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Scholars and coming to terms with the Holocaust in Poland

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Up to a few years ago Poland was the East European leader in efforts to come to terms with the Holocaust. In particular, it was known for major public debates on the Holocaust and on Polish–Jewish relations, which have repeatedly and intensively engaged the Polish public. Poland is by no means unique in having public debates on the Holocaust as, since the 1980s, such debates have taken place in most European countries, sometimes repeatedly. However, Poland stands out due to the intensity of debates and the number of controversies. There have been some sixteen such debates; they have erupted every few years and figured prominently in the Polish media for several months.¹

The most significant debate followed the publication in 2000 of Jan T. Gross's *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (published a year later in English as *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jedwabne, Poland*).² It was not only the biggest Polish debate on the Holocaust, but the biggest Polish debate on the past ever. The little book by Gross prompted hundreds if not thousands of texts as well as innumerable television and radio broadcasts, including addresses by state leaders and other key figures of public life in Poland. As opinion polls confirmed, nearly all adult Poles heard about the controversy, although opinions on the crime remained divided.³ The debate certainly exerted a lasting influence on the development of Polish research on the Holocaust, left its mark on the opinions of a large segment of the Polish intelligentsia, and contributed to the creation of new monuments, exhibitions, educational programmes, and many works by writers, painters, filmmakers, and other artists. It also generated a backlash against the claims of the book and the

1 For a list and analysis of these debates see Dariusz Stola, "Reactions, Discussions, Disputes: Polish Controversies over the Shoah", in Wilhelm Sasnal: *Such a Landscape*, ed. Rafał Szymczyk (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, forthcoming).

2 Jan T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2000); in English, Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

3 Antoni Sulek, "Pamięć Polaków o zbrodni w Jedwabnem", *Nauka* 3 (2011): 39–49.

critical history of Polish–Jewish relations in general. This backlash has grown in strength in recent years.⁴

The debates were more than exercises in the development of public opinion about the past. We may see them as a notable component of Poland’s evolution since the 1980s, resulting from and contributing to the broader changes that have profoundly reshaped the country. This great socio-political and cultural transformation has also included changes to the Poles’ understanding of their past, so closely connected to self-understanding, the substance of any imagined community.

Scholars, primarily historians, have often played key roles in the debates, as their initiators or protagonists. This paper argues that their contribution was greater than providing expert knowledge and professional analysis. They helped launch the early debates and brought to the debates elements of academic culture, contributing to their civility and constructive effects. In particular, they extended to the wider public some norms and patterns of transnational scholarly debate and cooperation, which had been developing among scholars of Polish-Jewish history since the 1980s.

This unexpected but much needed cooperation came after decades of Cold War isolation and marginalization of Jewish studies in Poland. At the early stage of its renewal, its main vehicle was a series of international conferences that took place between 1983 and 1988. Antony Polonsky played an important role in establishing and developing this cooperation.

Polish debates on the Holocaust, their political and cultural factors and effects, attracted the attention of scholars of various disciplines. This has resulted in a substantial – and growing – secondary literature discussing and analysing the debates. The first book dedicated to this topic was published as early as 1989, edited by Antony Polonsky. More than a dozen other volumes have appeared since.⁵ The most comprehensive and systematic of them are two monographs by Piotr Forecki.⁶ Other book-length contributions have been published by (in alphabetical order) Paweł Dobrosielski, Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Jan Olszsek, Maryla Hopfinger,

4 Piotr Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem: Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej* (Warsaw: IBL PAN [Polska Akademia Nauk; Polish Academy of Sciences], 2018).

5 Antony Polonsky, ed., “My brother’s keeper?” *Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1989).

6 Piotr Forecki, *Od “Shoah” do “Strachu”: spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010); Piotr Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory: The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates*, trans. Marta Skowrońska (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013); Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem*.

Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, Bartłomiej Krupa, Joanna Michlic, Lech Nijakowski, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, Anna-Maria Orla-Bukowska and Robert Cherry, Antony Polonsky, Michael Steinlauf, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Geneviève Zubrzycki.⁷ Relevant scholarship also includes several dozen articles written by the aforementioned scholars and others, including this author.

Poles have publicly debated the Holocaust more often and began discussing it earlier than other East Europeans. While the first relevant discussions had already begun in the 1940s, the first in the series of public debates that has continued to the present commenced in reaction to Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* in 1985. Consisting of interviews with Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders, many of them filmed in Eastern Europe, this powerful film brought to the fore the attitudes of the bystanders. It showed, among others, Poles expressing anti-Jewish prejudice or a lack of empathy with the victims. To many

7 Paweł Dobrosielski, *Spory o Grossa: Polskie problemy z pamięcią o Żydach* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2017); Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Jan Olaszek, *Holokaust, pamięć, powielacz: Zagłada Żydów i okupacyjne stosunki polsko-żydowskie w publikacjach drugiego obiegu w PRL* (Warsaw: Więź, 2020); Maryla Hopfinger and Tomasz Żukowski, eds., *Lata czterdzieste: początki polskiej narracji o Zagładzie* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2019); Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, *Przemoc filosemicka? Nowe polskie narracje o Żydach po roku 2000* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2016); Bartłomiej Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę: polska proza i historiografia wobec Holocaustu (1987–2003)* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013); Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Lech Michał Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci: esej socjologiczny* (Warsaw: WaiP, 2008); Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, *Niechciana debata: spór o książki Jana Tomasa Grossa* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Sedno, 2017); Annamaria Orla-Bukowska and Robert Cherry, eds., *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Antony Polonsky and Joanna Beata Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste: eseje i studia* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2004); Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Tomasz Żukowski, *Wielki retusz: jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów* (Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2018). One also ought to mention studies on the Holocaust in Polish literature and art, e.g. Alina Brodzka et al., eds., *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2000); Sławomir Buryła et al., eds., *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich Pan Wadawnictwo, 2012); Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013); Marta Budkowska et al., eds., *Sztuka polska wobec Holocaustu* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2013); see also collections of essays and voices raised in the course of debates published by Znak, Więź and Fronda.

in Poland these scenes came as a shock, and brought the question of wartime Polish attitudes to the Jews to the public stage for the first time in decades. Notably, despite its initial protest, the Polish government was the only communist government to allow fragments of the film to be broadcast on television and to show the whole film in a few cinemas.⁸ A number of relevant articles appeared in the official press, which, despite the official criticism of the film, presented not only its condemnation. The underground press, which had developed in Poland with the emergence of the Solidarity movement in 1980, offered a variety of opinions. As the recent detailed study by Jan Olaszek and Martyna Grądzka-Rejak shows, the Holocaust and Polish–Jewish relations were relatively frequent topics of the underground publications. Quite a number of them presented these topics from a (self-)critical perspective, rather than following the evasive, apologetic, or self-congratulatory patterns of the official narratives on the Polish–Jewish past, which had dominated since 1968.⁹

The next debate came in 1987, following the publication in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a Catholic weekly (censored but independent from the communist party), of the article “Poor Poles look at the Ghetto” by Professor Jan Błoński, a literary historian. Beginning with an analysis of two poems that Czesław Miłosz, the 1980 Nobel laureate, had written in response to the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, Błoński asked painful questions about the non-Jewish Poles’ reactions to the Holocaust and their responsibility – not for the killing, which Błoński put clearly on the Germans, but for the failure to help and the lack of empathy. Furthermore, he called on his compatriots to engage in a moral reckoning for the “indifference, which condemned Jews to much lonelier and more solitary deaths than they would otherwise have suffered.”¹⁰ Błoński explicitly addressed and broke the discouraging pattern of a Polish–Jewish “dialogue of the deaf”: mutual recriminations between Jews and non-Jewish Poles, and the tendency of the latter to adopt defensive and apologetic attitudes. He proposed to the Polish public to put aside the apologies and defensive measures, and engage in a frank and open debate about Polish reactions to the Holocaust, including the shameful ones.

8 Forecki, *Od “Shoah” do “Strachu”*, 132–48. On the circumstances of the top-level decision, involving General Jaruzelski himself (then the *de facto* dictator of Poland), to show the film in Poland, see Anna Bikont, “A on krzyczał: ‘Wszyscy jesteście kapo’”, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 Oct. 1997, 10.

9 Grądzka-Rejak and Olaszek, *Holokaust, pamięć*.

10 Jan Błoński, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2 (1987): 1; in English as “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”, in Polonsky, “My brother’s keeper?”, 34–52.

As in 1985, the debate was about controversial Polish attitudes during the war, but it was a Polish–Polish debate, developing in reply to the claims of a non-Jewish author in a Catholic magazine and largely between non-Jewish Poles.¹¹ It was longer and reached a wider public than the previous debate, benefiting from the ongoing partial relaxation of the censorship restrictions, and fuelled by emotions that surprised even well-informed observers. “The reaction [to the article] was greater than anything known in the course of the forty-two years during which I have edited the paper”, wrote the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Jerzy Turowicz.¹² Most of the reactions were critical, often following the arguments of Władysław Siła-Nowicki, a lawyer and soldier of the underground Home Army during the war, who emphasized that non-Jewish Poles had also been subject to brutal Nazi rule and that they offered heroic help to the Jews despite harsh reprisals.¹³ Nevertheless, the position of Błoński was supported by a number of respected personalities; the debate made Błoński’s view well known and a key reference for future discussions.

These two early debates show that Polish efforts to come to terms with the Holocaust began before 1989. Przemysław Czapliński in his powerful essay “Retroactive Catastrophe” (2021) points to the mid-1980s as the time of what he defines as a broader “change in consciousness” about the Polish Jewish past, expressed in a series of literary works of such prominent authors as Henryk Grynberg, Hanna Krall, Andrzej Szczypiorski, Paweł Huelle, Adolf Rudnicki, and Tadeusz Konwicki. It remains to be proven whether this “wave of memory, ushering in writings on the Jewish world, Jewish culture, and the Holocaust, resulted primarily from a crisis of Polish collective identity”, as Czapliński believes, or whether it augured a longer-term process that culminated in the early 2000s. It is clear, however, that there was something in the 1980s that made a growing number of Polish writers and scholars reflect and write in a new way on Polish-Jewish history.¹⁴

This relatively early beginning or, more precisely, renewal¹⁵ of Polish

11 See Polonsky, “My brother’s keeper?”.

12 Turowicz quoted in *ibid.*, 13.

13 See *ibid.*, 59–67.

14 Przemysław Czapliński, “Retroactive Catastrophe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 35, no. 3 (2021): 568–92.

15 The first major debate on the topic took place in the Polish press in 1946–47; see Joanna Michlic, “The Holocaust and its Aftermath as perceived in Poland: Voices of Polish Intellectuals, 1945–1947”, in *The Jews are coming back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after WW II*, ed. David Bankier (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 206–30;

reflection and discussion on the Holocaust is worth stressing, because it took place under the particular conditions of Poland's late communism. These included a relatively strong intellectual and popular opposition to communist rule, vibrant underground publishing offering a diversity of opinions, a gradual erosion of the communist regime that inconsistently resorted to repression and liberalization, and an ongoing memory war – a fight to delegitimize communist rule by unveiling its distortions of the past, which the underground movement was winning. By 1989 the directions and some key features of the Polish debate on the Holocaust had been established. It was a Polish–Polish debate on the Polish–Jewish past, which developed by the expansion of (self-)critical reflection on Polish reactions to the wartime Jewish tragedy, resulting in step by step revisions of the narratives of the past and soul-searching. Post-1989 Poland, liberal-democratic, undergoing radical and rapid socio-economic and cultural changes, and exposed to Western influence, offered conditions for debate to continue along these lines.

When Poland was in the middle of the peaceful revolution of 1989, it experienced the third public controversy about the Holocaust. Its topic was the Carmelite monastery that had been established right outside the barbed-wire fence of the former Auschwitz camp. The character and circumstances of the debate differed from the previous ones. It was primarily international in character, resulting from criticism coming from Jewish organizations in the West, and, formally, it was a Catholic–Jewish controversy with Polish and foreign participants. Crucially, it focused more on the present – on how to maintain and protect the Auschwitz camp area as a memorial place and how to balance the sensitivities of its Jewish and non-Jewish stakeholders – than on the past of the Second World War. The questions of Polish attitudes towards Jews and their comparative suffering loomed in the background, but the Carmel controversy opened the second series of Polish Holocaust-related debates, parallel to, but distinct from, the series of debates on Polish reactions to Shoah. It continued throughout the 1990s, even after the monastery was relocated, in the debates about the presence of Christian symbols near the Auschwitz camp, which culminated in 1998, and in discussions about plans to

Helena Datner, "Tuż po wojnie napisali już wszystko: Radykalni publicyści i pisarze o antysemityzmie", in Hopfinger and Żukowski, *Lata czterdzieste*, 251–87; Dariusz Stola, "Kilka uwag o początkach polskich dyskusji o Zagładzie," in *Od zgonu Ojca Narodów do śmierci Orła Karpát*, ed. Włodzimierz Borodziej et al. (Warsaw: Scholar, 2020), 365–77.

open a supermarket nearby and a night club elsewhere in the town of Oświęcim.¹⁶

The next debate on Polish wartime attitudes towards the Jews erupted in 1994. This debate deserves attention for two reasons. First, for the first time in Poland a debate on the Holocaust focused on the killing of Jews by Christian Poles, not just on the passivity of bystanders. Second, due to the topic and circumstances of the discussion, the role of historians changed. The controversy followed an article published by Michał Cichy in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the leading national daily of the time, which mentioned the killing of several Jews by Polish fighters in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.¹⁷ Because the article was about specific events that were unknown to the public, historians were called on to verify Cichy's account and comment on his claims. They were probably also expected to calm down the controversy, which touched on not one but two highly sensitive topics: the killing of Jews by soldiers of the Polish underground, and the memory of the 1944 uprising, a major tragedy in Polish history, which was acquiring the status of national sanctity after years of communist distortion and slander. As a consequence, in comparison with the Shoah and Błoński debates, in 1994 the role of historians significantly increased. The previous debates were largely about the moral interpretation of a broad social phenomenon of wartime Polish attitudes, and had just a few historians taking active part. In 1994 they played key roles: their number was larger and included such prominent names as Włodzimierz Borodziej, Andrzej Friszke, Andrzej Paczkowski, Teresa Prekerowa, and Tomasz Strzembosz, and their interventions were more visible. Historians did their job, offering factual arguments, referring to archival documents and memoirs, and bringing the methodology and reasoning of historical investigation to high-circulation newspapers. I believe we may credit them also with something more, namely contributing to the civility of the debate by showing respect for the historical evidence and

16 See Władysław Bartoszewski, *The Convent at Auschwitz* (New York: George Braziller, 1991); Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Marek Głównia and Stefan Wilkanowicz, eds., *Auschwitz: konflikty i dialog* (Kraków: Znak, 1998); Emma Klein, *The Battle for Auschwitz: Catholic–Jewish Relations under Strain* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001); Zubrzycki, *Crosses of Auschwitz*; Forecki, *Od "Shoah"*; Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: polityczne i międzynarodowe aspekty funkcjonowania Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980–2010* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2016).

17 Michał Cichy, "Polacy–Żydzi: czarne karty powstania," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 29 Jan. 1994, 13; Forecki, *Od "Shoah"*, 281–3.

opponents, a more nuanced and academically polite language, and the assumption that a frank and honest discussion of scholars is the best way out of controversy, leading to shared conclusions. This did not come only from the academic culture of debate at Polish universities, but seems to have resulted in particular from some important developments in Polish–Jewish studies that had taken place over the preceding decade.

It was more than coincidence that right before the debates of the 1980s, Polish–Jewish history had become, after decades of Cold War isolation, a theme of transnational discussions and cooperation between Polish and foreign scholars. The first international conference on the topic took place in March 1983 at Columbia University in New York, at the initiative of the Polish–American–Jewish–American Task Force, established in 1981 “to overcome misunderstanding and to promote mutual respect”.¹⁸ In autumn 1983 the first lectures on the history of Polish Jews were introduced at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (“enrollment surpassed our wildest expectations”, recalled Professor Józef Gierowski, their initiator¹⁹), followed by the establishment of institutes of Jewish history at the Jagiellonian University and the University of Warsaw. Simultaneously, the Center for the Study on Polish Jewry was established at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1983, and the Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies opened in Oxford in 1984.²⁰

Following the New York conference, Professor Chone Shmeruk, a literary historian of Yiddish at the Hebrew University, organized for his colleagues in 1984 a study tour to Poland. Its impact on participants was enormous. David Assaf, then a young Israeli historian, declared it to have been “one of the formative experiences in my life”. For Polish scholars who did not travel abroad it was an opportunity meet their foreign colleagues. A few months later, the second academic conference on Polish–Jewish history took place, this time in Oxford, with more than a hundred participants. A combination of the political calculation of the Polish authorities and some good luck helped bring as many as

18 Lukasz Hirszwowicz, “A Conference on Polish–Jewish Relations,” *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1983): 67–70; I am grateful to Antony Polonsky for sharing the manuscript of his unpublished memoirs, “Four Lives: An Intellectual Journey from Johannesburg to Warsaw”, which gives many details of the development of Polish–Jewish studies in these years.

19 Józef Gierowski, “The Scholarly Activities of Chone Shmeruk in Poland,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 515–18.

20 Antony Polonsky, *Polish–Jewish Relations since 1984: Reflections of a Participant/ Stosunki polsko-żydowskie od 1984 roku: refleksje uczestnika* (Kraków: Austeria, 2009), 12–15.

fifteen participants from Poland, a number unimaginable previously. Polonsky, who chaired the conference's organizing committee, recalls his intervention with the Polish embassy in London, where he managed to convince a diplomat (an intelligence officer, as it later turned out) that the conference had no political goals and would be beneficial for Poland. Not all invited scholars from Poland could come: among those refused passports was Professor Stefan Kieniewicz, the dean of Polish historians of the nineteenth century. However, the Polish presence was substantial and the conference was a great success, with prominent scholars coming also from Israel, America, and Western Europe, and messages of support from Pope John Paul II and the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain read at the opening.²¹

Polonsky knew first-hand the efforts to develop international co-operation of Polish and Jewish scholars. He saw the origins of their success in the rise of interest in the Polish–Jewish past among Polish scholars, and a part of Polish intelligentsia in general, and of the growing awareness of the importance of Poland in Jewish history among the scholars in the West. As a later document expresses this shared interest:

Today, when organized Jewish life barely survives on Polish soil, it is vital for Jews to preserve the memory of a world from which so many of us are descended and from which we derive so many of the vital springs of our being. Among Poles, too, there is a new willingness to investigate the past of a people who for ten centuries lived in close proximity to them and whose history constituted an integral part of the development of the Polish lands . . . We believe that there should be no taboo subjects and no topics too sensitive to be discussed.²²

In Poland, wrote Polonsky, this

interest was partly nostalgic in character. Poland is today practically mono-ethnic and mono-religious (although this homogeneity should not be exaggerated) and there is a genuine sense of loss at the disappearance of the more colorful Poland of the past, with its mixture of religions and nationalities. It does, however, have a deeper character. The experiences of the Solidarity movement in 1980–81 gave the Poles a greater sense of self-esteem. . . . Under these conditions, there was a greater willingness to look at the more controversial aspects of the Polish past and to consider again more critically how the Poles had treated the other peoples alongside whom they had lived . . .²³

21 Antony Polonsky, "Oxford Conference on Polish–Jewish Relations," *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1984): 51–6; Polonsky, "Four Lives", ch. 6.

22 "Statement from the Editors", *Polin: A Journal of Polish–Jewish Studies*, 1 (1986): 1.

23 Polonsky, *Polish–Jewish Relations*, 13–14.

No less important seems the fact that for many of the rebellious Polish intelligentsia of the 1980s, and Eastern European dissidents in general, the truth was a crucial moral value: “living in the truth” was a way of life and a meta-political strategy, the source of the “power of the powerless” in the face of the lie-based communist rule.²⁴ This was a part of a broader evolution of dissident reflection in Central and Eastern Europe from the late 1970s on, which included an important human rights component – part of the “Helsinki effect” that strengthened the weak influence of liberal thinking in the region. Combined with a tendency to see friends and allies in opponents to communist regimes in other countries of the Soviet bloc, this encouraged transnational cooperation (notably Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless* of 1978 was prepared for a Polish-Czechoslovak volume) and efforts to overcome the xenophobic nationalism that communist regimes had increasingly adopted since the 1960s.²⁵

Moreover, among the origins of the Solidarity movement was the Polish youth rebellion of March 1968, which had been a formative experience of many of the activists and key thinkers of the Polish democratic opposition. In 1968 the government combined violent suppression of the rebellion with the “anti-Zionist campaign”, a witch hunt that recycled and exploited many of the antisemitic tropes from Polish history, and forced half of Polish Jews and many Poles of Jewish origin into exile. This compromised the communist party in the eyes of many opponents of antisemitism, and antisemitism in the eyes of many opponents of communism. The effect is notable, especially as it was rather unexpected in a country where the myth of “Judeo-communism” (*żydokomuna*) was fairly popular. In the 1980s, the memory of 1968 motivated much of the anti-antisemitism among the critics of the regime, especially those active in underground publishing.²⁶

In 1981, at the height of the “carnival of Solidarity”, Jan Józef Lipski, a literary historian and prominent figure of the Polish opposition, co-founder of the Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR) in 1976, published an influential essay, *Dwie ojczyzny-dwa patriotyzmy* (“Two Fatherlands, Two Patriotisms: Remarks on the National Megalomania

24 This was most famously expressed by Vaclav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978); see Havel, “The Power of the Powerless”, *East European Politics and Societies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 353–408.

25 Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds., *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, vol. 2: *Negotiating Modernity in the “Short Twentieth Century” and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 118–19; D. C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

26 Dariusz Stola, *Kampania antyżydowska w Polsce 1967–1968* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2000); Piotr Oseka, *My, ludzie z Marca: Autoportret pokolenia '68* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2015).

and Xenophobia of the Poles”), which we may see as an original extension of the idea of “living in truth” to the matters of Polish national history. Lipski called on his readers to engage critically with the Polish past and oppose the nationalist apologetics that distorts history. “Every concealment [of truth about the past] becomes fuel to the fire of national megalomania . . . [it] is a disease; every failure to acknowledge one’s own faults destroys the national ethos”.²⁷ Notably, he defined and justified his call as patriotic, contrasting the altruistic, inclusive patriotism and the xenophobic nationalism (in Polish, “nationalism” is closer in meaning to ethno-nationalism, while “patriotism” is closer to civic nationalism). For Poland of the 1980s, high in national sentiments, this distinction was important especially for those critical of the conservative-nationalist currents in twentieth-century Poland, of which antisemitism had been a crucial element.

We find echoes of Lipski’s arguments in the debates about both Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and Błoński’s article. The latter shows a tendency to strengthen the collective, nationalist understanding of what it means to live in truth and to come to terms with the past. We see an expression of this tendency in the title of Błoński’s famous essay of 1987 – “Poor Poles look at the Ghetto” – while the title of Miłosz’s poem, which opened the essay, was “A Poor Christian looks at the Ghetto”. What Miłosz had expressed as a simultaneously universal and intimately personal problem concerning every Christian (or all those “uncircumcised”, as we read in the poem) transformed into a collective, national problem of the Poles.²⁸ Putting the universal questions raised by Miłosz into an ethno-national frame probably contributed to the debate’s dynamic and impact, but it came at the cost of narrowing its horizon and weakening the ability of participants to see those aspects of the past that do not fit into this frame.²⁹

This adoption of a Polonocentric national (or patriotic, as Lipski would have called it) framework to put in doubt the nation’s innocence made much of the powerful mixture that gave the Błoński debate its dynamics

27 Jan Józef Lipski, *Dwie ojczyzny-dwa patriotyzmy: Uwagi o megalomanii narodowej i ksenofobii Polaków* (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1981), republished by Otwarta Rzeczpospolita, <http://otwarta.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/J-Lipski-Dwie-ojczyzny-dwa-patriotyzmy-lekkie3.pdf>, 5.

28 I am grateful to Andrzej Paczkowski for turning my attention to the difference between these two titles.

29 A universalizing perspective was adopted in prominent early Polish texts on the Holocaust, such as the prose of Tadeusz Borowski and Zofia Nałkowska.

and emotions. Przemysław Czapliński called it “a revolt within the Polish-centered perspective: without abandoning Polishness, without adopting an external point of view, there was a change in the basis for collective identity.”³⁰ Exactly when Błoński was publishing his article, Jerzy Jedlicki, an outstanding historian active in the opposition movement, advanced an elaborate analysis of and argument for taking collective responsibility for the difficult past (“an obligation for symbolic compensation for [the group’s we identify with] misdeeds of the past”). “None of my essays has generated as much discussion” as this one, he later wrote.³¹ The influence of the self-critical patriotism that Błoński and Jedlicki articulated remained visible in the following debates. The big “We” of the Polish transgenerational imagined community was the main imagined actor of the controversial past, and its criticism was coming from within this community. The debate on Jedwabne strengthened this tendency, not least because of Jan Gross’s key claim that “half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half” (that is, that not only the actual killers but also the Polish population of the town in general was implicated in and responsible for the crime), and from a widespread inclination to see the town as representative of Poland in general.³²

Speaking of the currents in thinking of the Polish intelligentsia in the 1980s, we should add that the changes in the Polish communist party and government mattered too. The development of new initiatives in Polish–Jewish studies would have been impossible without the short-lived but far-reaching political destabilization and liberalization in Poland in 1980–81, followed by the attempts by the government of General Jaruzelski to improve its image in the West after the Martial Law of December 1981. The latter included solemn celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1983, the gradual lessening of censorship restrictions on publications about Polish–Jewish history, and a growing number of relevant books available to the Polish public. The government’s

30 Czapliński, “Retroactive Catastrophe”, 577.

31 Jerzy Jedlicki, “Dziedzictwo i odpowiedzialność zbiorowa”, in *Żle urodzeni czyli o doświadczeniu historycznym: Scripta i postscripta*, ed. Jerzy Jedlicki (London and Warsaw : Aneks-Polityka, 1993), 108–26; see also Stefan Amsterdamski’s critique of the essay and Jedlicki’s later comments in *ibid.* The essay was completed in January 1987 and published in *Obecność: Leszkowi Kołakowskiemu w 60 rocznicę urodzin* (London: Aneks, 1987).

32 Gross, *Neighbors*, 7. For my criticism of this claim, see Dariusz Stola, “Jedwabne: Revisiting the Evidence and Nature of the Crime”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 139–52.

approval or toleration of the international cooperation of Polish scholars in this field, including decisions to allow their participation in international conferences in the West, seems to have been similarly motivated.

Coming back to the Oxford conference in 1984, we may give it an important place in the history of Polish–Jewish studies for several reasons, including the decision to establish *Polin: A Journal of Polish–Jewish Studies* (later *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*). *Polin* soon became the leading journal in the field, and so it remains thirty-four volumes later, having published hundreds of high-quality articles. I would like to stress the conference's less tangible but no less important effect – the growth of what sociologists call social capital, namely mutual respect and trust among the participants, interpersonal relations, especially those transcending ethnic and national boundaries, a set of shared values and a culture of dialogue. Antony Polonsky's report from the conference noted "an atmosphere in which the reasoned exchange of views prevailed . . . a genuine dialogue had been established and with it the prospect of further fruitful collaboration on the history of the Jews in Poland".³³ Józef Gierowski wrote that the conference represented a crucial moment in the improvement of understanding and cooperation between Polish and Jewish scholars. Both sides agreed that objective research was the best way to overcome the mutually negative stereotypes existing in both nations. Only by searching for the truth and authenticating it can we promote better understanding. This principle would become the basis for all our subsequent joint activities.³⁴

We should not underestimate the impact of this determination to search for the truth about the Polish–Jewish past and to discuss it frankly for the later contributions of scholars to the Polish public debates, and consequently the trajectory of the development of these debates.

The Oxford conference contributed, directly and indirectly, to the launching of the debates in Poland in 1985 and 1987. Contacts established with the Polish embassy during its preparations unexpectedly helped bring Lanzmann's film to the Polish public. When the film was released in France in 1985 and the government in Warsaw protested against it as anti-Polish, Polonsky proposed to show and discuss it in Oxford within a group of scholars of Polish-Jewish history. Such a screening took place in September 1985, with the participation of both the Polish and French embassies, and participants such as Jerzy Turowicz, Józef Gierowski,

33 Polonsky, "Oxford Conference", 51.

34 Józef Gierowski quoted in Polonsky, *Polish–Jewish Relations since 1984*, 20–21.

Jerzy Tomaszewski of the University of Warsaw, Józef Garliński and Rafael Scharf of London, Michał Borwicz of Paris, Abe Brumberg of Washington DC, and Lanzmann himself. The discussion was heated, but showed that Poles and Jews can talk about it, and that the dividing lines do not have to follow ethnic ones. It was certainly reported to Warsaw and probably contributed to the Polish authorities' decision to release the film in Poland.³⁵

The connection between the Oxford conference and the publication of Błoński's article in *Tygodnik Powszechny* is direct and clear. Błoński took part in and was greatly impressed by the conference. He was especially moved by the speech of Scharf, a Jewish Krakovian living in England, who referred to the Polish Jews' "trauma of unreciprocated love" for Poland. Another participant of the conference was Jerzy Turowicz, the editor-in-chief of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, while Czesław Miłosz read the poems with which Błoński opened his article.³⁶ We may thus see Błoński's article as a follow up to the Oxford conference.

The next two conferences on Polish-Jewish history took place in 1986: in spring at Brandeis University near Boston, where as many as 180 scholars gathered, and in autumn at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. For the Brandeis conference all the invited Polish scholars got their passports, a sign of continuing relaxation of relevant policies in Poland. Present were many of the same people who attended the Oxford or New York conferences, which further strengthened personal acquaintanceship and trust. The discussions were frank and open, as Polonsky noted, "with some of the Polish participants criticizing their Jewish colleagues for being insufficiently critical of Polish antisemitism and with Jewish participants showing a much more sophisticated understanding of the nuances of Polish politics".³⁷ The conference in Kraków was the first of the conferences held in Poland. For many of the foreign participants it was an opportunity to visit Poland for the first time, or for the first time in many years. As we read in the conference report, "the Polish authorities facilitated the granting of visas to those invited, including not only sixty scholars from Israel but also a number of people who had been forced

35 Antony Polonsky, "From Johannesburg to Warsaw: An Ideological Journey", in *Holocaust Scholarship: Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations*, ed. Christopher R. Browning et al. (New York: Springer, 2015), 33; see also n. 8 above.

36 Polonsky, "Oxford Conference", 52; Polonsky, "Jan Błoński (1931–2009)", *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 23 (2011): 523–8.

37 Antony Polonsky, "Brandeis Conference on Inter-war Polish Jewry", *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 16, no. 2 (1986): 63–7.

to leave Poland in 1968".³⁸ Many of the latter had been blacklisted and systematically denied Polish visas. The former came from a country that had not had diplomatic relations with Poland since 1967.

The culmination of the series was the conference held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in February 1988, attended by more than three hundred scholars, including eighty speakers from Poland. Such a large presence of Polish scholars in Israel was unprecedented. A political decision to allow it must have been made in Warsaw, probably in the context of improving Polish–Israeli relations and the plans to revise the official position on the “anti-Zionist campaign” before its twentieth anniversary in March 1988. Again, in addition to academic contributions, the interpersonal component of the conference was remarkable. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the American political scientist and former National Security Advisor, spoke of “a kind of curious, almost metaphysical empathy which one senses in an encounter such as this. . . . I cannot suppress a genuine sense of very real emotion about this meeting – that there is something uniquely special about it – which goes beyond the purely cerebral and intellectual or the academic.”³⁹

The series of conferences and the launching of the journal *Polin* greatly accelerated the expansion of knowledge and accumulation of scholarship on Polish-Jewish history, but no less important was the social capital of trust, mutual understanding, shared values and interests that developed alongside. Part of this was a culture of sincere and open debate, including on the most sensitive topics. The report from the Jerusalem meeting noted that

a significant degree of trust has now been created. There is now a degree of awareness of each other’s position, so that it was possible to discuss matters which were previously almost taboo. If one compares the exchange at the Oxford conference on the difficult problems of the Second World War . . . and the exchange at the discussion on ethical problems of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, one can see a genuine movement in attitudes on both sides.⁴⁰

38 Antony Polonsky, “Kraków Conference on Jewish Autonomy in Pre-Partition Poland”, *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 16, no. 3 (1986): 49–53; Michael Kaufman, “Poignant Welcome in Poland for Jewish Scholars”, *New York Times*, 30 Sept. 1986, A2.

39 Zbigniew Brzezinski, quoted in Antony Polonsky, “Jerusalem International Conference on Polish Jewry”, *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 18, no. 1 (1988): 53.

40 Polonsky, “Jerusalem International Conference”, 53.

All these certainly influenced the ways of thinking of the participating scholars, and consequently the positions they were to take in Polish debates, as well as their interactions with other scholars and the values they conferred to their students. The efforts directed at transnational Polish–Jewish dialogue and cooperation for the study of Polish-Jewish history bore much fruit.