
“You need to speak Polish”

Antony Polonsky interviewed by Konrad Matyjaszek

Abstract: The interview with Antony Polonsky focuses on the history of Polish-Jewish studies as a research field, analyzed from the time of its initiation at the turn of the 1980s until year 2014. Antony Polonsky is the chief historian of the main exhibition of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, as well as the editor-in-chief of *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, a yearly research journal. He is also a co-founder of the first research institutions focused on the field of Polish-Jewish studies, and a co-initiator of the first academic events in this field. In the conversation, Polonsky discusses the context of the creation of the Polin Museum's main exhibition, including the impact of politics on this exhibition's final form. Afterwards, he recounts the history of the beginnings of Polish-Jewish studies, including the Orchard Lake meeting (1979) and the conference at Columbia University (1983). Polonsky gives a detailed account of the course and the outcomes of the Polish-Jewish studies conference in Oxford in 1984, which he co-organized. He also analyses the 1980s Polish political opposition circles' reactions to the presence of antisemitic narratives in the opposition's discourse. The last section of the conversation focuses on the presence within the field of Polish-Jewish studies of narratives that are apologetic towards the Polish nationalist discourse.

Keywords: Jewish museums; Polish-Jewish studies; Polish Jewish history; contemporary Polish history.

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Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Konrad Matyjaszek: I perceive the building of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews (MHPJ), and the exhibition it hosts, as a kind of explication of the contemporary narrative about the history of Polish Jews. The beginnings of this narrative date back to the 1980s, when it was initiated simultaneously in several different places: in Poland, the US, Israel and the UK. In Poland, the transformation of how the story of Polish Jews was being told spanned the period from the antisemitic campaign in 1968 to the enthusiasm about the “Jewish revival” triggered in the Kraków district of Kazimierz and elsewhere after 1989. Underlying this process was the work of historians which you describe in your essay on the Polish-Jewish relations after 1984 (Polonsky, 2011). I think it is significant that this narrative process is reflected by the Museum, which constitutes the ultimate stage of this process.

Antony Polonsky: The establishment and construction of the Museum was a very important experience for me. The fact that the Museum came into being is a miracle in a sense. The history of its development is also extremely interesting. The concept of the Museum is taken from the project of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington. This museum is organized along a relatively clear storyline, which begins when Hitler comes to power in Germany and ends when Europe is liberated in 1945. This is a narrative museum, as is the Polin Museum.

The construction of the Museum in Warsaw took quite a long time, having started in 1993. In 1996, Jerzy Halbersztadt was put in charge of this venture. He was formerly a Polish representative to the Holocaust Museum in Washington and was later appointed Director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews; he stayed in this post from 2005 until April 2011. In order to design the Museum, he brought together an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars, he himself was responsible for the general concept of the Museum. Halbersztadt announced his resignation in April 2011.¹ The Association of the Jewish Historical Institute was in charge of the core exhibition at the time and tried to organize the administration of the Museum based on management specialists. In August 2012, Andrzej Cudak² was appointed the Museum Director. He had a huge task ahead of him: the cost of the Museum, including the core exhibition and the actual building, amounted to a total of over one hundred million dollars.³ This was an enormous amount, but Cudak proved to be a good organizer of the project implementation process. The sequence of the project stages is also significant here: the competition for the building design was called after the concept of the Museum had already been decided.

K. M.: When did you begin working for the Museum?

A. P.: In June 2010, I spent two days consulting with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the Museum collection curator Renata Piątkowska, and Director Halbersztadt on the content of the Museum. In June 2013, I was appointed Chief Historian of the core exhibition, and in 2014 – the Chief Historian for the entire Museum. We faced the problem of the global economic crisis at the time. Jerzy Halbersztadt was no longer working at the Museum. The general concept of the Museum was complete at the time, but there were still some problems. Andrzej Cudak proved himself then to be a very good organizer.

K. M.: He was only a manager.

A. P.: Absolutely. Earlier, he organized the European football championship, Euro 2012. I met him for the first time when offered the position of the Chief Historian of the Museum in 2013. I was invited to Warsaw, where I met Andrzej Cudak. Trying to establish a contact during that meeting, I told him that my grandsons were most happy that I could

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- 1 Formally, Jerzy Halbersztadt stepped down as acting director of the MHPJ on April 21, 2011, but the newspapers said that “his [...] resignation was only a symbolic move. Halbersztadt’s dismissal had already been decided by the Mayor of Warsaw and Minister of Culture” (Urzykowski, 2011). Minister of Culture, Bogdan Zdrojewski said in an interview for *Gazeta Wyborcza*: “I can see two possible solutions: we will keep Mr. Halbersztadt in office and ‘encase’ him with a group of people who will continue the project, or we will seek a candidate for the new head. I am in favor of the latter.” He also said that talks with Halbersztadt’s potential successors had already started (Urzykowski, 2011). Later on Halbersztadt talked about having been “removed from the Museum” (Waślicka, Żmijewski, & Halbersztadt, 2015).
 - 2 Andrzej Cudak – a manager, graduated from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the University of Illinois at Urbana (USA). In the 1990s he worked as a local press editor in Gorzów Wielkopolski; from 1995 to 1998, he was in charge of a private local television station; from 1998 to 2004, he was Deputy Program Director at the Poznań branch of Polish Television, and from 2004 to 2006, he was Director of the Television Information Agency (TAI), an agency of Polish Television. In the period from 2007 to 2012, he was acting director of the Secretariat for the 2012 European Football Championship at the City Hall of Warsaw. From 2012 to 2014, he was acting director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews under construction. Since March 2014, he has held the post of Director of Organization and Maintenance at the Wolski Hospital in Warsaw (Cudak, 2016).
 - 3 According to the report by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the total cost of construction of the Polish Museum of the History of Polish Jews amounted to 320 million zlotys (Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, 2013).

meet the person who had been in charge of Euro 2012. And when he introduced me to his co-workers, the four deputy directors, he mentioned that he had been asked which was more difficult: to organize Euro 2012 or to construct the Museum. He said that both were equally complex. But if I were asked which I thought was more significant, I would have no doubts whatsoever: Euro 2012 was just a football competition, whereas the creation of the MHPJ was a decisive event in terms of what we wanted for our country – whether we wanted it to be a tolerant country with a positive attitude to the past and to its problems. Andrzej Cudak understood the importance of this task but, obviously, he wasn't a historian. For that reason in the period between the departure of Jerzy Halberstadt and the appointment of Dariusz Stola as Director, the people in charge of the core exhibition worked in a way without supervision. We have to remember that the Museum is an outcome of the partnership of private and public entities, the first of this kind in Poland. Three of the partners are the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the Warsaw City Hall. Consequently, all kinds of external experts were involved, first and foremost from the Ministry of Culture, but also from the City Hall, and suggested various solutions, but problems remained. The Museum's design team was composed of very young and highly competent people, but, as you well know, there are two research approaches towards the past in general and to the past as the history of Jews in Poland – a self-critical and an apologetic one.

K. M.: This is where I would like to ask about Jan Grabowski. For some time, he was a candidate for the position of the Director, too. What happened there?

A. P.: Jan Grabowski is an excellent and important scholar but I think that Dariusz Stola is much better as the person in charge, because he is well-known in Poland and is not so strongly identified with research on the Holocaust. He understood well the problems the Museum faced.

K. M.: Could he understand them better than Grabowski would have?

A. P.: As you maybe know, the Minister of Culture, Bogdan Zdrojewski, had already offered the position of Director to Jan Grabowski and told him that he could start choosing his deputies. This wasn't done properly, and Dariusz Stola made a point of improving relations with Jan Grabowski, and he was right in doing so. Apart from that, it was also about the approval of the core exhibition. As I said, for a long period the exhibition was prepared without any supervision. Being the Director, Stola understands the political background and that this is an independent museum on the one hand, but also a state-owned and a municipal museum. After taking the director's position, he realized that there were a few problems with the core exhibition.

I have known Stola for a long time. He wrote his doctoral dissertation about Ignacy Schwarzbart, one of Jewish delegates to the Polish National Council in London.⁴ I knew

⁴ Ignacy Schwarzbart (1888–1961) – from 1921 to 1924 editor-in-chief of *Nowy Dziennik*, a daily issued in Kraków, a member of the Zionist Organization in Poland (Organizacja Syjonistyczna w Polsce), deputy to the Polish Parliament from 1938 to 1939. From 1940 to 1945, he served as one of the two, along Szmul Zygielbojm, Jewish representatives to the National Council of Poland (Rada Narodowa Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) in London. After 1945, he moved to the US.

Schwarzbart's secretary, Rafał Scharf,⁵ so I introduced Stola to him. That's how we got to know each other quite well.

K. M.: Did Dariusz Stola have an influence on the exhibition? Hadn't the main exhibition already been completed when he took his office?

A. P.: It had, but not quite. The postwar gallery posed the greatest problem. The thing was how to present the issues of "Judeo-Communism," of the anti-Jewish violence from 1945 to 1948 and, thirdly, how to present the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign. Stola suggested to form a historical committee bringing together historians with different outlooks. I suggested a certain change in the work of this committee, too. It concerned the manner in which Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the Museum's Program Director, participated in the committee's discussions. She is a genius, doubtlessly. The Museum would never have been created but for her...

K. M.: In what sense is she a genius?

A. P.: She knows how to present historical events visually. The street exhibited in the prewar gallery is a good example, including the displays referring to the politics and culture of interwar Poland on both sides of the street,⁶ and the 18th century gallery, including the synagogue from the town of Gwoździec, the church and marketplace.⁷ Event Communications and Mirosław Nizio⁸ suggested a host of different solutions, but Barbara knew precisely how to present it. She did not speak Polish very well then, so she could not understand everything that was said during the discussions of the historical committee. She spoke in English, so not all discussion participants understood exactly what she said. I said to Stola then: we need an interpreter. Barbara will only speak in English and the interpreter will interpret everything.

K. M.: When was that?

5 Rafael Felix Scharf (1914–2003) – a journalist, writer and historian. Born in Kraków, he moved in London in 1938. During World War II, he served in the British Army and was a secretary to Ignacy Schwarzbart. After the war, he was a member of the committee examining Nazi crimes. He owned a print enterprise in London. He co-founded the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford.

6 The website of the Polin Museum reads as follows: "*The Street* [the interwar gallery – K. M.] is situated at the prewar location of Zamenhof St. – the main artery of the Northern District, a neighborhood inhabited chiefly by Jews. This fact was very much present in the minds of the creators of the gallery, which is set up along a 'street' whose frontage is formed by multimedia building facades. It is on these that presentations on topics of importance to this time period will be displayed. From the street, visitors will be able to go into building entrances, where they will discover the vibrant cultural and political life of the period, get to know the problems of daily life in the Polish provinces and see a new generation of Jews born in a free Poland growing up" (POLIN, 2016c).

7 "The Jewish Town (1648–1772)" is described in the following manner on the Polin Museum's website: "The [...] gallery opens with an account of the wars that ravaged Poland in seventeenth century. Its main subject, however, remains the daily life of Jews on private noble estates, portrayed against the general background of the Commonwealth. Jewish life centered around the Marketplace and Synagogue. A replica of the painted ceiling of the wooden synagogue from Gwoździec, created by a team of experts and volunteers using traditional materials, tools and techniques, hangs above an area symbolically recreating the space of a Synagogue. In an area designated as Home visitors will discover relationships within the family and among neighbors, while at the Tavern and Church room will be given to a discussion of Jewish-Christian relations. Time seems to have stopped in this gallery" (POLIN, 2016d).

8 Event Communications is a London-based company specializing in exhibition design; it was commissioned to develop the masterplan of the main exhibition at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The detailed executive design was developed by the Warsaw-based Nizio Design International company, headed by Mirosław Nizio.

A. P.: Stola was appointed Director in February 2014, I think, so we are talking about the period from March to June 2014, when the historical committee started to work. When Barbara could speak Polish, I mean, when everything she said was interpreted into Polish, the atmosphere changed, as it was clear that she was a serious person. This changed the whole situation and an agreement could be made on how to present the postwar period. The period of the Holocaust was less problematic than the postwar period.

K. M.: This is a bit surprising. If we adopt your distinction between apologetic versus critical research, we can imagine that it should apply to the Holocaust more than to the postwar period. Why wasn't that the case?

A. P.: The Holocaust gallery is very well designed. Jacek Leociak and Barbara Engelking are excellent; the idea of the bridge included in the Holocaust exhibition is very good.⁹ This gallery illustrates two narratives. One, about the Warsaw Ghetto, tells its story, leading from isolation to mass murder. The other narrative presents the broader phenomenon of how the Germans moved from isolating Jews to mass murder. It is strongly emphasized here that the Germans were the active party there, but it is also explained that the Germans gave much encouragement to those willing to collaborate with them, whether materially or politically, and severely punished those who opposed. The gallery shows German collaborators, it shows Jedwabne as well as Lviv, and Ponary, near Vilnius.¹⁰

K. M.: Why then was it the postwar, rather than wartime, period that posed problems? Would that be about the role of the Germans?

A. P.: The postwar authorities, even if communist, were Polish.

K. M.: Is it about responsibility?

A. P.: Yes. The problem was how to show the anti-Jewish violence. The postwar gallery features different quotes, one taken from Catholic Primate August Hlond, another one from a document of the National Armed Forces (NSZ), one more from Adolf Berman. As concerns the presentation of "Judeo-Communism," the exhibition designers decided to display short biographies of communists of Jewish origin.

K. M.: Is it here where pressure was exerted?

A. P.: I think that it was possible to block these pressures then, which would be much more difficult at present. Bogdan Zdrojewski was not heavily interested in discussion, but the following Minister of Culture, Małgorzata Omilanowska, understood what we

9 The "Holocaust (1939–1945)" gallery, included in the main exhibition, is located at the extension of the pre-war Zamenhof Street (ul. Zamenhofa), as is the abovementioned gallery "On the Jewish Street (1918–1939):" At the time when the Warsaw ghetto existed, Zamenhof Street was the main route leading to the Umschlagplatz railroad ramp; in the Museum, over the reconstructed Zamenhof Street a mezzanine has been constructed reminiscent of the footbridge that joined the two parts of the ghetto over Chłodna Street, which was itself excluded from the ghetto.

10 Reference is made here to the Jedwabne massacre of July 10, 1941, when the Jewish denizens of the town were murdered by their Polish neighbors; and to Ponary near Vilnius, where from 1941 to 1944 mass murders were committed by SS troops assisted by the collaborating Lithuanian Police; as well as the pogroms organized in Lviv in July 1941 by German Nazis, Ukrainian nationalist organizations and the mob of the city residents.

tried to explain. We stated that we understood that the other party feared what we were doing, but that it was our intention to present historical events in a reliable manner, and that it was better not to work under pressure; because if there would be pressure, the outcome would not be convincing. She understood that.

The concerns about the postwar gallery emerged, in my opinion, because the exhibition presents the activities of a government that was more or less Polish. The same holds true for 1968. The part of the exhibition dedicated to these events featured a quotation from a text by Witold Jedlicki¹¹ (brother of Jerzy), who was in Paris. Witold Jedlicki wrote that the whole nation eagerly accepted the anti-Jewish policy, which is not true, it is complicated; so we found another quote which gave a more accurate account of how Polish society responded to this anti-Zionist or antisemitic campaign.

K. M.: Did this change of the quote also result from negotiations with the government?

A. P.: Not with the government, all this happened within the framework of this historical committee, which still continues to work, by the way.¹² This was not the government, so much as the Ministry and Warsaw City Hall, although Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz [the Mayor of Warsaw – translator’s note] did not intervene. The Ministry had its concerns, but it accepted the action plan when Dariusz Stola promised to establish a historical committee including, among others, Janusz Tazbir (now deceased), Henryk Samsonowicz, Bożena Szaynok – reputable historians – and to find a compromise that could be accepted by everybody. This was a unanimous decision, like the *liberum veto*, it had to be unanimous. I have to admit that these negotiations were quite difficult. The most important thing then was to open the Museum.

11 Witold Jedlicki (1929–1995) – a sociologist, philosopher and journalist, an employee of the University of Warsaw (1956–1962) and of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. He participated in the meetings of the Krzywe Koło Club. In 1962, Jedlicki migrated to Israel. From 1964 to 1969, he stayed at the University of California as a scholarship holder. He made a significant contribution to the debate on the 1956 “thaw” and authored a text dedicated to those events, entitled *Chamy i Żydy* [Boors and Kikes], published in 1962 in the Paris *Kultura* (Jedlicki, 1962).

12 The events that preceded the establishment of the committee were related by Helena Datner, who co-authored the “Postwar Years” gallery at the Polin Museum until 2014: “A lot is likely to have happened behind our backs, but the climax was when we met at the Ministry of Culture (let us not forget that the [Polin] Museum is supervised and financed by this Ministry) in May last year (2013), when the main part of the exhibition had already been designed, more, it was being implemented. We were directly told that our section of the exhibition ‘did not meet the expectations of the Mayor and Minister of Culture; that it ‘defied the Polish raison d’état;’ therefore it would not be accepted. After all, the exhibition is paid for ‘with Polish money,’ we heard. That came as quite a shock. There were few specifics discussed during this conversation; it was about the insufficient number of ‘the assimilated [Jews];’ about the absence of Jews in the Solidarity movement (so we asked: Do you mean Michnik? Or Geremek?), about the creators of the Polish Film School, too much of The Social and Cultural Association of Jews [TSKŻ], while we failed to ‘disarm’ the ‘Judeo-Communism’ phenomenon (this was probably about percentage and condemnation). We showed Kielce too vaguely. This was a shock because the question arose of what right political authorities in a democratic state had to interfere with the content in this manner. In the time of the Polish People’s Republic, it used to be called ‘manual control.’ It was a shock because the talks were held in an atmosphere of utter mistrust and lack of dialogue. A shock, because it all happened at the last moment. We continued our work after that, there always was something that needed improvement, alteration, and abridgement – typical exhibition work. Another blow that was both powerful and effective came towards the very end, in June this year (2014). We received yet another, this time a highly detailed historical review; I talked to the reviewer and the Museum Director; the main issue was the pogrom in Kielce and the role of the [Catholic] Church after the pogrom. It was unpleasant; there were different outlooks on matters that had long seemed established, but there was also something that made me feel this wasn’t my place, I got this nasty feeling I hadn’t experienced for a long time. Several days later, at the meeting of the Museum Board, a committee was established to correct the mistakes made in our gallery. I did not take part in its work” (Sobel & Datner, 2015).

The core exhibition is occasionally criticized for not addressing antisemitism enough, or Roman Dmowski and his National Democrats, but all these issues are there. The museum catalogue also discusses all these topics and, anyway, Dariusz Stola has rightly said that this is not a museum of the history of antisemitism but a museum of the history of Jews in Poland. It shows the emergence of contemporary antisemitism, the *Rola* weekly is shown there,¹³ maybe more could have been said about Dmowski...

K. M.: You really need to look high and low for *Rola*.

A. P.: That's right, that's right.

K. M.: If someone knows what *Rola* was, they will find it, but otherwise...

A. P.: This is an enormous museum and it takes a long time to visit it, but there are good guides.

K. M.: One function of museums is to facilitate self-education.

A. P.: All these issues could be emphasized even better.

K. M.: This is not likely to happen now, is it?

A. P.: The government has different issues now, such as the Museum of the Second World War.¹⁴ But I think that they will eventually create this Westerplatte Museum and Paweł Machcewicz will keep his office...

K. M.: Really? According to the latest news, the museums will be merged.

A. P.: It is a fact that Machcewicz has not been dismissed so far. Machcewicz has the great asset of having Norman Davies sitting on his board.

K. M.: Well, right, of course. Let me then ask about your work as the Museum's Chief Historian. What did you do? You said you started in 2013.

A. P.: I would say that the problem related to the opening of the core exhibition was to find a common language between Barbara, alongside the American, Israeli and Polish historians on the one hand, and the more apologetic and more critical Polish groups on the other. I had spent a long time in Poland, starting in the 1960s; I was involved in Polish-Jewish historical research in the 1980s, so to some extent I understood all these mindsets. At the same time, however, I lived outside Poland. One problem in Poland was that, in the communist times, there were people you did not shake hands with. Today, we have the same problem: there is this tendency to demonize one's enemies. I don't feel

¹³ *Rola* – Polish conservative antisemitic weekly issued in Warsaw from 1881 to 1912.

¹⁴ The Gdańsk-based Museum of the Second World War (still under construction at the time of this interview) was criticized by Piotr Gliński, Minister of Culture in the Barbara Szydło cabinet (the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość / Law and Justice party). In May 2016, Minister Gliński stated that "the present management [of the Museum] seems to be planning a universalist tale about the history of this conflict and the nations it involved instead of concentrating on the Polish narrative of this event." He announced that the museum would be merged with the Westerplatte Museum, which had been established six months earlier but still not constituted at that time, thereby allowing the exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War to be substantively rearranged and Paweł Machcewicz to be dismissed from the office of Museum Director ("Fala krytyki pod adresem Muzeum II Wojny Światowej: Odpowiedź placówki," 2016).

this way, it's not a problem for me to talk to everybody. My role was to explain different points of view to different people. For instance, my idea to arrange an interpreter for Barbara improved the workflow tremendously. She speaks Polish better now, but it is still not perfect. My Polish is terrible, too...

K. M.: Horrible, indeed.

A. P.: ...but I have no problem speaking Polish.

K. M.: So your work was about facilitating the negotiations?

A. P.: Basically, it was.

K. M.: Did you work for the Museum as a historian?

A. P.: I was the editor of the catalogue of the core exhibition with Barbara, and I wrote the chapter about the 19th century. The gallery dedicated to the 19th century is crucial, but perhaps too long. To some extent, that is why it talks about antisemitism so little. Explaining the whole issue of the social integration of Polish Jews was also difficult, as was the presentation of successive governments and their policies regarding the Jewish community. This is the topic of the chapter I authored.

K. M.: As far as the exhibition is concerned, I understand that you had no influence on it at all?

A. P.: I had an influence only at the very end. In 2010, I got to know the entire concept of the Museum, which I found highly successful. The idea to integrate the history of Jews into the history of Poland in general – yes. The idea to start the narrative with the first Jewish settlement in Poland – yes. The inability to avoid the topic of the Holocaust – yes. The need to design the postwar gallery – yes. Barbara, together with Event Communications and Mirosław Nizio, had an idea to execute a strong and expressive exhibition project. This may be exemplified by the synagogue from Gwoździec, located in gallery four and surrounded by the exhibition presenting different aspects of the coexistence of the Jews, peasants and gentry. There is an inn, a church, a marketplace and a Jewish house. When I became strongly involved in the work for the Museum, all these elements had already been completed. When we compare the museum in Warsaw with the Jewish Museum in Berlin,¹⁵ or that in Vienna, at the Eskeles Palace,¹⁶ the museum in Warsaw has the advantage of the exhibition having been designed first, with the contest for the building having been called later on. In Berlin, the building was erected first, which resulted in problems with the arrangement of the exhibition in its interior.

K. M.: It was a necessity in Warsaw, wasn't it? The exhibition design was created in the initial stages, when the museum had not yet secured full financing.

¹⁵ The Jewish Museum in Berlin (Jüdisches Museum Berlin) opened in 2001.

¹⁶ The Jewish Museum in Vienna (Jüdisches Museum Wien) opened in its current location, the Eskeles Palace, in 1997; the building was subsequently refurbished and the museum exhibition rearranged in 2011.

A. P.: This is an interesting subject. I am convinced that Jerzy Halbersztadt made an enormous contribution to the Museum and, as was the case with Jan Grabowski, his sense of having been ill-treated is justified. We invited Jerzy Halbersztadt to a conference in 2015, after the Museum was opened, and the contacts have improved since.¹⁷ I think that the concept of a strong museum narrative was proposed by Jerzy Halbersztadt and we are extremely grateful to him for that. I think that technical details, the fact that the designers had no location for the building, were less important than the fact that Halbersztadt, who worked for the Museum of the Holocaust in Washington, realized that its success followed from the very clear narrative that the Museum presented. Everybody can understand what the point of this Museum is. If we compare the Museum of American History,¹⁸ or the Museum of the American Indian¹⁹ to the Museum of the Holocaust, we will notice that the former two are enormous collections of exhibits but without any visible narrative. That's very unclear, and people do not feel good there. The Polin Museum offers a strong narrative but without too many tangible exhibits.

Another significant goal of the Museum at present is to improve the relations with the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI). Both institutions are complementary.

K. M.: The Museum has considerably overwhelmed the JHI both in financial and organizational terms.

A. P.: Not necessarily. The Taube Foundation and Koret Foundation have given much financial support to the JHI, they also support the Museum. Anyway, the JHI has some advantages the Museum doesn't have. The JHI has a team of historians who specialize in the history of Jews, it has the archives and a collection of exhibits. The Museum has a building and, in a way, a larger budget, so the two institutions should cooperate. In my opinion, this collaboration should be done by means of joint projects. We organized a successful conference together.²⁰ Now, we are planning to make a joint publication of the papers presented at this conference, edited by Hanna Węgrzynek, Andrzej Żbikowski and myself. Doctoral scholarships are also planned to be awarded by a committee organized in collaboration with the JHI. An urban route is also being established, leading from the Museum to the JHI; an excellent idea, showing the connection between Anielewicz and Tłomackie Streets. All these projects should be continued. Running the Museum is extremely expensive; the entire exhibition is located underground, it has to be lighted and heated. One fourth of the running costs is covered by the government, one fourth by the City Hall, one fourth is generated by entrance tickets and the restaurant and one fourth is donated by sponsors.

K. M.: I would also like to ask about something you have already mentioned, namely the historical debate in Poland and the opposition between the critical and apologetic

17 The international conference to mark the opening of the main exhibition of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews "From Ibrahim ibn Yakub to 6 Anielewicz Street" was held on May 11–14, 2015.

18 The National Museum of American History in Washington opened in 1964.

19 The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington opened in 2004.

20 Reference is made here to the above-mentioned conference "From Ibrahim ibn Yakub to 6 Anielewicz Street" – see footnote 17.

approaches to history you have outlined. Do you believe it was necessary to design a museum gallery focused on the *Paradisus Judaeorum*,²¹ emphasizing the legend about Esterke²² and following along that narrative path? Did those apologetic themes have to have such a strong presence, in your opinion?

A. P.: They are not entirely apologetic. Barbara says that the most important event in the history of Polish Jews is the one thousand years of Jewish presence in Poland.

K. M.: That is a slogan.²³

A. P.: Yes it is, absolutely. But I think that focusing on these first four galleries is necessary in order to show that Polish Jews were a very strong and well-established community. Is that overly apologetic? There is no question mark after *Paradisus Judaeorum*...

K. M.: And it was supposed to be there.²⁴

A. P.: That was my proposal. The initial part of this gallery features a set of quotations that show that it was not a *Paradisus Judaeorum*, that this was a mere slogan...

K. M.: The content of the 17th century text which the notion *Paradisus* is taken from is not problematized there. It is not explained that the text is antisemitic.²⁵

A. P.: Audio-guides explain that, and I think this is clear. The same concerns the corridor of fire.²⁶ Only Bohdan Khmelnytsky is mentioned there as an organizer of pogroms,

21 The term *Paradisus Judaeorum* [Paradise for Jews] has been present in Polish culture since the 17th century. It comes from an anonymous text expressing anti-gentry and anti-Jewish sentiments, which was published in Latin in 1606 and titled *Paskwiliusze na królewskim weselu podzruczone* [Lampoons planted at the royal wedding party]. The anonymous writer uses the phrase *Paradisus Judaeorum* to express his conviction that Poland is ruled by Jews and that they enjoy excessive privileges (Kot, 1937; Tokarska-Bakir, 2004, p. 54).

22 The legend of Esterke tells a story of a Jewish mistress of Polish King Casimir the Great (Kazimierz Wielki), who, on her account and because of her influence, allegedly favored the Jews and passed laws that were beneficial for them. Elżbieta Janicka writes about this legend in the context of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews: "this construct was brought to life to be used against the Jews in a power play between the Church and the state. The aim of the Esterke legend was not only to humiliate the Jews and undermine their position – it was also to delegitimize their very presence in Poland"; Janicka quotes literary historian Chone Shmeruk, who states that "the first mention of it [the royal love affair – K. M.] is that of Jan Długosz (1415–1480), about a hundred years after the supposed event. [...] In the footsteps of Długosz, the Casimir-Esterka tradition became a more or less permanent feature of Polish antisemitic literature, the supposedly preferential status of Polish Jews being traced to Casimir's partiality towards his mistress" (Janicka, 2016, p. 161; Shmeruk, 1985, pp. 10, 14).

23 Settled Jewish communities have been present on Polish territories since the late 12th century, therefore 2016 can hardly be referred to as marking "one thousand years of Jewish presence in Poland" but rather "eight hundred and thirty years" at most. Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka record that Jewish communities located in Polish lands in the last decade of the 12th century amounted to a total of several hundred individuals (Piechotka & Piechotka, 2004, p. 14). Earlier documents mention the activities of individual Jews, for instance in Silesia in 1153, but such records do not justify the conclusions that Jewish communities inhabited the place (Grodecki, 1969, p. 611).

24 The plan to put the question mark in the title of the 1569–1648 gallery (which would then be titled: "Paradisus Iudaeorum?") was mentioned by Igor Kąkolewski in the lecture presenting this exhibition before the Museum's inauguration. The lecture was titled *Polska – raj dla Żydów? O znakach zapytania w galerii złotego wieku (XVI–XVII w.)* [Poland – a paradise for Jews? About the question marks in the gallery of the golden age (16th–17th centuries)] (Kąkolewski, 2014). The design team of the Museum eventually decided not to put the question mark in the title of the gallery.

25 Cf. footnote 21.

26 The so-called corridor of fire is a section of the main exhibition at the Polin Museum, located between the "Paradisus Iudaeorum (1569–1648)" and the "Jewish Town (1648–1772)" galleries, as part of the latter. The exhibition displayed in the corridor refers to the Bohdan Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1657) and the pogroms and murders committed on Jews by Cossack troops during this uprising.

whereas Stefan Czarniecki is absent, although he also killed quite a number of Jews. A Ukrainian historian complained about this when talking to me, and he was absolutely right. This can be changed. I don't think Czarniecki is such a sensitive subject in Poland. Apart from that, I think that the 18th century gallery is well-done and shows well the relationship between the gentry and Jews. Similarly, Jan Zamoyski and Zamość are presented well enough in the third gallery. And the forest, where the core exhibition starts – is that apologetic? This is a reference to Agnon.²⁷

K. M.: As a part of Jewish history, especially modern Jewish history, a forest evokes clear associations. It is associated with a hideout and the Holocaust.²⁸

A. P.: There is an interesting thing about the ideography of the Museum. The exhibition starts with very bright colors and it ends in very dark shades. First and foremost, the gallery of the Holocaust is dark, that is obvious for everybody. The Museum has different recipients, different groups of visitors. It has already been visited by 700,000 guests, maybe a bit more, the majority from Poland. History has to be presented so that people can understand and accept it.

K. M.: The function of the museum is to educate, the function of the museum is to change people's habits, including thought habits.

A. P.: This function can also be performed by temporary exhibitions. For instance, there is a topic of presenting the Jewish contribution to various left-wing groups, ranging from socialist to communist movements. In my opinion, this should be presented without apologetic tones. I would say that one of the problems in Poland is that there is no Left here, but that is a different issue...

K. M.: This might be the same issue.

A. P.: The collapse of communism has brought an end to social democracy, the outcomes of which we can see today, but this is another topic. I think that we have made an accurate presentation of the Jewish contribution to communism, both in the prewar and postwar galleries. The former one explains why communism was attractive to Jews, the latter presents a series of biographies of people who were communists. These biographies show that there were people like Jakub Berman on the one hand, and people like Adam Bromberg, who was highly active in the publishing movement, on the other. It would be good to have a temporary exhibition on this topic, which would explain, for

27 This refers to a version of the Polin legend, by Josef Szmuel Agnon: "So they came to the land of Polin and they gave a mountain of gold to the king, and he received them with great honour. And God had mercy on them, so that they found favour from the king and the nobles. And the king gave them permission to reside in all the lands of his kingdom, [...] And the king protected them against every foe and enemy. And Israel lived in Polin in tranquillity for a long time. [...] And those who seek for names say: 'This is why it is called Polin. For thus spoke Israel when they came to the land, 'Here rest for the night [Po lin]'; And this means that we shall rest here until we are all gathered into the Land of Israel" (Agnon, 1930, pp. 65–66; Agnon, 1987, p. xi).

28 As Elżbieta Janicka comments: "Forest is an emblematic figure of the Holocaust in its broader definition: both in the sense of the German process of industrial extermination and of what we nowadays call 'the margins of the Holocaust.' The latter refers to the attitudes and behavior of the majority societies towards the Jews. In the Polish context, the forest then denotes the period called *Judenjagd* – hunt for the Jews – which claimed 200,000 victims, the majority of whom are still scattered throughout backyard gardens, fields, meadows and forests in particular" (Janicka, 2016, p. 125).

instance, why – when Stalin was running the purge of Jewish communists in Russia – people of Jewish origin were playing such a crucial role in the Polish government. Stalin did not trust them, but he trusted Władysław Gomułka even less, and this needs to be explained. When the Stalinist system began to crumble, the Jews, or people of Jewish origin, played a prominent role among revisionists, this can be shown, but the thing is that the errors of the core exhibition can be corrected, but you need to wait a year or two, especially now.

K. M.: My question was about the strategy of presenting history within the main exhibition. What I mean is whether it could have been done differently, more openly, when the Museum was created.

A. P.: The ritual murder is shown.

K. M.: It is shown by quoting a sentence from an antisemitic document by Pope Benedict XIV that reads that the Jews should not be harmed, but the following two sentences, making a promise to help expel the Jews out from Poland, are omitted.²⁹

A. P.: You can find everything in the core exhibition, but you are right when you say that you need to look for it. That is why the information communicated by audio-guides and told by the museum guides is crucial. In a sense, the Museum speaks for itself; somehow, its message is not always clear, though.

K. M.: Sometimes it speaks very quietly.

A. P.: Very quietly.

Polish-Jewish studies in the 1980s

K. M.: Apart from the Museum, I am much interested in the events from the very beginnings of the historical narrative about Jews in Poland and from the beginnings of Polish-Jewish studies as a research field – the events from the turn of the 1980s. From what I have been able to find out, it appears that the first research projects started at that time simultaneously in Poland, the US and Israel. It seems that the United States was first, and the meeting held in Orchard Lake in 1979³⁰ marked the turning point

29 In his encyclical, *A quo primum* of June 14, 1751, to the Primate, Archbishops and Bishops of the Kingdom of Poland, Pope Benedict XIV writes about the harmful Jewish influence on the Polish state and elaborates on the ways of chasing Jews away from Poland. The document includes the words which are displayed in the exhibition at the Polin Museum: “The Jews are not to be persecuted: they are not to be slaughtered: they are not even to be driven out”; but this phrase was intended to encourage neither tolerance nor granting the Jews equal rights. These words are included by the pope as a quotation from St. Bernard, which Benedict XIV uses to demonstrate that it is the theological justification for the existence of Jews to continuously remind the Christians about the Jews being guilty for the crucifixion of Christ and, therefore, that slaughtering them defies the plan the God had designed for them. This context is not explained in the exhibition.

30 On September 13, 1979, a meeting of the representatives of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Polish minority organizations was held in Orchard Lake, MI, USA. It was hosted by the Catholic St. Mary's College, a center of research into the history of Polish minority in the US. On the part of the AJC, the meeting was attended, among others, by Hyman Bookbinder, representing the AJC in Washington, George Szabad, AJC Board member, and Rabi Marc Tanenbaum, director of interreligious affairs for the AJC. Polish minority organizations

allowing further studies to be conducted. Was that the case or had anything happened before that?

A. P.: That was the case. The meeting at Orchard Lake was crucial. The members of the two organizations that made this meeting happen, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Polish American Congress (PAC), realized that it was necessary to take steps.

K. M.: Why?

A. P.: Because they wanted, as they said themselves, to “overcome misunderstandings and promote mutual respect” by exploring shared historical experiences and contemporary common concerns. The *Orchard Lake Statement* outlined a specific agenda: to combat the vicious circle of polemics, to generate a balanced view of the history of Polish-Jewish relations and to work together to advance human rights on a global scale. The *Statement* expresses the hope to overcome resentment of the recent past and to reestablish “Polish-Jewish alliances of earlier centuries.” This was not that easy. The Polish American Congress was problematic, as you know.

K. M.: It was antisemitic.

A. P.: Edward Moskal³¹ was for sure. Eventually, the Polish American Congress left the team they jointly established with the AJC, the Polish American–Jewish American Council, but responsible representatives of the Polish minority stayed in the Council. This beginning was important because this team organized the first conference on Polish-Jewish studies at Columbia University in New York in 1983.

K. M.: In your opinion, was the meeting in Orchard Lake in any way connected with the disputes related to the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington and the participation of the representatives of the Polish

were represented, among others, by Rev. Leonard F. Chrobot, President of St. Mary's College, Andrew Ehrenkrenz from the North American Center for Polish Studies in Ann Arbor, Eugene Kusielewicz, President of the Kosciuszko Foundation, Aloysius Mazewski, President of the Polish American Congress, and Prof. Ronald Modras from Saint Louis University.

The objective of this meeting was “to overcome misunderstandings and promote mutual respect between the members of Polish American and Jewish American communities.” There were three main topics of the discussion: 1. the cases of abuse of the members of the two communities on the basis of their ethnicity; 2. the Holocaust and history of Polish-Jewish relations; and 3. human rights worldwide. With reference to the first topic, antisemitic and anti-Polish prejudices were equally condemned. The former were exemplified by anti-Jewish statements made by the representatives of African American communities, the latter – by the genre of “Polish jokes.” In the discussion on the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations, the intention was declared to generate an “objective joint Polish-Jewish history” that would renounce “mutual accusations.” The meeting participants identified the following accusations on the part of the Jews: blaming Poles for antisemitism before and during the Second World War and belittling the memory of the Polish Righteous; and on the part of Poles: emphasizing the history of the “golden age” of Polish Jews over the last thousand years, while diminishing significance of antisemitism in Poland. The third topic of the discussion boiled down to exchanging general observations as to the need for global peace and expressing satisfaction with the recent election of Pope John Paul II.

The conclusions from the meeting were written down in the *Orchard Lake Statement*. Its participants declared the establishment of a standing working team and organization of academic conferences on the history of Poles and Jews (*Orchard Lake Statement*, 1979).

31 According to Antony Polonsky, the Polish American – Jewish American Task Force “faced a major crisis in 1996 when Edward Moskal (PAC president, 1988–2005) attacked Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski for ‘excessive submission of the Polish authorities to Jewish demands’ and the AJC protested against what it described as ‘the unmistakable ring of old-style antisemitism’ in this statement. The discord led the PAC to withdraw its support for the council, although key Polish figures, above all Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, remained associated with it” (Polonsky, 2007, p. 122).

minority and other non-Jewish minorities in the US in the President's Commission on the Holocaust working on this museum?³² Both events took place at the same time, the work of the President's Commission and the meeting at Orchard Lake were coordinated by the same people, including Hyman Bookbinder, a close associate of the Jimmy Carter administration, who both worked in the Commission and organized the Orchard Lake meeting.

A. P.: I think that this was a coincidence more than anything else. But this is an interesting point, these were important meetings. Their greatest problem always concerned those mutual Polish-Jewish accusations. The Jews accused Poles of having collaborated with the Germans, of having been worse than the Germans; the Poles accused the Jews of having installed the communist system in Poland.

K. M.: The first accusation is relatively well justified, isn't it? The second one less so.

A. P.: The subject of the discussion was how to show that without the Germans the Holocaust wouldn't have happened. This was the most difficult thing, and a lot was said about that at Columbia.

K. M.: Were you present at the Columbia conference?

A. P.: No, I wasn't, but I knew people who were there. Łukasz Hirszowicz³³ was there. During the Columbia conference, the problem was that it took place in New York, and various people, non-academics, would come and disrupt the discussion. A conference held in Oxford one year later, in 1984, was much better organized. It was a very interesting conference in general. What do you know about Maciej Jachimczyk?³⁴

32 When US President Jimmy Carter announced the plan to build an American memorial museum of the Holocaust and the President's Commission on the Holocaust, established to design this museum, started its work, the activists of Polish minority associations conducted a campaign to pressure the presidential administration to enforce the extending of the Commission by including non-Jewish Poles, and to officially acknowledge non-Jewish Polish victims of the Nazis and Second World War as Holocaust victims who deserved to be commemorated in the proposed museum. The Polish minority activists also sought to extend the definition of the Holocaust, which they desired to be understood as the genocide of various European nationalities (including the Jews) by the German Nazis. Letters to the Commission and government institutions were sent by, among others, members of the Polish American Congress: Kazimierz Łukomski and Aloysius Mazewski, and Eugene Slotkowski from the Kościuszko Foundation. Similar demands were voiced also by Ukrainian and Hungarian minorities in the US. The changes proposed by the Polish minority were opposed by the President of the Commission, Elie Wiesel, and by some other members (including Benjamin Meed). US President and White House officials (including Zbigniew Brzeziński and Stuart Eizenstat) expressed their conviction that the Commission should be extended to include Poles and representatives of other non-Jewish national groups. Pressure from the administration resulted in the polarization of positions and to a conflict within the Commission. In March 1980, the US President unilaterally resolved to extend the Commission regardless of protests voiced by Wiesel and others. Polish non-Jewish members of the Commission involved PAC President Aloysius Mazewski and Rev. John Pawlikowski, a doctor of theology from Chicago (Linenthal, 1995, pp. 38–48).

33 Łukasz Hirszowicz (1920–1993) – a historian and expert on the history of the Middle East and Jewish history in Central and Eastern Europe, a researcher of international relations. Born in Grodno, in 1939 he emigrated to Palestine. Graduated in history and physics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1947. He joined the Communist Party of Palestine. In 1947, he left for Europe. Initially, he went to Prague where he participated in organizing a Jewish Museum. Moved to Warsaw in 1948, where he initially worked for the Institute of International Affairs. From 1950 to 1954, he lectured at the Higher School of Foreign Service, and in 1954 he started work at the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). He taught at the University of Warsaw in 1964–1968. Hirszowicz's publications focused on the contemporary history of the Middle East. He was forced into exile during the 1968 antisemitic campaign. From 1969 to 1971, he was a visiting scholar at St. Antony's College, Oxford; from 1971 to 1973, he worked for London School of Economics. In 1972, he was appointed editor-in-chief of the *Soviet Jewish Affairs* periodical, issued by the Institute of Jewish Affairs in Oxford; it was in this period that the periodical acquired an academic character. Hirszowicz held this office until 1992 (Abramsky, 1993).

34 Mansur Maciej Jachimczyk – in 1980–1981, a student of religious studies at the Faculty of Theology, Jagiellonian University, Kraków. Shortly before martial law was introduced in Poland, he left for the UK, and started

K. M.: I read a bit about him as a co-editor of the publication prepared after the Oxford conference (Abramsky, Jachimczyk, & Polonsky, 1986) and I thought that it might be better not to bring him up. In the 1990s, Polish Minister of Domestic Affairs, Zbigniew Siemiątkowski, considered him to be a man of the Russian secret service.³⁵

A. P.: Jachimczyk denied this.

K. M.: Jachimczyk was the editorial secretary of the *Polin* journal for five years.

A. P.: Yes, yes. He was a very complex person. I came across him when the Polish Students Appeal Fund was established to help Polish students in the UK after the martial law was introduced in Poland, and Jachimczyk came to Oxford within this project. A hundred persons, give or take a few, who studied with the support of this Fund, remained in the UK after the martial law was introduced, Jachimczyk and his wife, Małgorzata Unarska, among them. He is a man of great weaknesses, but a genius at the same time. The Oxford conference would have been impossible without him, he collected the funds.

K. M.: From what I have read, he lives in Monaco at present, where he has an oil trading company.

A. P.: He is in Kazakhstan and works for one of the banks there. In the 1980s, he studied theology and it was he who convinced Cardinal Jorge María Mejía³⁶ to support the

his Master's studies in theology at Oxford University (1982–1985), where he co-organized an international conference on Polish-Jewish relations (September 17–21, 1984). He participated in establishing the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford, and co-founded the academic periodical *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, where he was the editorial secretary, 1985–1989 (Jachimczyk, 1998, 2016). In the late 1980s, he suspended his academic career and, having received an offer to go to Russia from one of the London banking institutions, he went there and spent three years establishing contacts with Chechen politicians, activists and businessmen (Jachimczyk, 2013). In 1994, he established the Chechen Information Center in Kraków, an institution playing the role of an international cooperation hub, simultaneously being an educational center and a business exchange platform. After the end of the first Chechen war (1994–1996), Jachimczyk acted as an international affairs adviser to the Chechen government and a personal adviser to Khozh-Akhmed Nukhayev, a Chechen businessman, politician and the head of Chechen secret service, whom Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski described as the boss of the Chechen mafia (Sikorski & Warzecha, 2007, p. 44). In 1996, in Abu Dhabi, Jachimczyk converted to Islam and took the name Mansur (Jachimczyk, 2013). In 1997, he was one of the founders of the Caucasian Common Market (CCM) enterprise, established in London with the aim of stabilizing the North Caucasus and ensuring economic influence in postwar Chechnya to British and Western enterprises and institutions (Gall, 1997; Jamestown Foundation, 1997). The CCM founders were, alongside Jachimczyk, Khozh-Akhmed Nukhayev and Lord Alistair McAlpine, formerly the treasurer of the British Conservative Party and adviser to Margaret Thatcher. The Chechen Information Center in Kraków was a representative of the CCM. In 1997, Jachimczyk mediated in negotiations with the Polish government regarding the construction of the Caspian oil pipeline. In 2007, he represented the Kazakh oil industry and acted as an intermediary in the sale of oil extraction licenses, mediating in selling the concession for Ryszard Krauze, the owner of Prokom, an IT company. This investment did not turn out to be beneficial (Matys, 2013; Reszka, 2007). At present, Mansur Maciej Jachimczyk is an entrepreneur and investor managing several companies in Poland, Kazakhstan and Monaco (Jachimczyk, 2016).

35 In 1997, Zbigniew Siemiątkowski, minister coordinating intelligence services in the Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz government, referred to Jachimczyk as a “man connected with Russian secret service, who poses a threat to Poland’s security.” Jachimczyk denied this and announced he would sue Minister Siemiątkowski and the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, which was the first to publish the Minister’s words (Jachimczyk, 1998; Reszka, 2007; “Siemiątkowski podaje nazwiska,” 1997). Jachimczyk argued that “Siemiątkowski issued his statement one day before I left for Washington, where I was scheduled to meet President Ufelson, the International Monetary Fund and leading US politicians, including Zbigniew Brzeziński. Is the accusation that concurred with my trip to Washington as the advisor to the head of Chechen Secret Service, Nukhayev, a coincidence or is it not?” (Jachimczyk, 1998).

36 Jorge María Mejía (1923–2014) – an Argentinian Catholic priest, a lecturer at the Catholic University of Buenos Aires, from 1977 an official in the Vatican, named the “pioneer of Catholic-Jewish dialogue” (Marrus, 2016, p. 27). From 1977, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews. An expert in theology during the Second Vatican Council, appointed bishop in 1986, Archbishop in 1994 and named Secretary of the Congregation for Bishops. From 1998, the lead archivist of the Vatican Archives and Library (Allen, 2004, p. 221; Lentz, 2002, pp. 209–210).

conference. The Cardinal was very close with John Paul II. Jachimczyk appealed to everybody, and the conference would have not have taken place, if it hadn't been for him. Then he befriended Jerzy Kosiński. As a student in Oxford, Jachimczyk planned to write a doctoral dissertation. It is also most interesting how he got to co-edit the post-conference publication. He told me that he would collect the money for publication and being one of the editors would be very helpful. Several years ago, he announced that he was collecting money among oil industry companies in Kazakhstan and wanted to publish the Polish version of the conference publication. He found somebody in Kraków who translated the book and would like to publish it in a publishing house there.

K. M.: How did you react?

A. P.: I told him that it was impossible to print this book in its original form because we were thirty years on with research, and a new introduction was necessary. I wrote this introduction, but the book has still not been published. Maciej Jachimczyk was also instrumental in organizing the conference in Jerusalem in 1988, less involved in the organization of the conference in Kraków in 1986 and the one in Brandeis in 1986. In fact, it was he who got me and Felek Scharf to partake in organizing these conferences.

K. M.: How was that possible? Was he the author of the idea?

A. P.: He was a young man, a Catholic, who said that the line of the Second Vatican Council needed to be continued and he was highly committed to it. Now he is a Muslim.

K. M.: This was somehow related to his activities in Chechnya.

A. P.: Yes, he was a secretary at the Chechen Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

K. M.: Coming back to organizing the Oxford conference: were you already involved in Polish-Jewish studies back then, or not yet?

A. P.: No. I became interested in this subject a bit earlier than that. I did not attend the conference at Columbia, but I was already on the editorial team of *Soviet Jewish Affairs*.

K. M.: You published the accounts of all these conferences in this journal (Polonsky, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988). Łukasz Hirszowicz wrote the account from the Columbia conference (Hirszowicz, 1983), the one in Oxford was covered by you.

A. P.: Yes. I knew them very well, Łukasz Hirszowicz and his wife, Maria Hirszowicz, who was one of those excellent sociology professors who lost their jobs in Poland in March 1968. I knew them very well, we were friends. When Hirszowicz returned from the US, I told him that I would like to get involved in this work.

K. M.: Where was *Soviet Jewish Affairs* located?

A. P.: In London. It was published by the Institute of Jewish Affairs; the first issues date back to the 1970s, this was a very interesting periodical.

K. M.: Very. They published a series of highly critical and insightful articles on Polish politics. The authors featured, for instance, Abraham Brumberg, an editor of *Problems of*

Communism, who had no illusions as far as antisemitism was concerned (e.g., Brumberg, 1990, 1994).

A. P.: Yes. Hirszowicz was an instrumental figure there. Before the war, he studied in the Mir Yeshiva; as a communist he had to leave Poland and he went to Palestine; after the war, he left Palestine to go to Prague; from the early postwar years, he was in Poland. In the Institute of International Affairs he wrote about the Middle East and the policy of the Third Reich towards the Middle East (e.g., Hirszowicz, 1958, 1966). Chimen Abramsky was another editor of the *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, also an ex-communist and professor of Jewish history at the University of London. Hirszowicz was the editor-in-chief. This was a very active team.

K. M.: Was it through *Soviet Jewish Affairs* that you became involved in Polish-Jewish history?

A. P.: Yes.

K. M.: Before then, you wrote about Piłsudski, and also about nationalism (Polonsky, 1972, 1980).

A. P.: Yes, as well as about the Polish cause during the Second World War and about Eastern Europe between the two wars (Polonsky, 1975, 1976). Together with Bolesław Drukier, I also published a book about the beginnings of the communist system in Poland (Drukier & Polonsky, 1980). Drukier was a 1968 émigré and he took copies of documents from the archives of the Communist Party (PZPR). Hirszowicz invited me to edit this book alongside Drukier. Later on, Andrzej Garlicki published the originals of the documents that Drukier had brought to the UK. Garlicki was my academic advisor in Poland and I knew him very well. He was able to convince the censors that the original documents should be published, instead of these copies that Drukier had made.

K. M.: These documents were published with some kind of commentary, weren't they?

A. P.: With an introduction written by me. But these documents differed from the originals. Drukier could not make copies so he transcribed them, not always precisely. After he left Poland, he lived in Denmark; he has passed away, but his son is there. As you know, there is still a community of 1968 émigrés in Denmark. Drukier worked at the university in Aarhus.

K. M.: I would like to go back to the conference in Oxford. I am interested in how you became involved in it.

A. P.: There were two reasons. I wanted to get involved because – as you know – I wrote about interwar Poland and you cannot handle this topic without making references to the Jewish community. I wrote about this community as well, but it wasn't my main interest. I was born in South Africa. In a sense, my point of departure was to try to understand the situation of the South African multiracial and multicultural society. The Jewish community in South Africa had mainly Lithuanian roots, they lived isolated from other groups,

although they were now English-speaking; but the general society of the RSA looked the same as when described by George H. Calpin in 1941, who wrote that there was the South African state but there were no South Africans (Calpin, 1941). Now in turn, they are talking about the Rainbow Nation.³⁷ It is a miracle that this change has occurred but, on the other hand, Jacob Zuma is not the best politician and populism is present everywhere, including South Africa. All in all, this South African Jewish society was completely isolated, and it was also highly Zionist. I went to an elementary school which offered extra-curricular classes in modern Hebrew and I learned to speak it. I also spoke German and I learned Yiddish. I could explore the history of Polish Jews; I spoke all the languages that were necessary for that, apart from Polish, at the time. The work for *Soviet Jewish Affairs* was important to me, as was the entire period of the Solidarity movement.

The opposition and the “Polish-Jewish problem”

K. M.: Were you in Poland then?

A. P.: I lived in the UK, but I think I went to Poland twice in the time of the early Solidarity. I was strongly involved with the BBC World Service and BBC Polish Service. Eugeniusz Smolar was deputy head of that BBC section and I worked with him a lot. I didn't approach Jewish matters from a Jewish perspective as much as from a Polish one, which was also the outcome of my conversations with the people from Solidarity that I knew – Jacek Kuroń, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and others. They were of the opinion that the Polish-Jewish problem might strongly impede the formation of opposition structures; they mentioned speeches by Marian Jurczyk.³⁸ They wanted to oppose this. This was one of the impulses that led me to take up this direction of historical research.

K. M.: How did they want to oppose that? Does that mean that they wanted to talk about antisemitism?

A. P.: No, they asked me if I had contacts in Jewish circles that could be talked to. I had such contacts.

K. M.: What standpoint did they want to take in those discussions? Who expressed such will?

A. P.: The underground left wing of Solidarity.

K. M.: Which year was that?

³⁷ The concept of “Rainbow Nation” was meant to express the optimism of the formation of an open and tolerant South African society after the collapse of the apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994. The notion was coined by Desmond Tutu.

³⁸ Marian Jurczyk – president of the Solidarity labor union in the West Pomerania region of Poland, a leader of the union's right-wing faction and a critic of Lech Wałęsa. During a rally organized at a furniture factory in Trzebiatów on October 25, 1981, he said that the communist government of Poland were “three fourths Jews, traitors of the fatherland.” He also mentioned the necessity to hang communists (Ramet, 1999, p. 103; Zadworny, 2015).

A. P.: The period from 1980 to 1983. In a sense, the interest of the Poles in those matters stemmed from moral grounds. There was an emptiness following 1968; in the early 1980s, people realized that they had been manipulated by the government during the 1968 crisis. Poles also felt better after Solidarity had been formed, they showed to the world that they were not only romantic insurgents but they were able to form a semi-legal social movement which for fifteen months worked towards establishing a new system.

K. M.: It was also about a historical system, wasn't it? This was the time when Polish history was being told anew.

A. P.: I think that 1968 was important for two reasons. First, it marked the bankruptcy of revisionism. Those who believed that communism could be reformed from the inside, for instance Jacek Kuroń and Stanisław Krajewski, became disappointed and tried to create an alternative, clandestine circulation of culture, and an alternative society.

K. M.: I have a question related to that, which I believe is significant. The period from 1979 to 1980 brought a change in Polish society's self-narrative, a change of self-perception, in which religious and nationalistic themes reemerged. In 1979, John Paul II came to Poland and gave a sermon on Victory Square in Warsaw, where he repeated such phrases as "Polish nation" and "Polish soil"³⁹ some eleven times. The key elements of the imagery formed earlier by the National Democrats and Roman Dmowski were replicated by John Paul II, combined with Catholicism, and returned to Poles. I don't know if you remember that towards the end of this sermon the pope referred to the Warsaw ghetto, but he did not speak about the Jews as being Polish, he spoke about the Jews as "the peoples that have lived with us and among us."⁴⁰

A. P.: He always spoke about "nation" when referring to Jews, he spoke like this in Jerusalem as well...

K. M.: And I have a question here: was that a problem then? The mass in Auschwitz was next. A cross and Polish flag were planted on a railroad ramp in Birkenau and John Paul II didn't mention the word "Jew" even once – well, he used it once when speaking about

39 In the homily given on June 2, 1979, on Victory Square (Plac Zwycięstwa, today Plac Piłsudskiego) in Warsaw, John Paul II spoke about himself as "a son of the Polish Nation, of the land of Poland"; and speaking about Poland, he referred to territorial symbolism, where Poland was the "Polish soil" inhabited by the "Polish nation." When talking about Polish society, which he equaled to the community of Polish Catholics, the pope referred exclusively to the term "Polish nation"; the word "society" was not used even once, whereas the word "community" was used synonymously with "nation" and "family." The phrase "Polish soil / land of Poland" was used eleven times throughout the homily and "Polish nation" and "our nation" – seven times [in the original Polish version – translator's note]. The core of the speech by John Paul II is the message that the essence of Polish national community cannot be fully comprehended without a reference to Catholicism. The pope argues that "man cannot be fully understood without Christ." Since "man cannot be understood apart from this community that is constituted by the nation, [...] [i]t is impossible without Christ to understand this nation" (John Paul II, 1979a).

40 The exact words of John Paul II were: "All that in the hands of the Mother of God – at the foot of the cross on Calvary and in the Upper Room of Pentecost! All that – the history of the motherland shaped for a thousand years [...] by each son and daughter of the motherland [...]. All that – including the history of the peoples that have lived with us and among us, such as those who died in their hundreds of thousands within the walls of the Warsaw ghetto" (John Paul II, 1979a).

Edith Stein.⁴¹ He referred to a “plaque in the Hebrew language”; he used euphemisms all the time. Polish nationalist discourse was being modified and expanded. Did anybody feel that this was a problem then? Jurczyk – fine, Jurczyk used overtly antisemitic language, but was anything sensed apart from this case?

A. P.: The way I remember it, that was not a problem. Jurczyk was perceived as an exception, the pope was received as a hero. The themes that can be interpreted as national or nationalistic today were not viewed in this manner then. People talked about the truth all the time instead. I wasn’t in Poland then, but I remember the pope’s visit very well. I knew Józef Garliński well. He wrote his doctoral dissertation under my supervision, which is interesting because he is older than myself, but he would say: “Nobody is taking me seriously because I do not have a doctorate.” He called me and said that “this is the compensation for all our suffering in the 20th century.”

K. M.: What is?

A. P.: The pope’s visit. Garliński wasn’t a nationalist, he was a bit apologetic, but his words illustrate how people interpreted the pope’s visit then. That a different, non-communist Poland emerged to show it existed. This sermon about the “elder brother”...⁴²

K. M.: That was later.

A. P.: But it was all connected. The pope mentioned his Jewish friend from Wadowice, Jerzy Kluger. The *Nostra aetate* declaration was very important for the Jews, it was one of the stimuli that triggered a new wave of interest in the Christian-Jewish relations in America. I also remember that the first Solidarity enjoyed a very positive reception in the US.

K. M.: It was utter fascination.

A. P.: Absolutely. Wałęsa is in some ways a problematic figure, but I remember interviewing him alongside Eugeniusz Smolar during the Bydgoszcz crisis; it was a very tense moment, everybody expected pacification; it was March 1981, if I remember well. I worked with Smolar then, he made this interview, he asked questions and Wałęsa answered them most cautiously.

K. M.: What did Smolar ask about?

A. P.: Whether the police would intervene, whether the situation had to be mitigated, what the threats were. Wałęsa said that all these situations would have to be resolved

41 In the homily given at the ramp of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp on June 7, 1979, five days after the Warsaw mass, John Paul II asked: “But was Father Maximilian Kolbe the only one? Certainly he won a victory that was immediately felt by his companions in captivity and is still felt today by the Church and the world. However, there is no doubt that many other similar victories were won. I am thinking, for example, of the death in the gas chamber of the concentration camp of the Carmelite Sister Benedicta of the Cross, whose name in the world was Edith Stein, who was an illustrious pupil of Husserl and became one of the glories of contemporary German philosophy, and who was a descendant of a Jewish family living in Wrocław” (John Paul II, 1979b). This is the only case when the word “Jew” is used throughout the homily.

42 Visiting a synagogue in Rome, John Paul II said: “The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers” (John Paul II, 1986; Kowalski, 2011).

one by one. At the end, Smolar asked: “What do you think, will Poland exist ten years from now?” Wałęsa replied to that: “Who knows? I think that Poles will come to an agreement and we will have a democratic and pluralist state. But don’t think that I want to spend all my time working in the union. This is hard work. What I want, when it is all over, is to take a rest, to go fishing and to pick mushrooms.” That was charming.

K. M.: Solidarity itself was equally charming. When I read US press coverage from that period, their fascination is unbelievable.

A. P.: That is precisely why Mazowiecki and the other Solidarity advisors miscalculated. From the very beginning, they should have stayed put and worked in Gdańsk; but they thought that Wałęsa was good at talking but he could not think. This was that typical approach that the intelligentsia would have to a worker.

K. M.: Let me ask a question also about this transformation of the Polish historical narrative that occurred in the time of Solidarity. This is what Moshe Rosman wrote about in the context of the historical narrative presented by the Polin Museum: “[l]iberated at last from Communism, but still heirs (albeit reluctant ones) to its legacy, Polish historians searching for the historical roots of a non-Communist, liberal, independent, democratic, genuinely ‘Polish’ Poland found them in the multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious Poland of the past” (Rosman, 2012, p. 366).

A. P.: But I remember also that the first article written about the Kielce pogrom by Krystyna Kersten was published in underground press (Kersten, 1981). An apologetic – apologetic is a bit too strong a word – an idealized picture of Poland before the partitions definitely prevailed, but most of the people I knew in Solidarity were convinced that the mistakes of prewar Poland must not be repeated. They referred mainly to the prewar period, the war was still taboo. Yet all of them knew about the existence of antisemitism in prewar Poland and about the pogroms, also in the postwar time. One can see the same irony here as in the case of the changes to the two last galleries of the Polin Museum: Kielce was perceived as an event worse than Jedwabne, also because nobody knew about Jedwabne then.

I know Jan Gross well; when he found the documents about Jedwabne, the account by Szymon Wąsersztajn, he called me and said: I found those documents but they are very difficult to believe. He tracked down also the trial files later on.⁴³ *Neighbors* were published in 2000, but I remember that in the 1990s, in a discussion in the *New York Times*, someone wrote an apologetic article about Poland and said that one couldn’t believe the *yizkor bucher*⁴⁴ of Jedwabne because it said there that Poles had locked the Jews up in a barn and set it on fire. We were invited to the *New York Times* with Gross and we both said the same thing: that this was an improbable event, but it needed to be investi-

43 This refers to the court trials of the perpetrators of the Jedwabne massacre: that of Bolesław Ramotowski and 21 other defendants and of Józef Sobuta; these cases were tried by the Regional Court in Łomża in May 1949 and November 1953, respectively (Gross, 2001, pp. 15–16, 27).

44 *Yizkor bucher* are memorial books written after the war by the survivors from the Holocaust with the aim to commemorate the history of the communities they used to live in.

gated. So there had been debates on prewar and postwar history. The crisis of 1968 was crucial for the shape of these historical studies.

K. M.: Was the 1968 crisis important as an antisemitic campaign or as what you name the collapse of the communist revisionism?

A. P.: These are different layers. One concerns this collapse of revisionism. Another significant context is the fact that a number of participants of the student movement of 1968 discovered their Jewish identity later on. This was the case of Stanisław Krajewski, Kostek Gebert and others. The third element pertains to the response to the government propaganda in 1968. Paweł Machcewicz wrote a good book on this subject. Machcewicz was a student of Garlicki, who sent his book to me. Garlicki never wrote about these things, but his wife, Olga, is Jewish... He was always interested in those matters. So the third element is related to the fact that a considerable part of Polish society supported – not so much supported as accepted – the propaganda of Mieczysław Moczar. In a sense, what Moczar said about the Holocaust is very similar to what the apologetic Polish historians are saying today.

K. M.: I found it quite surprising that the historical narrative in 1968 was very much like the line of reasoning of the authors from Polish American émigré circles, who in 1980 protested against the composition of the first design commission at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. That was the time of the conflict between President Carter and the chairman of the presidential commission, Elie Wiesel. Carter tried very hard to include non-Jewish Poles in the commission, Wiesel was against, but eventually he surrendered. The letters and articles written by American Poles back then use language taken straight from Moczar.⁴⁵

A. P.: This language was certainly important. In the time of Solidarity, the Grunwald Patriotic Union (Zjednoczenie Patriotyczne “Grunwald”) and similar groups tried to use the same tone. I would say that Solidarity was a coalition of the intelligentsia, the Church and workers, and that all these groups had their own goals, but the majority of the intelligentsia that supported Solidarity was anti-antisemitic. In a sense, their attitude was a response to the attempts at using antisemitism by the Grunwald Union and similar groups.

K. M.: And the intelligentsia’s anti-antisemitism was a part of their political struggle with the government as well.

A. P.: Yes. The fact that the government tried to use antisemitism in 1968 compromised antisemitism in the eyes of many supporters of the opposition and encouraged them to seek its sources. This is partly what motivated Polish researchers who made their contribution to the Oxford and Columbia conferences. Other sources were the emergence

⁴⁵ Kazimierz Łukomski from the Polish American Congress published an article in the PAC bulletin in February 1979, where he denied that antisemitism existed in Poland, accused the Jews of having contributed to the Holocaust and said that, “there might have been excesses here and there, but Poland protected its Jewish citizens,” although it could have been difficult in his opinion, since: “how do you help people who are themselves resigned to passively accept their fate?” (Linenthal, 1995, p. 39).

of Solidarity and the concept of a new Poland as well as a new surge of interest in the Holocaust following the trial of Eichmann, and these activities that started in the US in the early 1980s. It is true that not much was written in Poland about the history of Polish Jews in the 1970s, that was taboo then.

K. M.: But such writing would not yet be politically useful in the 1970s, would it? There was the so-called “Jewish” issue of the *Znak* monthly published in 1983, where Stefan Wilkanowicz wrote in the editorial: “why are we taking up the Jewish issue today? Because it is there, because it had to be taken up at some time” (Wilkanowicz, 1983, p. 171). Of course, this is not the answer to such a question, Wilkanowicz probably did not know the answer to it himself; but this was also the very moment when a nostalgia for the prewar Poland got articulated and when the anti-antisemitic argument became political. This issue of *Znak* came out shortly before the Oxford conference and in this context I am curious about the common points in the motivation of Polish and American researchers who attended this conference. From what I know, absolutely everybody was there. There were Poles, with Władysław Bartoszewski and Czesław Miłosz, they came with some expectations about Polish-Jewish history, and there were almost all the American and Israeli historians who had been to Columbia the previous year, where the foundations for a research framework had been laid. They all met in Oxford. I have the impression that individual people might have had a joint need to explore history, but very different motivations. What was it like?

The Oxford conference, 1984

A. P.: Firstly, why did so many people come, primarily from Poland?

K. M.: Do you know why?

A. P.: I know it very well. A lot of invited people who came from Poland in June 1984 – Miłosz, who lived in the US, was also invited – came as a result of Maciej Jachimczyk’s efforts.

K. M.: Did Jachimczyk invite Miłosz?

A. P.: He was a genius as far as such things were concerned. Leszek Kołakowski felt the same about him, everybody adored him. The thing was, as it turned out later, that he was enormously gifted, but he used his skills for all kinds of purposes. There was the problem of how to invite scholars from Poland. Before the Columbia conference, the invitees from Poland did not get visas. Only Witold Tyloch and Jerzy Tomaszewski went to Columbia. Before the Oxford conference, Jerzy Wiatr arrived in London. I had known him for a long time. We shared a similar interest, namely the army in politics. He was a son of a general. Wiatr called me and suggested a meeting. He said: “You have to understand, not everything in Poland is the way people say.” To which I replied: “Jurek, neither

you will convince me, nor I will convince you, but there's something else I would like to talk about – we are organizing an academic conference on the history of Polish Jews and we have nobody from Poland, because the Polish government has refused to issue visas." He thought for a while and said: "You're right, this is an important topic and we can help you here. If you want to come to the Polish embassy on July 22, I will introduce you to the person who is in charge of these matters." The embassy was being boycotted then, understandably, but I went there. Wiatr introduced me to a Zygmunt Bako from the embassy. At present, he is employed by a private security company, like all of them. This Bako was the embassy's first secretary and an officer of the Polish Security Service (SB). I explained the matter to him and he said: "What you are saying is very interesting, stay after the reception, please, and we will talk about it." We went to his office after the reception and drank a bottle of whisky there, as a ritual of truth. I more or less repeated what I had said about the conference, and he said: "You have convinced me; I'm writing to Warsaw right away, these visas need to be issued." The funniest thing was that, after the conference, this Bako called me and said: "This was a great success, could we meet for lunch?" "All right." We met for lunch. I've found his report from this conversation in the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), but what he wrote in the report was not what he told me then. He said: "What we have done exists only on a cultural plane. Could you convince the leaders of the English Jewry to pressure the American Jewry to convince Reagan to withdraw from the Star Wars project?⁴⁶ That would be some achievement." I needed to think very fast. I wanted to tell him that I did not have a direct phone number to the Elders of Zion, but I replied that if the Soviet government had had as intelligent a policy towards the Jews as the Polish government, everything would have been much easier. Interestingly, he did not take notes as we spoke, and in the report for Warsaw he wrote that we discussed how to establish contacts in the Israeli circles that were interested in developing diplomatic relations with Poland. It's true, we talked about this as well, but he took a note only of this one thing.

What is more important in the context of the participants' expectations, though, is what happened during the conference. Let me start with the discussion on the Holocaust, one of the most important at the conference. One of the mistakes of the Columbia conference was that its organizers dedicated only half a day to the Holocaust, and therefore the participants had the impression that the topic was not discussed thoroughly. On top of that, the conference was held in New York, and the organizers did not monitor the entrance, so many Polish New Yorkers came there, as well as Jewish ones, people who had survived the war and had extremely bad experiences; therefore the atmosphere was highly unpleasant. In Oxford, we dedicated an entire day to the topic of the Holocaust and we had a very serious discussion with such participants as Israel Gutman, Joseph Lichten and Józef Garliński. Interestingly, in the context of your question about different

⁴⁶ This refers to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a US defensive system against ballistic nuclear missiles. The system would comprise both earth-based stations to intercept missiles and satellite devices in orbit. The construction of the system, popularly called the "Star Wars," was announced by US President Ronald Reagan on March 23, 1983.

attitudes to history, the discussion slowly switched from English to Polish. It took place before lunch, I don't know how it happened but people started speaking only in Polish as it made them feel better. Scharf, Gutman, Lichten and others. This made the whole discussion much easier, it was published later and you can read it (Bartoszewski et al., 1987). I remember that when we were going for lunch, Garliński came up to me and said: "This shows that Polish is a global language."

K. M.: And that was important to him?

A. P.: Very much so. Both the "global language" and that this discussion was possible. It's the same thing as with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. If you want to speak about these matters seriously, you need to speak Polish because, even though Poles speak English very well, it makes the discussion more difficult.

Now about Miłosz. Miłosz was a very complex person, but I respect him very much. It was an evening at the Yarnton Manor, a building from the 17th century, very beautiful. Miłosz was asked to read his poetry there, and I conducted the meeting. That's how it started: we were entering the building, when Miłosz stopped in front of the door, saying: "We need a good entrance so you walk in before me" – he was an actor – "I'll walk in after you." I agreed. At this moment we saw a bat fly by and Miłosz said: "It's my familiar." Then he entered and said to the audience: "I'm going to read my most difficult poems. I usually don't read these poems to Jewish audiences because I could be misunderstood." He said all that in Polish and it was interpreted into English. He read *A poor Christian looks at the ghetto* and *Campo di Fiori*. *Campo di Fiori* came first and later *The poor Christian...* It made an enormous impression. The editor of the *Problems of Communism*, Abraham Brumberg, read poems by Jerzy Ficowski after that.

K. M.: Ficowski was extremely popular at that time; his poems enjoyed a great reception on the wave of this nostalgia.

A. P.: Brumberg read Ficowski's poetry; he was a very good reader. Brumberg was there, Krajewski was there.

K. M.: Absolutely everybody was present there. How did it happen that so many people who were so important for this subject took part? It's hard to comprehend.

A. P.: This was all due to Jachimczyk's efforts. He made it happen. On the last day, it was Friday, we were sitting in Somerville College, and Felek Scharf read, also in Polish, his paper titled *Cum ira et studio*. I was sitting next to Jan Błoński and he kept taking notes all the time.

K. M.: Błoński wrote his essay *Poor Poles look at the ghetto* with reference to Scharf's paper.

A. P.: Yes. Also on the last day, at Leszek Kołakowski's house, we decided to start the *Polin* journal.

K. M.: Was the conference still going on?

A. P.: I don't remember exactly, it might have been one day after the conference, at Leszek Kołakowski's house in Oxford. This was another of Jachimczyk's ideas. That is precisely why he is difficult to avoid in this story, and he is difficult to describe at the same time. I'm trying to write my own autobiography now and this is quite difficult.

K. M.: I understand that Jachimczyk came and said, "Let's make a conference"?

A. P.: Yes. He had befriended David Patterson, President of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, and they organized it all together.

K. M.: What was the relationship between the Oxford conference and that at Columbia? These two events are logically connected. Columbia was first, followed by the Oxford one year later. This could not have been solely Maciej Jachimczyk's endeavor. The Columbia conference was coorganized by people from the American Jewish Committee and the Polish American Congress.

A. P.: The American Jewish Committee had nothing to do with Oxford. We contacted them later, but that was a separate matter. The people who were strongly involved in Columbia, Michael Stanislawski and others, were invited to Oxford and a few of them came. Americans had a problem with the date of the Oxford conference, which took place in September. This is one of the differences between the academic systems in the US and Europe. The semester started later in Europe, and people from the US could not come in the second week of the semester.

K. M.: Does that mean that such AJC members as Gary Rubin had nothing to do with Oxford?

A. P.: Not much. But the third conference in Kraków and the fourth one in Brandeis attracted everybody. Józef Gierowski was instrumental, as was Jerzy Tomaszewski. Later on, Polish embassies and diplomacy saw that that was important. In Jerusalem, Gierowski read a letter from Wojciech Jaruzelski saying that the situation would change compared to 1968... Gierowski was a great person, but as the President of the Jagiellonian University he had to accept much during the martial law, for instance, awarding an *honoris causa* doctorate to Andreas Papandreu,⁴⁷ who said that the martial law had been the best alternative. Gierowski was heavily criticized for that.

K. M.: Coming back to Oxford. Did the fact that you presided over the organizing committee follow from your involvement in the studies into the history of Polish Jews? That was the first time you acted as the organizer of these studies. The situation was similar with the *Polin* periodical, where you were appointed editor-in-chief.

A. P.: This was about choosing a person capable of organizing it. I was invited by Jachimczyk, but also by David Patterson and Łukasz Hirszowicz. But you are right, this was the first time. Feliks Scharf was of great significance in the context of this organizational

⁴⁷ Andreas Papandreu (1919–1996) – a Greek politician and economist, a founder and member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), served as Prime Minister of Greece twice (1981–1989 and 1993–1996).

activity. Scharf and Jachimczyk were friends. He was a very interesting person, the author of the book *Poland, what have I to do with thee* (Scharf, 1996). He had an English wife. He was a very gifted man, but he worked as a printer, he had his own printing house. The opportunity to talk about these matters with Jachimczyk in Polish was a new experience for him. They also shared another topic with Jachimczyk – both of them were from Kraków. Scharf came to the Kraków conference, too. He spoke beautiful, prewar Polish. This was charming as well.

Hegemonic reading of Jewish history

K. M.: There is one more thing which I believe was important, and I would like to ask about it. It is about the intellectual framework which was present both in the discussions on the Polin Museum and during those conferences that could be described in terms of a new interpretation of the political theory of diaspora nationalism, a theory developed before the war in Eastern Europe by Simon Dubnow.⁴⁸ Karen Underhill interprets diaspora nationalism in the context of contemporary studies on the history of Polish Jews as an idea which binds a new interpretation of Jewish history with Poland.⁴⁹ Was this topic touched upon during those discussions at all?

A. P.: This is more present today than it was then. During the Oxford conference, the situation in Israel was much better. This was the beginning of the peace process. The conference in Jerusalem coincided with the end of the first intifada, and everybody hoped for the events to develop in a new direction. That new direction did not materialize, as we can see today, but at that time, all those people in Israel who were involved in the exploration of the history of Polish Jews thought about taking a new approach to the national Jewish movement, or to Jewish nationalism. The situation is a bit different today. The Israeli academic community is sharply divided into people connected with religion and those who remain secular, and Israel is no longer so attractive for a large part of the Diaspora. That's why Yiddish attracts increased interest, as does Polin as a great center

48 Diaspora nationalism is a political idea created at the turn of the 20th century on the basis of Jewish autonomism by historian, writer and politician Simon Dubnow (1860–1941). Dubnow sought the source of the identity of Diaspora Jews in their “spiritual autonomy,” or independence based on their own secular culture and social life, but not on their own institutionalized authorities or a pursuit of their own territory. In this sense, the ideology of autonomism was the political opposite of both assimilation and Zionism. The fundamental source of the “spiritual autonomy” was to be ensured by the culture of the Yiddish language. Diaspora nationalism was close to the literary and cultural direction of Yiddishism; its best-known related academic institution was the Institute for Jewish Research (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut, YIVO); while the Jewish People's Party in Poland (Yidishe Folkspartai in Poyln) and, to a certain extent, the General Jewish Labor Bund, conveyed this ideology in the political context.

49 Karen Underhill writes: “In the present context, the *doikeyt* model [of the idea of ‘being from here’ embraced by the ideology of diaspora nationalism, or the Jewish belonging in a place – K. M.] returns us to the challenge posed by changing narratives of [Jewish – K. M.] belonging in Poland and throughout Central and Eastern Europe. [...] the *doikeyt* model is one powerful reminder that Polish/Jewish culture and history have long contained post-national or supra-national approaches to thinking about and teaching about culture and history in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the Polish–Lithuanian Union and later Commonwealth (1410–1795), and later Independent Poland, both characterized by a constitutive hybridity, or linguistic and cultural plurality, provided the cultural and political space in which [...] written and oral Jewish literature would develop” (Underhill, 2014, p. 699).

of the Diaspora. This is a sensitive issue, though. Kostek Gebert said that the Polin Museum was a museum of Bundism.⁵⁰ Of course it isn't, Zionism is presented very well in the Museum. You can't imagine that Zionism could be shown in such a way in a British museum, for instance. What is important in the Polin Museum's narrative, however, is the conviction that the history of Jews in Poland is not a tragedy from beginning to the end.

K. M.: There are several themes related to this conviction, and to the diaspora nationalism which is being reconstructed at present, themes that I am trying to comprehend. I'm under an impression that the form of the Columbia conference was significantly influenced by the texts by Salo W. Baron, including his postulate to renounce the vision of the history of the Jews in pre-modern Europe as a history of persecution, a vision Baron critically named the "lachrymose theory of Jewish history" (Baron, 1928/1964, p. 63). I am not sure, but it seems to me that this is close to Ezra Mendelsohn's criticism of the "hegemonic reading" of Jewish history, the reading which, he believed, consisted in the conviction that Polish antisemitism was permanent and all-pervasive, thereby depriving Jews in the prewar years of any chance of staying in Poland (Mendelsohn, 1995, pp. 3–4). In the opinion of Mendelsohn, this way of reading history was founded by right-wing Zionist politicians, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir⁵¹ (Mendelsohn, 1995, pp. 3–4). These debates are clearly inscribed in the dispute over the role of Israel in modern Jewish identity that you referred to a moment ago, but I have the impression that in Poland, and in the Polish context, the voices in this debate have been trivialized and read without the true intention to understand their meaning. In relation to this, the words of Norman Davies are utterly incredible and downright outrageous in my opinion. In his text titled *Ethnic diversity in twentieth-century Poland* Davies writes:

In my view, Błoński [writing the essay *Poor Poles look at the ghetto* – K. M.] has set an example which all parties to the Polish-Jewish debate could profitably follow. On the Jewish side it is also clear that Zionism triumphed at the end of the war, and that in the last twenty years or so, the more nationalistic elements within Zionism have risen to prominence. [...] Certainly, the political atmosphere is bound to affect the conduct and direction of academic studies and debates, in the Diaspora no less than in Israel. In which case, one might conclude that in prevailing circumstances, if we are to understand the rich variety and achievements of prewar Jewry, there may be a special need to emphasize the non-Zionist and non-nationalist elements of the story (Davies, 1989, p. 155).

For me, this is the language of 1968 in Poland, almost the language of Moczar, completely detached from the dispute over the text by Baron, to take just one example.

50 Bundism – political ideology of the General Jewish Labor Bund, a socialist workers' party established in Vilnius in 1897. Bundism combined Dubnow's ideas of Jewish politico-cultural autonomy in the Diaspora (alongside its anti-Zionist ideas) with the pursuit of socialist socio-political reform.

51 Mendelsohn writes about the "hegemonic reading of Jewish history": "According to this almost canonical reading, the most obvious lesson of modern Polish-Jewish history is that, given the all-pervasive, perhaps even uniquely virulent character of Polish anti-Semitism, the Jews had absolutely no future in that country. This sentiment is shared by politicians, writers, historians, contemporaries and those whose only knowledge of the subject derives from study. Menachem Begin tells us in his memoirs, published in 1951, that 'In Poland there lived millions of Jews surrounded by violent anti-Semitism'; and that Poland was 'a country with millions of poverty-stricken Jews, persecuted, dreaming of Zion'. His successor as Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, is reported to have remarked that the Poles imbibed anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk" (Mendelsohn, 1995, pp. 3–4).

A. P.: Well, Davies will be Davies. We invited a lot of people from Israel to the conference at the Polin Museum in May 2015. Mendelsohn was to come as well, but he died around that time. Today, you can come to Poland and not meet a single person supporting the current government, in particular in university circles. The same in Israel. The majority of scholars, primarily those dealing with the history of Jews in Poland, are liberals who want a different Israel. I don't know if you read about when, during a discussion about Błoński in Jerusalem, Israel Gutman said that, being a young Zionist, he was convinced that, after the Holocaust, Jews would not be able to persecute other peoples (Brumberg, 1988, p. 123), but now we can see that this is possible and we need to learn a lesson from that.

K. M.: This turn has also had an impact on what is thought and said about the history of Poland in the context of Jewish history. I think that what's happening within the Polish historical narrative is frequently very separate from analyses of the Israeli social and political situation. This can be clearly seen in the text by Gershon David Hundert titled *Poland: Paradisus Judaeorum*, where the author says that the Holocaust is a "distorting prism, impeding our vision of what came before"⁵² (Hundert, 1997, p. 335).

A. P.: This is a distorting prism, but at the same time it is about a very complicated history, about why the history of Jews in Europe, and primarily in Eastern Europe, ended so badly. Not long ago, I guided a group of former students from our university during a cruise on the Danube. On this occasion, I read the novel by Ivo Andrić *The woman from Sarajevo* (Andrić, 1973) once again. Andrić writes about the situation in Sarajevo after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. He writes that Serbs, Croats, Austrians and Turks coexisted in relative peace, but at the time of the assassination the atmosphere changed completely, and grim elements surfaced. Ethnic conflicts were present everywhere in Europe, and the Polish-Jewish conflict is only one of many. What is a problem now is how this history will be described in the future. We've had twenty-five good years, in Poland and elsewhere, when the past was explored and its dark elements were the focus of academic research. At present, nationalism is reemerging. Once again, in Poland and elsewhere, populism is everywhere, in Hungary, in the Czech Republic, and the influence it has on historiography is a problem. In a sense, the situation in Hungary is worse than in Poland, because Hungarians feel heavily aggrieved by the Treaty of Trianon. We will

52 Hundert writes: "When I, as a historian, try to recover that historical period [of the history of Jews in the final centuries of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – K. M.], I confront a number of obstacles or existential problems that frustrate my efforts to see the evidence clearly. The first of these is the desire to see one's ancestors in a favourable light. There is a reluctance to recognise impiety in the generations of the past and a natural tendency to romanticize, even to sanctify, the historical record. And it should be stressed that the majority of Jews in the world today are descended from Polish Jewry. A second, more difficult, obstacle is the Holocaust. Our knowledge of the end of the story forms a sort of distorting prism, impeding our vision of what came before. One must, however, attempt to avoid the fallacy of seeing all of East European Jewish history as leading inexorably to the Nazi genocide. One must try to gain access to the earlier periods directly. Ultimately, it is true, the [Polish – K. M.] Jews were lost in the sea, but many centuries elapsed before that happened, centuries of life and of creativity. The third problem or obstacle is what might be termed the conventional wisdom of contemporary Jews, which has it that the terms Pole and anti-Semite are synonymous; indeed, as a former Prime Minister of the State of Israel so memorably phrased it, that Poles receive anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk. It is this conception that I wish now to contest. Whatever its accuracy in the context of twentieth-century Poland, it is a fundamental distortion of Jewish experience in the Polish Commonwealth of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Hundert, 1997, pp. 335–336).

see whether or not what is happening now is self-containing. It's hard to determine this at present.

K. M.: In relation to the concept of the Holocaust as a prism that distorts the picture of past centuries, I have a question reminiscent of the one I asked with reference to the Museum: was it necessary? Could this "obstacle" be avoided exclusively by means of the *Paradisus Judaeorum*, and why should "the conventional wisdom [...] which has it that the terms Pole and anti-Semite are synonymous" (Hundert, 1997, p. 336) become an equal obstacle? I do not understand why it should make sense to reinforce the image of Poland as a paradise for Jews, when everybody knows that it was nothing like a paradise at all. Was it necessary to take all these steps, including the removal of the question mark at the end? My question is not so much about the Museum as about the concept of history.

A. P.: A museum is not just history, it has other functions. And when it comes to historical research, the answer is: definitely not, the entire work of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research clearly shows how evil this was. There is one thing that needs to be remembered: we can't change the past, we can only accept it. The narrative of the Museum is the first step taken towards people who do not know much about the subject, who will then read further about the history of Polish Jews. The catalogue of the Museum explains those issues that are not completely clear in the exhibition itself. It is also significant that we have this enormous building in the heart of Muranów, which, in a sense, represents a return of the Warsaw Jews.

K. M.: A return?

A. P.: This building says they are still here, because they have returned.

K. M.: But who has returned? Once again, we are talking about Jews imagined by Poles.

A. P.: We have already said that integration failed in Poland for various reasons, and only a minority of the Jews spoke of themselves as Poles of the Mosaic faith.

K. M.: Others couldn't quite do that.

A. P.: Yes, this is the significant issue of the reasons why the integration movement has collapsed. But this is posthumous integration. It is true that there aren't too many Jews there, but there are virtual Jews, as Ruth E. Gruber calls them (Gruber, 2002). This is important, too.

K. M.: For me, this posthumous return is still a part of the problem. This is a model of integration we have been familiar with since Berek Joselewicz, who could become Polish only after he died. This is the same story all the time.

A. P.: The question is: what alternatives are there? I remember the times when Kazimierz in Kraków was completely derelict and devastated. The Kazimierz we have today is problematic, but not as much as it used to be. Prague is similar.

K. M.: This is a question about alternatives once again. Was it necessary? And if the reconstruction had taken a different form, what else could have happened in its place?

A. P.: I believe it was necessary, and I can live with the compromises that have been made. We have the building of the Museum. When it was being constructed, I said – and I was right – that we couldn't hope that the Civic Platform [Platforma Obywatelska (PO), a Polish political party – translator's note] would stay in power forever; that this Museum was being built for the future and we had to take into account the fact that someone else might come to power, therefore both Jarosław Sellin and Jarosław Kaczyński should be invited to the Museum. Marian Turski did that. The Museum should explain the true history and stay away from politics. It's a bit like what Brecht wrote: the nation has lost the government's trust, therefore the nation should be dissolved and another one should be elected. This is not possible.

The interview was conducted in Polish; translated into English by Katarzyna Matschi

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**„Trzeba mówić po polsku”:
Z Antonym Polonskim rozmawia Konrad Matyjaszek**

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem rozmowy z Antonym Polonskim jest historia pola badań studiów polsko-żydowskich od momentu, kiedy powstały na przełomie lat siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych XX wieku, aż po rok 2014. Antony Polonsky jest głównym historykiem wystawy stałej Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin i redaktorem naczelnym rocznika naukowego „Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry”, był też współtwórcą pierwszych ośrodków studiów polsko-żydowskich i współorganizatorem pierwszych konferencji naukowych w tej dziedzinie. W przytoczonej rozmowie A. Polonsky opowiada o kontekście powstania wystawy głównej Muzeum Polin, w tym o wpływach politycznych na kształt tej wystawy. Tematem rozmowy jest też historia początków pola badawczego studiów polsko-żydowskich, włącznie ze spotkaniem w Orchard Lake (1979) i konferencją na Uniwersytecie Columbia (1983). Ze szczegółami relacjonowany jest przebieg i skutki konferencji studiów polsko-żydowskich w Oksfordzie (1984), którą rozmówca współorganizował. Polonsky przedstawia dalej reakcje polskich środowisk opozycji politycznej na obecność narracji antysemitycznych w dyskursie opozycji w latach osiemdziesiątych. Ostatnia część rozmowy dotyczy obecności narracji apologetycznych wobec polskiego dyskursu nacjonalistycznego w obrębie pola badań studiów polsko-żydowskich.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: muzeum żydowskie; studia polsko-żydowskie; polska historia Żydów; polska historia współczesna.



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