THE IVANSK PROJECT *e*-NEWSLETTER

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Contents

- **The Jews in Poland.** *edited by* **Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk** and **Antony Polonsky.** Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK. 1986.

  Although it appeared over 20 years ago, "*The Jews in Poland*" remains an indispensable foundation for anyone attempting to understand the course of Polish Jewish history. In 17 chapters a group of distinguished scholars consider a broad range of issues and events that impacted the lives of Polish Jews. The ***Introduction*** to the book was selected for the e-News as an excellent summary of what our people experienced during the best and the worst of times.

- **The Two Saddest Nations on Earth: A Polish Jewish Octogenarian Looks Back and Forward.** *by* **Rafael F. Scharf (1914 – 2003).**

  "The Two Saddest Nations on Earth" is a personal and poignant statement of the triumph and the tragedy of Polish-Jewish history. Born in Cracow **Raphael ("Felek") Scharf** lived most of his life in England but always remained a Pole and a Jew. This thought-provoking essay explores his feelings of the people and the country of his birth in light of the momentous events that occurred during his lifetime. Felek Scharf was a scholar, historian, journalist, lawyer and successful entrepreneur. His obituary in The Guardian (UK) is appended to the essay; you'll be interested in learning more about this remarkable, accomplished mensch.

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The current e-Newsletter differs from its predecessors; for the first time the e-News contains nothing written by Ivanskers about Ivanskers…

The reason? We cannot sustain publication unless you come forward with ideas and items that can be presented in the e-News. In the last e-News I alerted you to the reality and suggested that an Op-Ed section might capture more reader participation. But this idea went nowhere. Only two individuals responded.

We've only scratched the surface of chronicling the story of Ivansk and Ivanskers. Unless things turn around, the story will never be told. In the past we've focused primarily on securing testimony from/by "original" Ivanskers. This must continue, and before it's too late I urge you to interview family and friends and search for documents, photos and other memorabilia in family archives. But other avenues must also be explored. Stories written by first generation Ivanskers born outside the shtetl, for example, can reveal much about our history. How did our parents and grandparents adapt to their new surroundings and overcome all the obstacles? What were their achievements and frustrations? And what became of their children and succeeding post-Ivansk generations? Such accounts are fascinating and inspiring; a few have appeared in earlier newsletters (David Lederman (Issue #2), Seymour Sherry (#28) and Eva Abbo (# 29). Those of us whose parents and grandparents escaped the poverty and desperation of the shtetl must document their family's story. Their sagas could fill volumes and will enrich the lives of generations to come.

Unless we do it, no one will ….. it's up to all of us.

The Jews in Poland

edited by

Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk and **Antony Polonsky**

Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK. 1986

Introduction

OhI All is gone.. .
There was a People, which exists no longer
There was a People, but it is no more
Gone. Wiped out

Yitzchak Katzenelson
'Lament for the Murdered Jewish People"

The essays in this book describe the establishment, flourishing and destruction of one of the most important Jewish communities in the world. Since the Babylonian exile and the beginnings of the Diaspora, Jewish life has always been characterized by the emergence of major *foci* of creativity and dynamism. In the period of the second Temple and after, Mesopotamia with its *exilarch* (Resh galutha) and its great academies was an even more important area of Jewish intellectual and legal activity than *Eretz Israel.* After the destruction of the second Temple it remained a major centre to be supplanted in the early Middle Ages by the communities of Spain and the Rhineland. When these settlements lost their significance, with the persecutions which followed the Black Death in Germany and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, their place was taken by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. By the end of the seventeenth century probably three quarters of world Jewry lived within the borders of the Polish republic. Poland - described by Jews as a haven in a world of persecution - became the centre of a flourishing Jewish culture. This culture survived the decline and partition of the Polish state and in the nineteenth century those areas which had formerly made up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became the seedbed for the intellectual movements which were to transform the Jewish world: Zionism, secularism, socialism, neo-orthodoxy. Moreover, with the development of mass emigration from the late nineteenth century, the influence of Jews from the former Polish Republic was carried to Western Europe, North and South America, South Africa and the Antipodes. At the same time, the rebirth of the Polish state, although it created major difficulties for its Jewish population - ten per cent of the whole - provided a new stimulus to Jewish creativity. In 1939, before the Nazi occupation, Polish Jewry was still the second largest Jewish community in the world (after that of the United States which was largely derived from it) and was still, in many ways, the centre of Jewish political and cultural life.

This book does not provide a full account of the history of the Jews in Poland. The individual contributors were all encouraged to focus on specific themes and concentrate primarily on the relationship of the Jews to the other people, in the first instance, the Poles, with whom they lived - sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict. There is little on internal Jewish developments, whether the religious disputes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the emergence of

Chassidism or the various conflicts engendered by the clash between orthodox Judaism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is also relatively little on the role of the Catholic Church, which played such a large part in determining the conditions under which the Jews lived. There is a great deal of material on how Jews fared in the period of the rise of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but much less on the impact of its economic and political decline from the Chmielnicki revolt onwards. The whole question of the 'reform' of Jewish life, how the Jews could be made more productive and useful citizens - a pre-occupation of Polish radicals from the mid- eighteenth century to the crushing of the 1863 insurrection and beyond, is not dealt with in any depth. Yet in spite of these omissions we believe that it does provide the reader with a general outline of the most significant factors in the evolution of Jewish life in Poland.

Jews first settled on the Polish lands, as Professor Gieysztor demonstrates (chapter 1), even before the establishment of a Polish state. They came both from the Mediterranean and from the short-lived Khazar state, and in every day life they probably used some forms of the Tartar and Slavonic languages. It was with the influx of Yiddish-speaking Jews, who came to Poland after the persecutions of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, that Yiddish became the most important language of normal discourse (although areas where Tartar was still spoken persisted until the seventeenth century and beyond, if one considers the Karaites as part of Polish Jewry). At this stage the size of the community was still small. As late as the end of the fifteenth century, there were only 18,000 Jews in the Polish Kingdom and 6,000 in Lithuania, located in 85 towns and constituting barely 0.6 per cent of the population. Yet at the same time the basic structure of Polish Jewry had been established in the form in which it was to persist until the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was a community the rights of which were defined by charter (the basic instrument of medieval society) and in particular by the Kalisz statute granted by Boleslaw the Pious in 1264 and that of Kazimierz the Great in 1334. These statutes determined the legal position of Jewish communities, exempting them from German law and placing them under the jurisdiction of the *voivodes* (royal governors). In this sense, the frequently-employed description of the Jews in pre-partition Poland as a caste is quite incorrect: they were a medieval estate, with the rights, obligations and privileges of other estates, as is clearly set out in Professor Goldberg's article (chapter 3). They were a link with the outside world, both Jewish and non-Jewish, which aided them considerably in their trading activities and was one of the factors which induced the Polish Kings to invite them to their country. Their links are clearly to be seen in the charters. The Kalisz statute of 1264, for instance, is modeled on the Austrian charter of 1240.

The Jews benefited greatly from the economic upsurge experienced by Poland in the sixteenth century and linked above all with the Vistula grain trade. They were involved in all aspects of Polish trade from the most far-flung to the most local, as well as with skilled crafts connected with the rural economy, as is demonstrated by the articles of Professors Toilet and Hundert (chapters 2 and 4). Yet at the same time, they were divided from the rest of Polish society by a religious gulf, zealously maintained by both sides, which could only be overcome as Andrzej Ciechanowiecki demonstrates, by conversion (chapter 5).

Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth century has often been described as *'heaven for the Jews, paradise for the nobles, hell for the serfs'*. It is certainly true that Jews enjoyed unprecedented economic and social freedom in Poland in those years. Jewish autonomy was widened so that by the end of the sixteenth century, the Jews governed themselves through a sort of parliament, the Council of the Four Lands *(Vaad Arba Aratzot* - the four lands referred to the four parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Common wealth; Great Poland, Little Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine). This generally met once a year and was responsible for negotiating with the crown the level of Jewish taxation and for levying taxes on the Jewish communities. In addition, it passed laws and statutes on internal educational and economic matters and other general concerns of Jewish life. The Council of the Four Lands was a unique institution in Europe, its powers going

considerably beyond the degree of self-government which Jewish communities enjoyed in other European states. One reflection of the generally favourable position of the Jews was the increase in the size of Polish Jewry, the result both of natural growth and of immigration from Germany, Bohemia and Hungary, and to a much lesser degree from Spain and Portugal as well as Italy and Turkey. By the mid-seventeenth century there were about half a million Jews in Poland, nearly five per cent of the state's population.

Another was the flourishing of Jewish religious and intellectual life. The Talmudic Colleges *(Yeshivot)* of Poland became the models for Talmudic study for the rest of Europe. Students from Germany, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary and even Italy went to study there. From the second half of the seventeenth century, most rabbis in Germany and Central Europe came originally from Poland. At the same time, Polish masters of *Halakha* (Rabbinic law) became the dominant influence in the religious life of the Jewish world. The critical glosses of Moshe Isserles (Rama) to the rabbinic code of Joseph Karo established the mores of Ashkenazi Jews. The *novellae* on Talmudic tractates by Shlomo Luria (Maharshal) and of Samuel Eidlish remain unsurpassed to the present day. The ascetic Kabbalistic ethics of Isaiah Horowitz in his book *Shnei luchot habrit* inspired both Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike, and for over two centuries his work remained the most widely distributed Kabbalistic treatise. Indeed, the mystical traditions of the Kabbalah flourished more in Poland than in any other Jewish community with the exception of Safed in Palestine. In Poland Kabbalistic study was transformed from the domain of a small aristocratic elite into a mass movement. Secular learning developed too and Rabbis Moshe Isserles and Mordechai Yaffo wrote profound treatises on secular subjects such as philosophy and astronomy.

Popular religious literature also flourished on Polish soil. One need only mention the Yiddish paraphrase of the Pentateuch, the *Ze'enah Ur'enah* by Yakov of Janow, a book which has gone through innumerable editions including one recently issued in Israel and New York. Women and unlearned men gained their knowledge of the *Torah* (Pentateuch) with the aid of a Hebrew-Yiddish glossary written in Poland *(Sefer Rav Anschel,* Cracow 1534 and 1880) while there were also many editions of the Prayers in Hebrew and Yiddish. With the rise of the European Enlightenment, Polish Jews further advanced the Yiddish language - it was in Poland that the first popular book on medicine in Yiddish was printed *(Sefer Ozer Yisrael)* as was the first modem translation of parts of the Bible into Yiddish (Mendel Lefin's rendering of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes).

Of all European countries, Poland was the only one in which Jews were allowed to participate in a wide range of trades, crafts and skills. It was the only country in Europe, after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, where Jews managed the estates of the nobility (the *Arenda* system). They were the indispensable craftsmen of the rural economy in the villages and small towns (shtetlach) - the carpenters, cobblers, blacksmiths, tailors, tar makers, wheelwrights. This was a unique phenomenon in Europe.

The position of the Jews, however, was by no means as secure as it appeared. The failure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to develop" modem political institutions - above all a centralized and effective state bureaucracy under royal control - and the corresponding weakness of the crown made the Jews increasingly dependent on the great nobles, the magnates whose political and social influence grew considerably from the seventeenth century onwards. Jews in private (non-royal) towns were now placed under jurisdiction of their aristocratic owners and the centre of gravity of Jewish life shifted from the western and central parts of Poland to the eastern areas, where magnate influence was greater. The Jews were thus caught up in the combination of social, religious and national resentment which Polish rule aroused among the Orthodox peasantry and the Cossacks. There has been a tendency in recent years to claim that Jewish' casualties in the Chmielnicki revolt have been exaggerated, although even under these estimates nearly twenty per cent of the Jews lost their lives. Certainly there can be no denying that the events of 1648-57 and

their consequences both highlighted and accelerated the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and, with it, the standing of its Jewish inhabitants. Economic recession was accompanied by a further weakening of the power of the King and a strengthening of that of the magnates. Parallel to these events foreign influence was growing, coming to a head with the 'dumb' Sejm of 1719 which effectively made Poland a Russian protectorate. Economic and political retrogression was accompanied by growing intolerance and a strengthening of obscurantist tendencies, above all within the Catholic Church, so that accusations of ritual murder against the Jews which had earlier been relatively rare in Poland now became much more frequent. These coincided with the increasing impoverishment of the Jewish community referred to by Professor Tollet (chapter 2) which led to growing difficulties in paying taxes and to the abolition, in 1764, of the Council of the Four Lands. Equally within the Jewish community poverty and increased insecurity provoked a reaction against the dry and rationalist character of rabbinic Judaism, which took various forms (such as limited support for the false messiah Shabtai Zvi and a subsequent outgrowth of this movement called Frankism, after its founder Jacob Frank, most of whose adherents were eventually baptized). Particularly important was the growth and development of *Chassidism,* a pietistic and originally anti-establishment religious revival which developed into a genuine religious mass movement and which is still very much alive among Jewish communities in the world today.

The first partition of Poland in 1772 led to a series of attempts to reform its political structure which were ultimately frustrated by Russian, Prussian and Austrian intervention and the disappearance of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These attempts at reformation included a number of efforts in line with the political thinking of the Enlightenment to 'productiivize' and 'modernize' the Jewish community and convert its members into 'useful' citizens. These plans did not cease with partition but continued in the nineteenth century, both in the Kingdom of Poland, linked with Russia and established at the Vienna Congress in 1815, and in the former eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, not to mention the Austrian and Prussian partitions. Reforms from above and from outside sometimes went hand-in-hand and sometimes clashed with Jewish attempts to reform Jewish life by introducing the principles of enlightenment *(Haskalah)* derived above all from Germany. The not very satisfactory results of this interaction, in the former eastern Polish lands, form the subject of Professor Beauvois' article (chapter 7).

Another important consequence of the partitions and the Vienna settlement was that the bulk of Polish Jewry now lived under Tsarist rule. '*Imperial Russia came to the Jews, not vice versa*', it has been argued. Certainly for over a century the fate of the largest Jewish community in the world was intimately bound up with the policies and fortunes of the Tsarist Empire and, particularly in the former eastern parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the impact of Russian culture on the Jewish intelligentsia was considerable, a development which led to increased tension between Jews and Poles.

Simultaneously, the attempt to regain lost independence led to a new situation in the Polish lands. How was independence to be pursued - should one work slowly within the framework of the frontiers of 1815 and seek to create the pre-conditions for an independent or semi-independent state? Or should one aim, rather, to spark off a national insurrection which would end foreign rule? How could the peasantry - the overwhelming majority of the population - be induced to support an uprising? Could the Jews be enlisted for the national cause and, if so, what sort of Jewish emancipation was required? These general questions are discussed by Professor Kieniewicz (chapter 6), while Professor Bender describes one detailed example of Polish-Jewish cooperation in the run-up to the 1863 insurrection (chapter 8).

The catastrophic crushing of that uprising ushered in a new era of Polish history. Romantic nationalism, with its hope of regaining independence by armed force, was now almost entirely discredited and the dominant ideology was positivism. This held that independence should be renounced, except as the most long-term of goals, and attempts should be made to concentrate on economic advance and to improve the positions of the peasants (who had been given their land by the Tsarist government in 1863), of women and of the Jews. Substantial economic growth did subsequently take place and the Congress Kingdom of Poland began to experience an industrial revolution. Urbanization and the break-up of the agrarian society of pre-partition Poland were inevitable consequences, changes which inevitably affected the position of the Jews. Calls for the 'solution' of the Jewish problem by the abandonment of Jewish separateness and the adoption by Jews of the Polish language became more widespread and are described by Dr Lichten (chapter 10). It should be stressed however, that assimilation never became a mass movement and that the overwhelming bulk of the Jews remained distinct in language and dress from the majority of the population.

Concurrently with these events new forces were beginning to emerge. From the 1890s, a general European revival of assertive nationalism took place which led in Poland to the emergence of the National Democratic movement led by Roman Dmowski, Zygmunt Balicki and Jan Poplawski. Like similar movements in Italy, France and Germany, the National Democrats stressed the organic character of the Nation and the ‘unassimilable’ nature of the Jews. *'There cannot be two nations on the Vistula'*, was one of their slogans. Increasingly too, the peasantry were now drawn into political life, above all in semi-constitutional Austria. The temptation to exploit traditional anti-Jewish sentiments for political advantage became strong in Poland, as elsewhere in eastern central Europe, in order to mobilize the now increasingly important voting power of the peasantry, as is outlined in Professor Golczewski's article (chapter 9). Among Jews, the feeling became widespread that the traditional liberal panaceas of equality and assimilation were inadequate to deal with the increasingly difficult situation of the Jewish people, giving rise to movements like Socialism and Zionism and the various combinations of these ideas, which even before the First World War were assuming mass proportions. The dilemmas which the Jewish problem posed for socialists, both Polish and Jewish, before and after the Great War are set out in Professor Holzer's article (chapter 12).

The emergence of an independent Polish State in 1918 posed new and difficult problems for the Jewish community, now numbering three million and making up ten per cent of the population. Despite the intentions of the peacemakers at Versailles the prevalent climate of heightened nationalism did not favour liberal treatment of the national minorities, who constituted more than a third of the inhabitants of the new state. The Jews were regarded as only dubiously loyal, particularly in the eastern parts of the new republic where they were suspected of having been Russified and of sympathy with Bolshevism. The economic problems inherent in re-establishing a state from regions which for nearly 130 years had been integral parts of the Russian, German and Habsburg empires created major imbalances and contributed to the decline of the economic well-being of the Jews, many of whom had been deeply impoverished even before 1914 and who were, moreover, concentrated in the more backward sectors of the economy. The early years of independence were marked by anti-Jewish violence and although the situation eased from the mid-twenties, after Marshal Pilsudski's death in 1935 the impact of political and economic crises and the influence of Nazi Germany, meant that, once more, anti-Semitism began to play a pre-eminent role in political life. There has been a tendency in Poland to treat these developments as essentially economic in origin and of somewhat marginal significance since no anti-Jewish legislation was introduced before the defeat of Poland in 1939. To the Jews, however, there was no doubt about the hostility of the state system to their position. As Rafael Scharf has written:

If the question were asked, whether Poland was a country where anti-Semitism grew and was rampant, the answer for every Polish Jew, an eye-witness, would be so obvious and unequivocal that he would be angered and resentful of anybody doubting it. As soon as Poland regained independence after World War I, the framework of an anti-Jewish movement began to take shape. It grew in strength and came to be for us an ever present force, filling the atmosphere like ether. The fact that the Poles were and are not aware of this - at least this is what they claim - is for us hard to believe and understand. They have either forgotten how it was or have been seeing life from an altogether different perspective!

Yet at the same time, partly because of the plural character of the political system in interwar Poland, Jewish life also flourished, although under much pressure. A series of private school networks developed, reflecting the division of the community into Zionist, socialist and orthodox groupings. An extensive press in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish found many readers. Scholarship into Jewish history and ethnography grew with the establishment of the Jewish Scientific Organization (YIVO) in Wilno and the creation for Professor Mayer Bataban of a chair at the University of Warsaw. The paradoxes of Jewish life in Poland between the wars are summed up in Professor Ezra Mendelsohn's article, *'Interwar Poland: good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?'* (chapter 11).

The Polish defeat and the German occupation sealed the fate of the Jewish community in Poland. The Nazis immediately introduced anti-Jewish legislation and soon segregated the entire Jewish population in ghettos. From late 1941 they embarked on a systematic, mass murder of the Jews which, by liberation in the second half of 1944 and nearly. 1945, had led to the deaths of over ninety per cent of Polish Jewry. Approximately 50,000-100,000 Jews survived, in hiding or in concentration camps, while another 250,000 saved their lives by fleeing to the Soviet Union. It should be clearly stated that the responsibility for this horrendous crime lies with the Nazis and, in the first instance, with Hitler himself. Inevitably, perhaps, the actual circumstances of the mass murder have led to bitter controversy and recrimination. Jewish writers have accused the Poles of offering insufficient assistance to Jewish fellow-citizens, of looking with complaisance and even approval on German actions and finally, in some cases, of actively assisting the Nazis. Poles, for their part, have argued that Jewish historians have been insufficiently aware of the brutal nature of Nazi rule in Poland, of the savage repression provoked by attempts to aid the Jews and of taking too little account of how much Poles did actually aid Jews. The Relief Council for Jews in Poland, in which Professor Bartoszewski was active and which is described by Dr Prekerowa (chapter 14) was, after all, a unique institution in occupied Europe. This controversy risks taking a too narrowly Polish perspective on events. Everywhere in the Nazi 'New Order', when faced with the plans to deport and murder local Jews, a proportion of the population attempted to aid and succor the Jews, a proportion assisted the Nazis and the majority remained inactive somewhere in between. One can only agree with Professor Bartoszewski that, from a moral point of view; *'it must be stated clearly that not enough was done in Poland or anywhere else in occupied Europe. "Enough" was done only by those who died while giving aid.'* The problem remains of deciding what proportion of the population should be assigned to each group. But even a willingness to aid Jews could not necessarily affect their final fate. The Dutch are generally held to have been strongly philo-Semitic, yet the proportion of Jews who survived in the Netherlands was not much higher than in Poland.

The controversy surrounding the aid given by the Poles raises moral dilemmas which normal historical methods are not well-equipped to answer. The problems are aired in a balanced and open manner by Professor Bartoszewski, Dr Preker and Professor Gutmann (chapters 13, 14 and 15). The main point at issue between them appears to centre on the question of whether the impact of Nazi anti-Jewish policies led the Poles to adopt a more friendly attitude towards Jews. It is certainly true that many Poles, some of them previously strongly hostile to Jews (like the writer Zofia Kossak Szczucka or the National Democratic politician, Jan Mosdorf) came to see anti-Semitism as morally totally unacceptable. Equally one cannot overlook the successes of German

propaganda in isolating the Jews and inducing Poles to see them as sub-human or even not human at all. Czeslaw Milosz in his poem Camp di Piori has described the indifference of Poles at the spring carnival in Warsaw to the clearly visible and audible destruction of the ghetto. Equally, it was Jan Karski, a prominent member of the Polish underground and the first person to bring an account to the West of Nazi mass murder, who in a report to the Polish government in France in February 1940 wrote of Polish attitudes:

The solution of the 'Jewish Question' by the Germans - I must state this with a full sense of responsibility for what I am saying is a serious and quite dangerous tool in the hands of the Germans, leading toward the 'moral pacification' of broad sections of Polish society. . .

It would certainly be erroneous to suppose that this issue alone will be effective in gaining for them the acceptance of the populace.

However, although the nation loathes them mortally, this question is creating something akin to a narrow bridge upon which the Germans and a large portion of Polish society are finding agreement.

It is certain that this bridge is no less narrow than the desires of the Germans to strengthen and reinforce it are great.

Moreover, this situation threatens to demoralize broad segments of the populace, and this in turn may present many problems to the future authorities endeavouring to rebuild the Polish state. It is difficult; 'the lesson is not lost.

I do not know how to do this, or even how to begin, or even who could do it, or on what scale in the long run (if it is possible at all) - but might it not be possible to a certain extent, in the face of the existence of three enemies (if, of course, one should currently regard the Jews as enemies), to endeavour to create something along the lines of a common front with the two weaker partners against the third more powerful and deadly enemy, leaving accounts to be sewed with the other two later?

The establishment of any kind of broader common front would be beset with very many difficulties from the perspective of wide segments of the Polish populace, among whom anti-Semitism has by no means decrease.

In the immediate post-war years, the survivors of Polish Jewry found themselves caught up in the near-civil war provoked by the imposition of a communist government on an unwilling population. Jews provoked hostility because of their prominence (sometimes exaggerated) in the new regime and because of the fears of those who had taken over Jewish property that they would be compelled to give it up. Between liberation and mid-1947 some 1,500 Jews lost their lives in violent incidents of which the most shocking was the pogrom at Kielce in July 1946 in which at least 42 Jews were killed. This sad episode in Polish-Jewish history is chronicled by a man who participated in it, Michal Borwicz, who had also been the highest-ranking Jew in the Polish underground Home Army *(Armia Krajowa)* in chapter 16. While conceding that many of these incidents, and possibly Kielce itself, had an element of communist provocation in them and were certainly exploited by the communists to tighten their hold on power, he stresses the responsibility of the right-wing underground groups, and also of those church authorities who refused to condemn anti-Jewish outrages.

By 1948, with the fall of Wtadystaw Gomulka, a stalinist-style regime was established in Poland and Polish-Jewish relations entered on a new and, in many ways, paradoxical course. As Dr Hirszowicz demonstrates (chapter 17) Jewish communists were prominent both in the Stalinist wing of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) and among the revisionists who hoped to reform

the communist system. Gomulka's return to power in 1956 proved a disappointment to those who hoped he would usher in new and more open attitudes. Increasingly from the early 1960s, as his regime lost its dynamism and was plagued by persistent economic failure, the temptation grew for young, power-hungry members of the party apparently led by Mieczylaw Moczar to blame the relatively small number of Jews in the party leadership for the failures of Polish communism. This tendency came to a head in 1968 when 'anti-Zionism', ostensibly provoked by the Israeli victory in the six-day war, led to a.major purge of Jewish communists and what was almost certainly an unsuccessful attempt by Moczar and his faction to seize power. Moczar failed and after Gomulka's fall in 1970, the regime of his successor Edward Gierek returned to a policy of trying to improve relations with international Jewish organizations, while periodically resorting to attempts to smear the growing opposition movement as 'Jewish' in character. This dual policy has been maintained not only during the 17 months during which Solidarity was legal but also during the subsequent period of martial law and the 'normalization' which has followed.

The history of Polish Jewry has virtually come to an end. Barely 6,000 Jews still live in Poland and although a number of institutions, such as the Jewish Social and Cultural Organization and the Jewish Historical Institute continue to perform useful and valuable work, it is difficult to see organized communal life surviving another generation. As a consequence, the history of this community, which has played so large a role in the life of both Poland and of world Jewry assumes an even more vital significance. For the Poles, it is part of their past which they are in danger of losing forever. It is true that the significance of the Jewish contribution to Polish life has not always been fully appreciated by Poles. It was the character of the Jewish writer Yitzchak Leib Peretz who, in Aaron Zeitlin's play *Esterka* tells Adam Mickiewicz*, 'I know who you are, but who I am - you do not know'.* Rafael Scharf sees this lack of interest as the result of a superiority complex:

> *Did it ever occur to a Pole that in a neighbouring town, or for that matter on the very same street something was happening that could engage his attention and deserved his interest? Not in the least. The Jewish population was commonly regarded as a 'dark continent', backward and primitive, evoking feelings of aversion and repugnance. The Poles, automatically regarded themselves as something infinitely superior - each Pole to each Jew, be he a rabbi, a writer, a merchant, a shoemaker. . .'*

In recent years, the situation has changed. Polish interest in Jewish matters has increased greatly. The awareness of the common links binding Poles and Jews has grown enormously. Yiddish and Hebrew literature has been translated into Polish, attempts have been made to preserve and rebuild Jewish monuments and the study of Polish-Jewish history has become increasingly widespread - the conference at which these papers were delivered gave eloquent testimony to the high quality of Polish research in this field.

There is also a moral dimension. Anti-Semitism was not a uniquely Polish phenomenon. It was a sickness of Europe and of Christianity, whose ghosts many people have tried to exorcize. There is nothing shameful in admitting that there are anti-Semitic aspects of Polish history just as there are aspects of the Jewish past and present which a Jewish historian must feel compelled to criticize. On the contrary, it is on the 'overcoming of the past', on striking a balance between what is good in a national tradition and what should be rejected, that the path lies to true democratization and freedom. This is clearly understood in Poland. As Marek Leski wrote in *Arka,*

> *The anti-pluralistic elements in Polish culture are particularly important today when for a number of years, efforts have been made to organize society outside officially sponsored bodies. The romantic vision of the nation-organism, the spiritual community not open to outsiders has never been as far from reality as it is today. Cultural diversity has become the characteristic of all modern western societies, channeling in this way more or less effectively and more or less creatively nationalist feelings. Nationalism in its pure form, we observe only in political dictatorships, generally*

economically backward as well as in political movements with a revolutionary or autocratic character. A reckoning with Polish nationalism and its xenophobia therefore appears an important task if our society is to become like that of countries characterized by a political culture which respects individual rights and civic freedoms and has a plural character. It is therefore injurious and indeed downright harmful to close our eyes to Polish anti-Semitism or to diminish its role in our political tradition. The conviction that there is something shameful in speaking about this subject, or that doing so will undermine or paralyze the national will and spirit of Poles merely displays a lack of faith in the self-correcting abilities of Polish culture. The one guarantee that we will not make such mistakes again is to remember our past errors, the lost opportunities to make use of the intellectual and social potential possessed by our ethnic minorities, our insensitivity to the achievements of other cultures, the laziness and sloth displayed by the glorifiers of national self-praise.

For the Jews the importance of Polish-Jewish history lies elsewhere. The destruction of many of the major centres of Jewish life has been an amputation which has left Jewry numbed and mutilated. Memory, it has often been said, is the mother of the muses. Jews have a need to find their own past, to deny to the Nazis success in their bid to destroy the record of Jewish activity in Europe and, in particular, in Poland. Jews have lived in Poland for a millennium and many of the most glorious pages of their history have been written there. Jewish attitudes to Poland and Poles may often be ambivalent. Yet there is no denying Jewish nostalgia for the lost centre of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was Jerzy Ficowski, a Polish poet, who wrote accurately of those Jews who…

went to Jerusalem
and that far they smuggled
a handful of willow pears
and for a keepsake a herringbone
that sticks to this day.

Similarly Antoni Stonismki wrote of the old Jew at the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem who asked, *'Are the Saxon Gardens still there? And are they still the same?'*

It was in the hope of creating the framework in which a balanced and scholarly examination of the past of our two peoples could be undertaken that the Oxford conference was held. This work is the first fruit of that conference. It is our hope that it will be followed by much further research and analysis of the many developments which have united - and sometimes divided - *'two of the saddest nations on the earth'*, the Poles and the Jews.

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'The Two Saddest Nations on Earth': A Polish Jewish Octogenarian Looks Back and Forward [1]

by **Rafael F. Scharf (1914 – 2003)**

In one respect at least the Germans were unlucky in their choice of victim: the Jewish people were determined to leave a trace of their fate at whatever cost. Feeling abandoned by God and man, the Jews were haunted by the thought that the world might never know how they had lived and died. Writing made dying easier. The final entry in *The Scroll of Agony,* the diary of the Hebrew teacher and scholar Chaim Kaplan before his deportation to Treblinka, is the anguished cry, *'If I die what will happen to my diary?'*

1997: Rafael F. Scharf

In *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Michael Joseph, 1988, p. 1) Primo Levi imagines *SS* men taunting their victims:

"However this war may end, we have won this war against you. None of you will be left to bear witness and even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicion, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; they will say they are an exaggeration of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you."

Things have not turned out in accordance with Primo Levi's scenario. Thanks to these writers and scribblers the truth has been recorded and has become known to the world. The Germans have not denied it and no one but a maniac would question it.

An ocean of ink continues to be spilled: is there anything new to be said?

I posed this question rhetorically to my audience. A voice came back at me from the back of the hall: *'No, there is nothing new to be said, but the same truths have to be said, again and again, endlessly, to new listeners, to new generations.'* I found this revealing; the thought filled me with new vigour.

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[1] *This paper was presented at a conference of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, 'The Holocaust in Poland and Its Aftermath: Current Reflections and Debates', held in London on 23 November 2000 and was subsequently published in East European Jewish Affairs, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp 95-100, 2001.*

I looked into a pile of old papers. I recall that in the 1970s, in an issue of the Paris émigré journal *Kultura* (November 1979, p. 115), I was in a discussion with the eminent Polish writer Andrzej Szczypiorski which caused considerable controversy at the time and became a sort of *locus classicus* of a Polish-Jewish discussion of the subject. Since *Kultura, Kultura's* founder and editor Jerzy Giedroyc and Andrzej Szczypiorski are no longer with us, perhaps it may be apposite to recall some passages from that discussion, especially as I discover, with amazement, that on re-reading the text, I do not find it necessary to make many alterations - and is that not significant?

In inter-war Poland pronouncements on this subject, on both sides, were marked by a lack of openness and of sincerity. People are open and sincere only when they address one another from a position of equality. In independent Poland public argument was inseparable from politics. The press sought the approval of the street: some newspapers, like some political parties, were programmatically anti-Semitic. The Polish-language Jewish press in the three principal newspapers - *Nasz Przeglad, Chwila* and *Nowy Dziennik.* (I came to this country in 1938 as a correspondent of the third of these) - had to be very guarded in their statements so as not to aggravate the situation or expose themselves to the censor. They were also hampered by a certain built-in ambivalence of attitude: to encourage emigration to Palestine while staunchly defending Jewish rights in the Diaspora.

In the Polish People's Republic, where, as Szczypiorski noted, every item of printed matter had to pass the censor, there was never a question of objective reporting on these matters; some of the crudest calumnies and fabrications were born at that time. It was in the nature of the subject that the dogma of the day turned overnight into 'a mistake and an error' and the journalist who spouted lies to order would the following day preach the opposite.

Outside Poland, in exile, we can afford to be open with each other and without ulterior motives. Moreover, the long stay in exile has, I think, sensitized Polish opinion to certain basic features of the Jewish psyche.

Polish utterances on this subject often imply that the spreading of the myth of the irredeemable Polish anti-Semite is the result of a calculated campaign by Jewish ruling circles - another of those conspiracy theories such as the Elders of Zion. However, it is not necessary to search for conspiracy theories. It is a fact that among Jews the world over there is a widespread and deeply-rooted conviction that a very large number of Poles are of an anti-Semitic persuasion. Jews who give expression, in speech and in their writings, to these anti-Polish sentiments are not the agents of some pre-conceived campaign but are expressing their conviction spontaneously. If one is not to put it down to sheer Jewish spite and perversity it behooves men of good will to search for reasons why this and not another stereotype has become established in the Jewish consciousness. To attempt, genuinely, to understand why this is so is the first step towards a better future.

The view that the Polish people are by their very nature anti-Semitic is, according to Szczypiorski, simply stupid. Such a view also does grave injustice to a great many fair-minded people as well as to those who are indifferent to the subject, who I presume are now the vast majority of people in Poland who have never encountered a real Jew in their lives. Jews who are themselves the victim of stereotyping should beware of falling into that trap. Moreover, such an approach closes the door to open discussion and blunts the edge of genuine grievances.

It is important to see the history of the Jews in Poland in the interwar period in the context of the general situation at that time. The Poles did not invent anti-Semitism. The Marxist thesis that anti-Semitism is the result of economic causes and will not exist in a classless society proved illusory – though it might be more accurate to say that it is the vision of a classless society itself which proved illusory. The Zionist thesis that it was the state of homelessness of the Jewish people which

was at the root of the trouble also explains only one aspect of it. It is a fact that ethnic minorities, if they are numerous, easily discernable and competitive, create difficult problems for the state. The tolerance and political wisdom required to molliate them are rare. Cultural and religious differences, which will be cherished and cultivated in more enlightened times, as adding to the wealth and variety of the human heritage, have often served as a pretext for antagonism and discrimination.

In interwar Poland all these conditions which sharpen and aggravate the minorities existed in a classical form. Moreover, the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to the alleged guilt of the Jews for the death of Christ played an enormous part in stoking hostility and contempt.

A substantial and disproportionate number of people of Jewish origin in the radical and revolutionary movements at a time when membership of the communist party was illegal added to the friction. Assimilation was within reach of only a small minority. For the vast majority it was not a realistic option: the overwhelming majority of the Jewish community - its orthodox as well as its Zionist wing - opposed it as a matter of basic principle.

The new Polish state, after 150 years of loss of independence, with its crippling social and ethnic structure, economic impoverishment, predisposition to anarchy and lack of democratic traditions, faced difficulties it simply could not cope with.

Political parties came into being which had anti-Semitism as the main plank of their programme. The growth of Nazism in Germany also began to exercise a powerful influence. Taking all this into account, one may be pained, but not surprised, at the shape that things were taking for the bulk of the Jews in Poland.

In retrospect, a Polish Jew has good cause to complain of the discrimination, the attempts to organize an economic boycott, the ghetto benches at the universities, the sporadic pogroms, the incitement of the gutter press - but it is as well to remember that in comparison with what was happening in Germany after 1933, Jewish life in Poland was an idyll. There was Jewish representation in both houses of parliament, a free press, a relatively uncorrupted dispensation of justice, free professions, a prosperous middle class, a flourishing cultural life in Polish and Yiddish, and aspects of political and social life which contained a fabric of common existence. To cross all this out, to forget all this in the course of making new assessments, would be a self-inflicted wound in the balance of Jewish history.

All that, however, is part of a distant past and plays only a secondary role in the balance of Jewish history today.

The German occupation of Poland and the Holocaust cast an eternal shadow on Jewish thinking and behaviour, including Polish-Jewish relations. The immensity of suffering left the Jewish people with wounds which cannot be healed. In 50 years of research, meetings, and traveling in Europe, America and Israel, I have not come across a single person of Jewish origin in whose family there were no victims. It is not proper to outbid each other in suffering but when someone says 'Enough of this - we suffered too!', one has to remember that only a Jew went to the gas chamber only because he was a Jew, and in the pile of children's shoes in Auschwitz there are only those taken from the feet of Jewish children. Thus, if we probe the Jewish mentality we must realize that we are faced with a society which has been damaged. Its dominant feature is a grudge against the world, against so-called 'Christian civilization', that when it was no longer a secret that Hitler was carrying out a systematic, wholesale slaughter of the Jews within his reach, the world did nothing to stop it. The Pope, for reasons best known to himself, kept silent, the clergy kept silent - that silence reverberates in one's head even today. Was it so difficult to name the crime, to remind believers that love of your neighbour is the essence of religion, that blackmail and denunciation are

unpardonable sins? Can anyone seriously doubt that if at that time the mighty voice of the Catholic Church had been heard in defence of the Jews, thousands - maybe tens of thousands - would have been saved? That would have been something to be proud of.

And so to the question we are posing today: what, after mature consideration, will be the ultimate view of the Jews, and of the Poles, on the role played by the Polish nation during the Holocaust?
The Jewish *vox populi,* based on the written and spoken evidence of eyewitnesses, maintains that Poles, as a rule, were not only unhelpful but were the main danger of disclosure for those who were seeking shelter. The main fear was not of a German soldier or policeman, who could not necessarily distinguish between a Jew and a non-Jew, but of a Polish neighbour or passer- by with his or her sharpened sensitivity to Jewish features, pronunciation and fear in the eyes.

The figure of 50,000 is said to reflect the number of Jewish survivors of the Nazi occupation. One speaks of hiding places in attics and cellars, monastery cells or merely cupboards. For hiding a Jew entailed a death sentence. Despite this, there is a documentation, very fragmentary, which mentions 600 Polish families murdered by the Nazis for helping Jews. In the *Alley of the Just* in Yad Vashem 4,000 trees have been planted in tribute to Polish heroes who risked their lives in the hour of need. There must be thousands of similar cases which remain undocumented.

One must try to remain impartial. Nobody can expect or demand saintlihood from ordinary people. The sowing of hatred does not ripen into a harvest of compassion. War, penury, lawlessness - human depravity is rife in such conditions; there was no shortage of depravity among the Jews either.

But if one tries to weigh up everything that is known - heroism and self-sacrifice on the one hand and depravity on the other - there is no doubt in Jewish awareness which was the rule and which the exception. I think that informed Polish opinion would not quarrel with that verdict.

Szczypiorski says that *“the struggle to save Jews was a moral duty. The fact that to carry it out required heroism proves only one thing - the unspeakable savagery of Hitler's Germany”.* Sadly, one must add that it required heroism because the surrounding populace threatened blackmail and denunciation. Not only the so-called scum, but a considerable segment of the population.

Had the Jews felt they were in their natural element - among people with whom they shared a common fate, a struggle with a common enemy - escape and hiding in the vast areas where the Germans were scarce on the ground would not have been so difficult. But the Jews knew they were outside the circle of compassion, they knew the attitudes of the local population. When the figure of 50,000 survivors is quoted one is prompted to ask how many of them survived with the help, and how many (like my mother) without the help and against the will, of their hosts.

As the process of gassing and burning went on in the crematoria, as the cattle trains to Chelmo, Belzec, Sobibór, Majdanek, Treblinka and Oświecim [Auschwitz] went on day and night for months, smoke belched from the chimneys. One is prompted to remark: if it were known that it is not the Jews who are burning but Polish fathers, husbands and sons, mothers and children, how long would that process have been allowed to continue uninterrupted - the rage of the nation would have been such that the whole might of the Reich could not have withstood it, even if it came to tearing out the rails with bare teeth.

Need we be surprised if Jews who never cease to think about this are not always excessively cautious in their utterances on the subject, weighing up their words, lest - God forbid! – they hurt somebody’s feelings?

A word about postwar times. When we returned to relative normality - i.e. the hunt for Jews and their exterminators came to an end, and the pitiful handful of survivors began to reappear at the surface - they were not met by a wave of sympathy and affection. On the contrary, it appears that those who managed to successfully disguise their identity found it advisable to continue with the deception so as not to irritate their neighbours with their presence. There was a widespread view that 'Whatever one may think of Hitler, he *did* solve the Jewish question in Poland!'. How such a 'balanced' view feeds on Jewish hysteria can well be imagined.

Polish apologists for the overall behaviour of Polish society towards their Jewish population during the Nazi occupation have to accept that Polish society has not emerged from that infernal moral trial with credit. One is, however, entitled to pose the question: where is the society which would have come through such a trial with greater credit? If, say, the situation were reversed and the life of a Pole depended on the self-sacrifice of a Jew, would the human, the moral, reckoning be any better? A glimpse into the fathomless depth of the human soul does not inspire optimism - but that looks like a quarrel with God, who also has not covered Himself with glory…

The paths of the 'two saddest nations on earth', as Antoni Slonimski put it, have parted for ever. Jewish creative powers and talents will no longer enrich Polish life and culture. And for the decimated Jewish people, the loss is irreparable too: for it was in that frequently inhospitable climate that there flourished the most vital, life-enhancing branch of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

Obituary published in *The Guardian* (UK), 18 September 2003

Rafael F. Scharf

Written by David Flusfeder:

Rafael Felix "Felek" Scharf, who has died in London aged 89, was an educator, writer, historian and keeper of memory, who devoted his intellectual life - and much of his emotional life - to the tragedies of the Shoah, and to the grim complex of Polish-Jewish relations. Very much a pre-war Polish Jew, and occupied for much of his life with a business career, he became a crucial figure in postwar historiography. This was just one of the paradoxes in his life that pleased, delighted and puzzled this kind, ethically scrupulous and much-loved man.

An agnostic, he went to weekly Talmud classes. An emotional man, he wept easily, but had great capacities for pleasure and laughter and conversation, taking delight in an illicit cigarette, walks on Hampstead Heath, the Rembrandt self-portraits that hang in Kenwood House. He spent most of his life in England and was a devoted husband to his - non-Jewish - wife whom he married in 1944, while remaining "totally, a Polish Jew, and cannot and would not be anything else".

Scharf was born in Cracow, where he studied to become a lawyer. He was a modern, exemplary Cracowian of his times, inhabiting Polish, Jewish and European cultures. Increasingly, though, his love for Poland was unrequited. Scharf left Cracow in 1938, going, he would later say, voluntarily but guiltily, as if he were deserting a kind of battlefield. Life was being made increasingly difficult for Jews, no matter how much they loved the great Polish poets.

Scharf thought that coming to England would be a stop on his way to Palestine - like his neighbour, the future Israeli premier Menachem Begin, he had fallen in love with the charisma of the revisionist Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky - but in London he fell out of love with rightwing Zionism and instead occupied himself with the urban adventures enjoyed by young men in foreign cities.

He had a job as London correspondent for the Cracow newspaper Nowy Dziennek (a Jewish newspaper in the Polish language) and was doing postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics. London was, for him, the city of Charles Dickens, Aldous Huxley, John Galsworthy, Israel Zangwill, as well as Sir Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists.

In August 1939, in what would be his final article for Nowy Dziennek, Scharf wrote, "I stake my journalistic reputation on the prediction that there will be no war." By the time this prophecy reached his editor's desk the Germans had occupied Cracow.

It is easy to dismiss the remark as a callow judgment. We all know what happened next. But this goes to the crux of Scharf's later mission. If we are to begin to understand what happened to the Jews in Poland between 1939 to 1945 (and not just the Jews, and not just Poland, and not just the years 1939-1945) we have to separate ourselves from our received opinions, the straight historical lines that have been drawn from now back to then.

This can only be done from the inside, with sympathy, and with knowledge, which Scharf accumulated with scholarliness, tact, and with an appetite that was born to some extent from survivor guilt. Scharf once said, not without a little vanity, that there was one man in Israel who maybe knew as much about the subject as him.

During the second world war, he served first in the infantry and then in British military intelligence. He worked for a while with Ignacy Schwarzbart, one of the two Jewish representatives to the Polish government in exile in London. Scharf was with him when the telegram from the Polish underground arrived with the first news of the death camps. Schwarzbart, that day, recorded in his diary, "This is not possible." Scharf spent the rest of his life trying to explicate the impossible.

Perpetually grieving for those, including his immediate family (only his mother survived the war), who had not been able to get away, he was also perpetually hopeful. "The greatest difficulty as I see it," he wrote, "is how to present the boundless horror of those events which have no analogy in history and at the same time not to undermine the belief in the sense of creation, in human values, in justice."

At the end of the war, he was interrogating Germans in Norway, which was when he made his first of many trips back "home". He combined his mission with family life and business careers as the owner of a silkscreen printing business and then as a dealer in English watercolours. Scharf became an important figure on committees and in publishing houses - he was one of the founders of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford; he sat on the board of editors of the Library of Holocaust Testimonies. Each year he took students to Cracow for a summer course at the university.

Much of his creative energies went into enabling the work of others. Scharf's first and, sadly, only book, *Poland, What Have I To Do With Thee?*, was published in 1997. A collection of his essays, reviews, introductions and feuilletons, it has the power of absolute moral authority, all the more so by its careful avoiding of the categories of good and evil. In the penultimate chapter, Scharf celebrates his Cracow Hebrew schoolteacher Benzion Rappaport. Rappaport was an inspirational teacher, of ethics as much as religion. What was most important to him, even if it risked him his job, was to inculcate "the spirit of free-ranging, open-minded inquiry".

"He [Rappaport] took me aside and what he told me I have never forgotten: 'The most important thing is the question man has to put to himself when he raises his eyes to heaven. Ma chovato b'olamo - what is my duty in this world? Every morning, before you begin your day, ask yourself this question. Do not try to answer it - there is no short answer to it, it will not come to you quickly, maybe it will never come to you - it matters not. The thing is to realise that the question is important, that you have a duty to perform and have to search for it." This lesson went deep. Scharf lived by it.

He is survived by his wife, three children and five grandchildren.

Written by Anne Karpf:

Walking round the streets of Cracow with Felek (no one ever called him Raphael) Scharf was a vertiginous experience, but also a confusing one. Suffused with a love of Polish language and literature, he would quote

at length from its masterpieces, pausing on every corner for a burst of Mickiewicz or Ujejski, flawlessly recalled. Yet traversing Dietla Street, the artery of the Jewish quarter Kazimierz, he would also remember the names and occupations of all its pre-war inhabitants - the Einhorns, Lipschitzs, Sonntags, Ohrensteins and Rakowers. Almost all had perished in the Shoah.

"How does one cope," Felek wrote, "with [the] knowledge that almost everybody one knew - family, friends, teachers, neighbours, shopkeepers, beggars - all died some horrible death and it is only due to some accidental twist of fate that one has not gone the same way." That twist of fate was Felek's departure (as a lawyer-turned-journalist) from Cracow in 1938 for the wider professional and cultural stage of London. Felek breathed contradictions.

In Poland a Zionist and follower of the revisionist leader Jabotinsky, he later berated himself for his failure to emigrate to Israel as had his peers. When he visited the country, Menachem Begin, a friend from Poland, called him "traitor" and refused to shake his hand. In London, he fell in love with and married the non-Jewish sociologist and tireless social activist, Betty, with whom he had three children. Though he strove to shield them from the shadows that darkened his own life, in his later years he deeply regretted that he had not transmitted to them his Jewish past and preoccupations, and therefore much of himself. He also feared that in trying to protect them from pain, he had deprived them of part of their heritage, although all three absorbed more than he realised.

Schoolfriend of my mother, business partner of my father, he led our annual Passover Seder dinners with an irreverent wit and passionate erudition (though he had long since abandoned religious belief), invariably rounding off the meal with a discussion of some vital, current Jewish issue. It was from him that we first heard of Primo Levi, long before he was taken up by the literary world. Here, too, I was introduced to vexed debates about how (and if) to preserve the crumbling fabric of Auschwitz. As I got older, he turned from a family friend into a personal one.

Before he left Cracow, Felek had never been inside a non-Jewish home. Decades later he was honoured (with the Commander's Order of Merit of the Polish Republic) for trying to build bridges between Poles and Jews. He tried to understand (without condoning) prejudice towards the Jews from the Polish point of view, and recognise the 2% or so of courageous Poles who helped escaping Jews. Yet he also acknowledged that Poles in general presented the greatest danger to Jews in hiding, since most Germans couldn't tell a Pole from a Jew, but the Poles could and did. Moreover, Felek argued, if it had been Poles rather than Jews being incinerated in the death camps, Polish wrath would have exploded.

Nevertheless he continued, to the bafflement of many of his Polish-Jewish peers, to visit Cracow, where he helped set up and attract funding for the Centre of Jewish Culture. Though he described his (and other Jews') feelings for Poland as "unrequited love", in truth he was feted there in the postwar period more than here in Britain where, though he helped found the Jewish Quarterly and the Institute of Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford, he remained self-confessedly unassimilated. Although he acknowledged the harshness of Polish-Jewish daily life, he tended to posthumously idealise it, only rarely admitting to the more ambivalent feelings that had induced him to leave it in the first place.

Perhaps that is why he took upon himself the task of being the guardian of the memory of what was the heart of interwar European Jewry - Cracow. He wrote obsessively about it, as if he might restore its inhabitants to life by the sheer vividness with which he recalled them. Or maybe he couldn't bear to abandon them once more - the over-used concept of "survivor guilt" is legitimate here. But although he wrote movingly and was the most lachrymose adult I have ever met, he was also a vibrant and entertaining man, surrounded by scores of interesting friends, who made use of his preoccupations by trying to open up channels of communication between those parties that (apart from his family) he loved best – Poles and Jews.