

Poland

I first visited Poland in October, 1988, and began to photograph there more and more after the completion of my first book. Estimates then were that there were 5,000 to 8,000 Jews in Poland. Today, in 2017, some organizations claim there are 30,000 to 40,000. I personally don't subscribe to that, but there's a lively Jewish community in the country and a genuine interest by a great many Poles in their country's Jewish history.

This is what I wrote in 1991 and updated in 2017.



Felix Karpman, one of two Jews still living in Gora Kalwaria in 1989, standing before the Jewish cemetery, almost all of which had been destroyed during the war.

Of the 3.5 million Jews living in pre-war Poland, approximately 250,000 survived the Second World War, either in concentration camps, Nazi ghettos, secret hiding places or returned after having found refuge in the Soviet Union. But from the time the last German soldier fled in 1945 until 1947, it is estimated that a minimum of 1,000 Jews were murdered by Poles.

Matters sunk to a nadir on July 4, 1946, when hundreds of people in Kielce surrounded a house where Jews were living and in a pogrom that lasted hours, and they murdered forty-seven Jews. By way of "apology," Cardinal Hlond blamed Jews in politics for causing "dangerous tensions." 150,000 Jews fled Poland for Israel in these early years. 75,000 remained, many of them party members.

The official Jewish community was set up along Soviet lines. A religious organization was tolerated while a cultural association acted as a conduit for party agit-prop. The government allowed Jewish schools. JOINT and ORT functioned as well. But when Stalinism descended on Poland, it hit Jews especially hard.



"I was working at a Jewish orphanage," said Emilia Leibel (pictured left) in Krakow, "which we were allowed to start right after the war. We had one hundred forty children who had suffered horribly and one child, about nine years old, even killed himself. But they forced me out in 1952 just like all the other Jewish teachers there."

Emigration was cut off. JOINT and ORT were run out of the country. Jews were demoted or fired from their jobs, especially those in high positions. Then, when Wladyslaw Gomulka took control of the party in 1956, some Jewish schools were re-opened. Emigration was again made legal and another 33,000 Jews left Poland, including Emilia Leibel's former charges.

Yet no matter how quickly its population dwindled, Poland's Jew-hatred existed as if in a vacuum. If it lay relatively dormant from the mid-50s until 1968, it was remarkably easy to re-awaken. As the unmanageable economy worsened and Communist Party leader Gomulka's position became shaky, an interparty squabble used antisemitism as a political

football. Gomulka was only too happy to use it. Once again, Jews were fired, but this time it didn't stop with the well-placed, the conspicuous. This time it seeped into every level of Polish society, spreading like a slick across the whole of society. It began as state-sponsored. It didn't end that way. Synagogues were attacked. In Lodz, hostile youths rampaged through the cemetery, destroying gravestones.

"It was horrible. It was hard to believe," said Professor Arthur Eisenbach, who had been director of the Jewish Historical Institute since 1946. "Jews were thrown out of their jobs and told to go to Israel, to get out of the country. They were given exit visas, relieved of their passports and practically pushed out." Suddenly, Eisenbach's voice, choked with emotion, broke. "I'm a scholar specializing in Polish-Jewish history. My job was my life, my entire life's work! I couldn't stay at this institute and I couldn't leave — there was too much material I'd never find anywhere else." His eyes had tears in them. "Twenty two years I gave them!"



This was the final great exodus of Polish Jewry and approximately 20,000 left for good. From 1969, a fraction remained, mostly the elderly on pension. Still, the purge had a strange side effect: It awoke feelings in totally secular, younger Polish Jews just then reaching adulthood. "Until 1968, I never felt Jewish," said Dr Jakub Broder, a Wroclaw physics teacher in his early forties. "I'd never needed to identify as a Jew. But when I watched television, saw newspapers and felt all that antisemitism, suddenly, I felt more Jewish than Polish. I felt I was being defined by the outside world and since then, its only grown."



Beginning in the 1970s and into the 1980s, these secularized Jews were coming back to their communities looking for something more meaningful to hold onto, yet the established organizations, run by aging party functionaries, weren't where young people felt at home. "I didn't find out I was Jewish until I was a teenager," said Piotr Kadlcik. "My mother had been given to a gentile family over the wall of the Warsaw ghetto, and she kept it a secret. But after a while, she finally told me. I was shocked, but I was even more shocked when I went to synagogue. All I found was a bunch of nasty old men who ignored me, wouldn't help or want to teach me anything. And even though I came to synagogue, if they had nine men and the tenth included me (the minimum needed for services), they would just go home. Can you imagine how that made a teenager feel?"



Piotr Kadlcik was one of the luckier ones, as he and his mother could make that journey back to Judaism together, but over the next twenty years, there were hundreds, and then even a few thousand Poles who would walk into the Jewish Historical Institute unaccompanied with a piece of paper with strange writing on it, or to say they had heard a stunning deathbed confession about having been handed over the walls of the Krakow, Radom,



Zamosc, Lodz or Warsaw ghettos. Some Poles found out they were Jewish as late as their sixties, others when they were children. And throughout the 1980s and after Communism collapsed, it seemed at times as if all of Poland was wrestling with its Jewish heritage.

On the one hand, in the late 1980s Holocaust memorials and Jewish cemeteries were defaced so regularly I rarely visited one that was untouched. In surveys Poles said they'd never want a Jewish neighbor and said there were hundreds of thousands of Jews in Jews in Poland, if not millions.



The grimmest experience I had came in November, 1989, when Piotr Kadlcik took me to the village of Sobienie, where we found a priest's front yard completely covered in Jewish gravestones. "We didn't do this," this priest said, "the Nazis did." As three thugs started jogging up the street toward Kadlcik and me, we decided to make a hurried exit, although I had wanted to ask the priest if he hadn't perhaps had a few free weekends free since 1945 to dig the gravestones up.

Every few years came an ugly spat. Nuns built a convent next to the Birkenau death camp and put up giant crosses that loomed over a killing center reserved exclusively for Jews. Radio Maria broadcast anti-Semitic rants every day. Then came 2000, when Jan Gross published a book, *Neighbors*, about how Jews in a village called Jedwabne had been murdered by the non-Jewish residents of the town and had been burned to death in a barn.

The book set off a firestorm. Some Poles condemned Jews, Jews lashed out at Poles. But as this and earlier discussions came and went, something was happening. In the surveys year after year, Poles were reacting differently toward Jews. As of 2015, with the older generation of deeply religious Catholic Poles dying off, with younger priests no longer describing how Jews murdered Jesus, surveys showed that this virulent antisemitism was on the wane. Not so with hatred and fear of Syrian refugees, but for the time being, hatred toward Jews was sinking.

There has been a genuine wave of interest in all things Jewish over the past few years; plays, cookbooks, novels and theater productions have appeared throughout the country and this has been a spontaneous, grass roots movement that grew from below. Poles were chomping at the bit to know more about their country's pre-communist past, and that meant learning about Jews, who many realized had been an integral part of the country's



history and culture. Even the federal and local government got involved, supporting Jewish museums, Holocaust education programs and Jewish cultural projects.

Inside the Jewish community, many of those formerly hidden Jews were taking over leadership roles, such as Piotr Kadlcik (pictured, left) and others. The Lauder Foundation funded a Jewish school, new Jewish community centers opened in Warsaw and Krakow, and in Warsaw, the Polin Museum opened in 2015, telling



the story of Polish Jews in spectacular fashion, with hundreds of multimedia screens and award winning exhibitions. People like Tadeusz Taube, who fled the country as a child and made his fortune in high tech and real estate in California, saw to it that Jewish studies programs were funded in Polish universities and cultural festivals could count on him for support. In Krakow, the Galicia Jewish Museum opened with an outreach program to hundreds of teachers every semester.

As of this writing, in 2017, the right wing, nationalist Law and Justice party has had an outright majority in the parliament for two years. The leader of the party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, holds no office, but sets his party's agenda, which is anti-European Union and deeply Catholic-nationalist. Hundreds of journalists have fired from their jobs while Law and Justice tries to pack the courts and some of its members have called homosexuals 'socially useless.' Party ideology has already made inroads in the culture ministry to change the new museum in Gdansk on the Second World War and the party's virulent hatred and fear of Syrian refugees is alarming.

But Poland is not the only European country to shift dramatically rightward: Hungary and Slovakia have extremists in their governments, too.

How does this affect Jews in Poland? The short answer: not very much. Jews aren't leaving Poland, and the government has steadfastly not indulged in antisemitism. The groundswell of interest in Poland's Jewish past only seems to grow stronger each year, and the Jewish community, as small as it is, continues to make a valiant effort as it maintains schools and youth clubs, cultural events and social welfare programs. It is all a great deal more impressive than what I witnessed in the late 1980s and 1990s.