some extreme views, there were descriptions suggesting something like a Holocaust. But these were more literary ideas than an actual program."

Staszek divides the question of

Polish guilt during the Holocaust into two issues: active complicity and passive indifference. Examples of the former, Staszek says, have been exaggerated.

"Jews tend to blame Poles more than the Germans," he says. "I understand it this way: During the war, Polish Jews who were in hiding didn't meet Germans, they met Poles. A Jew never knew whom he could or could not trust. So you had to suspect all strangers—and those were the Poles. The Germans were like a natural disaster: you don't blame the tempest, you blame your neighbor who didn't admit you into his cellar."

Staszek dismisses the common Jewish claim that the Nazis built the

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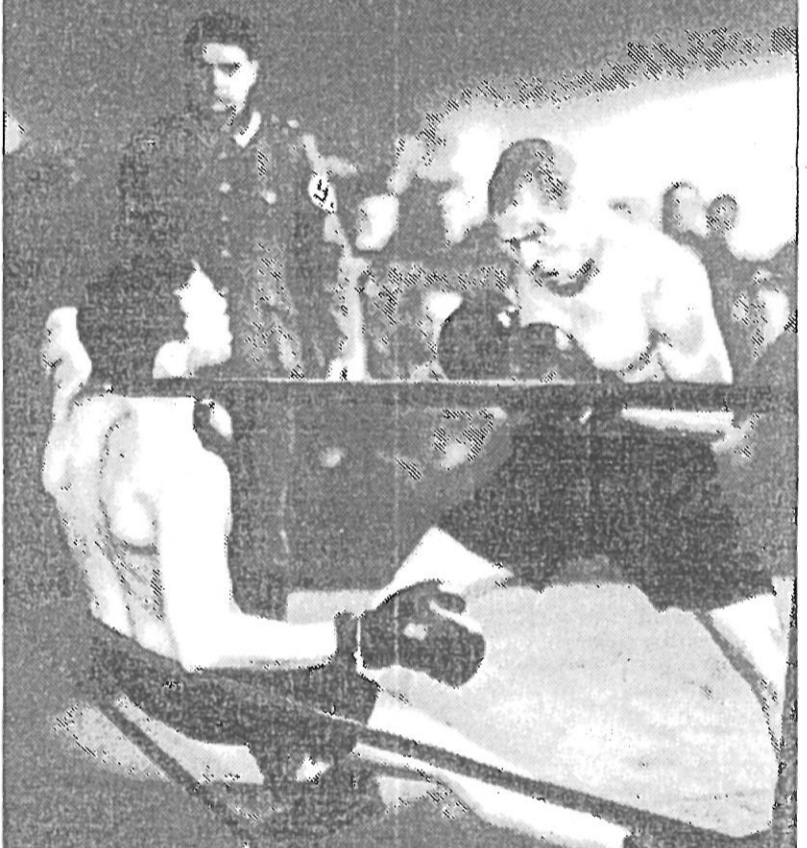
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# Poland

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death camps in Poland because they expected the support of the local populace. "With all the Nazi documents that researchers have studied," he says, "there has never been a single hint that the Nazis took this into consideration. The Nazis built the camps in Poland for a simple reason: that's where the largest number of Jews were living."

Still, says Staszek, Poles should not feel entirely absolved. "There is a certain guilt. After the war, Poles didn't regret the absence of the Jews. And certainly more than a few Poles were glad they were gone."

"But with my generation—especially among the intelligentsia—it is easy to find people who feel Poland has missed something because of the

absence of Jews. Poland in many ways seems unsatisfactory for many people; one of the reasons is that it is homogeneous and dull. Pre-war Poland, with all its problems, was heterogeneous. Some Poles today idealize the richness of that old Poland, which Jews symbolize.

"Now it's easy—too easy—to have this feeling. The virtual absence of Jews here makes it ironic. But I don't mean to reproach my generation; it is not their guilt."

## A Kotsk Story

As a young Jewish girl during the war, Hannah Krall was hidden by Polish families. Today, she is a well-known Warsaw journalist, writing for the Solidarity-affiliated paper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Because of her close ties to Solidarity, her books were banned for eleven years by the communist government, and published only by underground presses.

This year, four of her books will be

officially published. One of them, *Hypnosis*, is an account of Krall's travels to Polish villages that were once centers of Hasidic life, to explore the place of the vanished Jews in the memory of the villagers.

Krall tells me a story from the Holocaust she heard in the village of Kotsk—famous to Jews as the place of the Kotsker Rebbe, the Hasidic leader who withdrew into his room for 20 years of melancholy silence. The story is about a young Polish woman named Apolonia Machczynska, a pregnant mother of three children, who hid 25 Jews in her home.

One Sunday after church, some Polish children noticed smoke coming from a cellar of one of Apolonia's neighbors. They informed the Germans, who discovered a Jewish woman with four children. The Germans made her this offer: they would spare the lives of her children if she told them where other Jews were hiding in the village. The woman,

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desperate to save her children, gave them Apolonia's name. The Germans killed the woman and her children and went searching for Apolonia.

Apolonia was warned that the Germans were coming for her. She ran through the village with her children, pleading with her neighbors to hide her. Terrified, all her neighbors refused.

Apolonia, and the 25 Jews she hid, were shot in a field of snow. That night, their bodies froze. Pranksters from the village came and built pyramids with the stiff corpses. And that, says Krall, is the end of the story.

"You see," she says, "everything is in this story. A Polish woman who

saves Jews. A Jewish woman who betrays her because of fear. Poles who won't hide their own Polish neighbor, also because of fear. And Poles who play with corpses as a joke.

"I like this story very much, because it shows how absurd it is to judge an entire people—any people. We judge a writer by his best book, not his worst book. But we like to judge a nation by its worst people.

"If you meet Jews who say, 'Poles denounced us to the Germans, killed us, took our property'—it is true. And if you meet Poles who tell you, 'We risked our lives to save Jews'—it is also true."

During the period of martial law imposed by the communist regime in

1981, Krall hid several dissidents in her home. "Of course it was a joke compared to the risk of those Poles who hid me as a child. The penalty for hiding someone during martial law was some time in prison; the penalty for hiding a Jew during the war was death.

"Even so, I felt afraid, especially for my daughter and my grandchild. I wonder now if I would have taken the risk that all those Polish families took when they hid me. Would I risk my life, my family, for someone else's family? I would like to think that I would, but I'm not at all sure. You see, it is foolish to judge Poles who didn't help Jews. How can you judge anyone until you are in his place?" □

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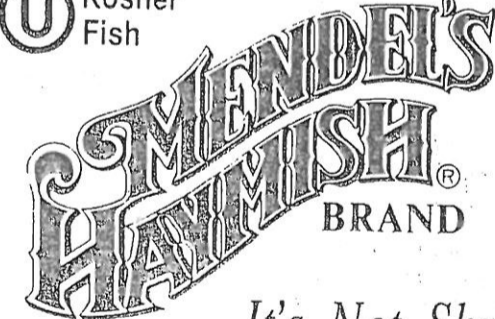
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