



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
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Presentation by Prof. Dov R. Aleksandrowicz
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Workshop 2: JEWISH STEREOTYPES OF POLES

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to present my views on the subject. Let me state that I am neither a historian, nor a social scientist and cannot claim any *professional* expertise on the topic. The only justification for presenting my views on the topic is personal. To begin with, I am a Jew, an Israeli Jew. Moreover, I grew up in Poland, mostly among Poles, and have close personal ties with post-Socialist Poland. Finally, I grew up in Poland during the '20s and the '30s at the time when much of the present Jewish stereotype of Poles was shaped.

The current Jewish stereotype of Poles is simple and sad: “Every Pole is an inveterate anti-Semite; he absorbs anti-Semitism with his mother’s milk”. The “every” in this sentence is, naturally, an inherent feature of stereotypes. The essence of stereotypes is that they oversimplify, ignore the complexity of human societies. At the same time stereotypes often contain a small or large element of reality. In this case it is indisputable that there is a great deal of anti-Semitism in Poland. Some time ago I heard the presentation of a study which found that a majority of Poles (admittedly, mostly of the uneducated ones) still believe that Jews kill Christian babies to make matzo bread for Passover.

It is notable, however, that people stubbornly holding on to this stereotype of the Poles, ignore many salient facts. They do not know, or do not wish to know, that the largest proportion of the “Righteous of the Nations” were Poles (as were the highest number of martyrs). The names of Irena Sendler or Father Musial mean little to most ordinary Israelis. And they ignore the vigorous opposition to anti-Semitism of so many Polish intellectuals and prominent members of the Church. In fact, ignorance is the greatest contributor to stereotyping, whatever its direction. I call such ignorance about Polish realities: “The ‘Chmielnicki (1) was not a Pole’ syndrome”.

(1) Bohdan Chmielnicki, a XVIIth century Cossack “ataman”, i.e. military and political leader, led an uprising against the Polish landlords, and in process massacred thousands of Jewish inhabitants.

What are the reasons for such a stubbornly held one-sided view? As I said before, I can only offer some thoughts of a nonprofessional.

One reason is rather banal: The Jewish community in Poland was, before WWII, by far the largest in Europe. The Polish-Jewish community also was, before the mass immigration of Jews from the Middle East, the largest in Israel, including a high proportion of political leaders, intellectual elite and other shapers of public opinion. Admittedly, there were countries in Europe where anti-Semitism

was as virulent, or more so, than in Poland. Indeed, the war-time record of Lithuania or the Baltic republics was far worse, and there was no *Zygota* (2) there. Yet, in all my years in Israel I have known only one person from Estonia and none from Latvia. The Hungarians in Budapest massacred Jews with a ferocity comparable to that of the SS, yet there are relatively few witnesses to that in Israel. Therefore, the sheer number of Israelis who had experienced Polish anti-Semitism, or who heard their parents relating stories about it, had a deep impact on Israeli.

(2) A joint Polish-Jewish clandestine committee to save Jews under Nazi occupation supported by the Polish Underground (AKA) mentality.

The second reason is that most of the Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the years before the war, the people who built and shaped today's Israel, came there during a low point in Jewish-Polish relations. Those relations had, for centuries, followed a pattern: the King, the "magnates" and even the less affluent land-owners, favored Jewish presence, often protecting them from anti-Semitic excesses. The Jews were useful: they contributed to the economy as craftsmen, inn-keepers, merchants, physicians and even money-lenders. Some kings found it useful to have a trusted counselor who did not report the monarch's secrets to his confessor.

The source of hostility were the middle-class burgers and merchants, who resented the competition, and the Church. That was understandable. Whenever a religious establishment assumes a political role, it becomes intolerant toward any influential group outside its confines. This happened in mediaeval Spain, as it happens now in Israel. The simple folk, uneducated and poor, were only too eager to vent their frustrations on "aliens", "the enemies of the Savior". Yet, there was always some benevolent authority for the Jews to turn to. It was a kind of power-balance, tolerated for centuries.

But in the between-the-wars Poland, however, the situation changed. To begin with, after a long period of loss of sovereignty, Poland found itself free and united. There was a surge of patriotic feelings and a strengthening of the bond between patriotism and the Catholic faith, bolstered by the role the Church had played in defending and preserving the Polish identity and culture, especially in areas under Russian rule. The traditional Polish tolerance toward minorities gave way to an intensive desire to consolidate the national identity and "close ranks", shared by the ruling circles. I remember that some of the people I knew expressed deep concern over the future when Marshal Pilsudski died. They were right. The Sanacja government, after the Marshal's death and for the first time in Poland's history, openly gave support to anti-Semitism. We, the Jews, felt threatened and no longer trusted those empowered to protect us from injustice. Not the police, certainly not government officials, not even the courts. The feelings of alienation and disillusion were particularly hard among those of us, who like myself, had deep roots in Polish culture.

The feelings of alienation became much more acute after the Shoa. The survivors, even those that were saved by courageous Poles, brought stories of indifference, exploitation and betrayal. All these were absorbed by the masses of Israelis from the Eastern countries, who knew nothing about the long and complex Jewish-Polish history and created the image of "the Polish Jew-hater, Chmielnicki". (Even though this is slowly changing.)

The last reason for this stubborn stereotype is, like the first one, almost incidental. Poland, under the Soviet-sponsored government, was an intellectual prison. Any open discussion of anti-Semitism was immediately stifled, the systematic extermination of millions of Jews was presented as "murder of Polish citizens, many of them Jewish, by fascist occupiers". The collaborators and denouncers were "marginal dregs of the Polish society". The reports of Poles, even some members of the Underground, murdering Jews, were silenced or denied. The entire issue of the Jewish Shoah and its horrors was glossed over. (Incidentally, my own impression was that this attitude was the only topic on which the Church and the Communist government were in agreement.) Poland was isolated, and any attempt at an honest Jewish-Polish dialogue (like the one that took place in Germany under Adenauer) was impossible. Even the blatant persecution and purge of the Jews following the 1967 Israeli-Arab war, was conducted under the cover of "anti-Zionist" action. Naturally, all of this only consolidated the stereotyping of Poles as being "incorrigible".

What can be done and what is being done? That is beyond the topic of my presentation. I can only say that education is the most effective antidote to prejudice, and that truth is a relentless enemy of any stereotype.