

OCCASIONAL PAPERS · 6
THE FOURTH
GOLDMAN LECTURE

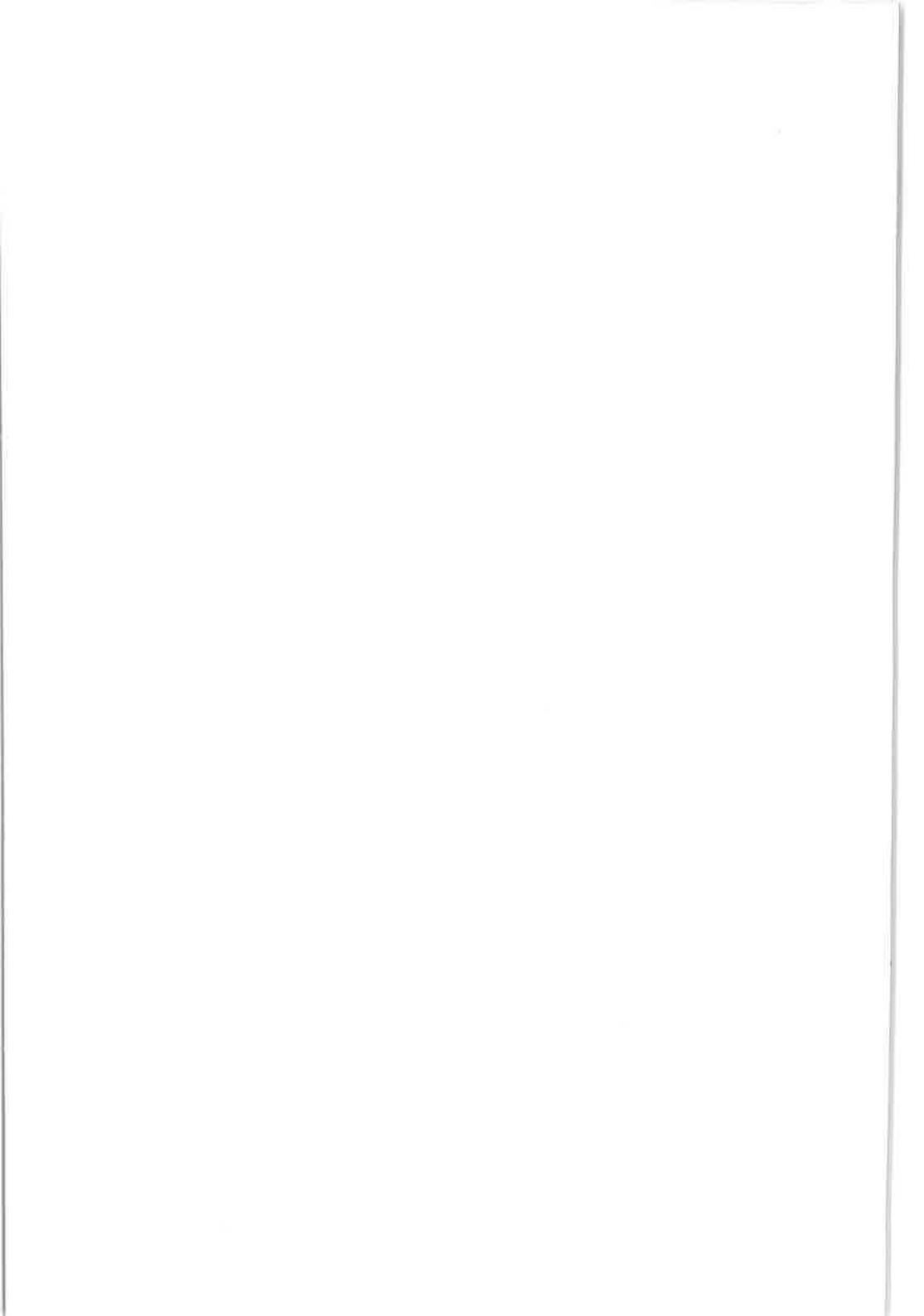


Extenuating
Circumstances?
A Personal Memoir of
Polish-Jewish
Relations



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Oxford Centre for
Hebrew and Jewish Studies



THE GOLDMAN LECTURE SERIES

The biennial Martin Goldman Memorial Lectures in the history and culture of Polish Jewry have been established at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies through the generosity of his mother, Mrs Helen Goldman, in memory of Dr Martin Goldman, a young man of exceptional talent who died in an accident in 1984 at the tragically early age of 34.

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reached Britain from Cracow in 1939 and has been active for many years in promoting Polish-Jewish understanding, a subject on which he has published widely.

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I once entitled a book on Polish-Jewish affairs *Poland, What Have I to Do with Thee? – Essays Without Prejudice*, a title which echoes the account in the Gospel of St John (2:4) of the wedding in Cana, at which Mary urged Jesus to change water into wine for the wedding guests. The text goes on to report how he brushed her off, saying: ‘Woman, what have I to do with thee?’ In part because I could never understand how a boy could address his mother in this way, I have long been interested in establishing dialogue between Poles and Jews. For many years this appeared unattainable, and there are still Jews who believe that bridge-building efforts are futile, just as there are Poles who view Jews as inferior, greedy, rapacious and incomprehensible. Primitive stereotyping is difficult to overcome and this paper is not addressed to people with such prejudices. But on both sides there are people of good will who are ready to listen, and it is they who make it possible for me to be a guarded optimist.

The fabric of Polish-Jewish cohabitation on Polish soil has been irreversibly destroyed. The few thousand Jews remaining in Poland, many of whom have virtually to apologize for being alive, constitute a community in terminal decline, physically and spiritually. There is currently one rabbi, one school, one synagogue, no leadership and consequently no future. Regrettably, world Jewry has ceased to care for them and has written them off as lost. From a Jewish point of view we are talking not about current affairs, but about history.

For Poles, however, the end of a millennium of Jewish presence in Polish lands is a fact without which it is impossible to understand their past or present. An authentic dialogue with the past is essential for moral health, serving as a corrective to the way we see ourselves when we look in the mirror. For Poles, Jews are witnesses who must be questioned and listened to carefully.

Often, Poles speak differently about Jews in private or in public, since anti-Semitism is still deemed unrespectable. But the same is true of Jews with regard to Poles. We must free ourselves from double-think and double-talk and should attempt to abandon stereotypes. Jewish stereotypes were transformed for Poles after the Six-day War –

although the one they adopted next was no less distorted. This is as unfortunate as the Jewish tendency to take it for granted that every Pole is an anti-Semite and, when it is claimed that a particular one is not, to see him as an exception. The augury for honest and productive dialogue is not propitious.

One ought to begin by agreeing some historical facts, although what constitutes a historical fact in this context is itself subject to question. Anti-Semitism was rampant in interwar Poland in the opinion of every eye-witness. No sooner had Poland regained independence following the First World War than an anti-Jewish movement began to take shape. This became for Jews an ever-present force, and it is hard to believe that Poles could have been, as many claim, unaware of this.

The spectrum of Polish Jews, or Jews of Polish origin, living all over the world is today wide, ranging from the strictly Orthodox to the completely assimilated. Some have consciously severed their ties with their country of origin and want nothing to do with it. Others have merged with their present surroundings and have no need to state a position. But there remain those who have a genuine affection for Poland. When the exiled Polish poet Julian Tuwim first heard what was happening to Jews in Poland, he wrote a lament entitled 'We, Polish Jews', in which he stated that 'I am a Pole because I like it that way'.¹ Others might amend this to: 'I am a Pole even if I don't like it', 'I am a Pole because they don't like it' or 'I am a Pole because I don't know how to cease to be one'. My own case has an additional twist, since although Poles take me for a Jew, Jews tend to see me as an Englishman and Englishmen for a Pole. I could say, half in jest, that I regard England as a wife, Israel as a lover and Poland as a stepmother. But despite these distinctions I feel no internal split and know perfectly well who I am, irrespective of how others judge me. I am a Jew, *tout court*, completely and naturally. My Polishness, on the other hand, does require proofs, and if necessary I could produce them. But what would their relevance be to the Polish essayist and journalist Stefan Kisielewski,² who wrote that 'Poland is Catholic not only by

¹ Julian Tuwim (1894–1953), poet, was co-founder of the Skamander group. (This and subsequent biographical notes have been compiled by Małgorzata Sochańska.)

² Stefan Kisielewski (1911–91) also wrote literary and musical criticism and was a composer.

faith and tradition. A Pole is Catholic by temperament, by choice, and most importantly – by his perception of the world? An unbridgeable gap separates me from such a view.

Is it possible to ‘convert’ from being Polish and consciously, by an act of will or declaration of intent, to shed it forever? I think it is possible, particularly if one lives abroad and has been wounded by the way many Poles have treated Jews. If one remembers what happened to Jews who lived in Poland it is indeed possible to turn one’s back, sever all emotional ties and feel no further bond with the country. I know many who have done so and I see nothing unworthy in such an attitude. But I want them to show a similar tolerance towards my own more complex attitude. I have lived for over half a century outside Poland. Nobody in my family speaks Polish, I have taken no part in the Polish community-in-exile and have made no investment in my Polish heritage. Yet I do not deny my Polishness. Certain thoughts about Poland drive me to distraction and others fill me with aversion. But I could never ‘convert’. What would be left of me if, by some strange edict, I were stripped of all that is Polish in me? The language – although somewhat rusty and neglected – remains part of the furniture of my inner space, the poems and verses are what I lull myself to sleep with, the recollection of the landscape, its sights and smells, are close to me. Janusz Korczak remarked, during his stay in Palestine, that the eucalyptus tree speaks a different language from the pine.³

Losing all links with the language and the landscape, with the good and less-good memories of the past and with that part of one’s personality which reflects the Polish character (for the relationships between Poles and Jews produced resemblances), would leave one impoverished and incomplete. This Polish facet or its residue is not easy to quantify, but it gives life an added dimension. Who can afford to lose a personal heritage?

I am grateful that I have lived the greater part of my life in Britain. This country has proved, on the whole, hospitable to strangers, with its civilized lack of curiosity about neighbours and an aversion to prying into private matters. There used to be a widespread feeling of

³ Janusz Korczak (1878–1942), originally Hersz Goldszmit, was a physician, teacher and writer who was murdered in Treblinka with the children of his orphanage, ‘Dom Sierot’.

superiority to foreigners, but slowly, through influxes of foreign immigrants and visitors, the increase in mass tourism and the loss of Empire, that posture has faded. The pendulum has swung the other way, making the British self-critical and more *sympathique*. It has been life-enhancing too to find oneself within the orbit of Anglo-Saxon culture and to be given direct access to the treasures of the English language and literature.

Once I would have loved to speak English without a foreign accent and not to have been recognized as a foreigner as soon as I opened my mouth. But that wish now seems misplaced. Native speakers are not superior to me, only different. Better a colourful variety of accents than grey uniformity. I nowadays cling purposefully to the remnants of my accent, proud to sound a little different.

From my present perspective I wonder how Jewish culture, which existed cheek by jowl with the ethnic Polish community for so long, remained almost totally unknown and uninteresting to most Poles who, for their part, would have been astounded to hear it described as a culture at all. Ethnic Poles, generally, saw their Jewish fellow citizens as a dark, motley crowd, with beards and sidelocks, kaftans, skullcaps and black hats in the small towns and market places, petty merchants, small shopkeepers with whom they traded and from whom they bought, often on credit, in spite of the slogan 'Buy from your own' and the officially sponsored boycott. They saw the jabbering, noisy, uncouth poor, whose poverty was somehow different from that of ethnic Poles. Jewish shopkeepers were competitive, apparently all the more so, since many Poles regarded trade as beneath their dignity. They saw Jewish artisans, including some highly skilled watchmakers, cobblers, tailors. They saw middle-class Jews in the larger towns who in dress and behaviour differed little from their ethnic Polish neighbours despite their distinctive lifestyles. They saw landlords – owners of tenement houses – since bricks and mortar were the preferred Jewish investment and the proportion of Jewish owners was substantial. They saw fellow students at school who, if they differed from themselves at all, did so by dilligence and ability. They saw colleagues at university, often forced to sit on separate benches. They saw Jewish professionals – doctors and lawyers – including some of the best. They saw a few Jews in high positions (however few there were, it seemed too many), some of them converts. They saw contemporary writers –

Leśmian, Tuwim, Słonimski, Wittlin – writing often for the *Wiadomości Literackie*, a paper owned and edited by Grycendler-Grydzewski.⁴

This distinctiveness was blurred at the edges, however, enabling some Jews to identify with Polish national aspirations under the regime of Piłsudski.⁵ But assimilation became increasingly difficult and unrewarding, a trend that happened to be in keeping with the instinctive stance of the overwhelming majority of Jews. Most of these were radically separated from the ethnic Polish community, a separation ultimately favoured by both sides. As a result, in Poland in the interwar years I did not enter a single Polish home, other than peasants' cottages rented for holidays in the southern-Polish mountain resorts of Zakopane or Zawoja. This did not feel to me a deprivation, but appeared to be wholly natural. I had non-Jewish friends at university and clients in our legal practice, but there were almost no social contacts.

The main reason was that Poles did not consider Jews their equals, but looked down on them regardless of their social position. Any Pole was superior to any Jew, by definition. The absence of a common bond helps explain why most ethnic Poles were later indifferent to the fate of Jews under the Nazi occupation. A few openly welcomed their destruction by the Nazis, many others were shocked by the spectacle unfolding before their eyes and had genuine compassion for the victims, but most remained indifferent.

To help actively was risky and demanded courage, and one cannot expect attitudes that had developed over generations to change overnight. Teresa Prekerowa estimates that between 1 and 2.5 per cent

⁴ Bolesław Leśmian (1878–1937), originally called Lesman, was a poet and member of the Polish Academy of Literature. Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976), poet, journalist and co-founder of the Skamander group, returned in 1951 to Poland from London where he spent the War-years. He became president of the Polish Writers' Union in 1956–9 and initiator of 'Letter 34' in support of creative freedom. Józef Wittlin (1896–1976) was a poet, prose-writer and literary critic. Mieczysław Grydzewski-Grycendler edited the most influential interwar Polish literary magazine, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 'Literary News'.

⁵ Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), army officer, statesman and founder of the Polish Socialist Party, was hero of the battle known as the 'miracle of the Vistula' during the war against the Bolsheviks, 1919–20, led a military coup in May 1926 and remained in power until his death in 1935.

of the population actively helped Jews, a considerable proportion of those in return for payment.⁶ But whatever the precise figures, Jews know that ethnic Poles still generally do not, cannot, or perhaps do not want to know what happened. Jews are bitterly resentful about this, sometimes noisily, not only towards Poles, but towards a world in which such things could be tolerated. Yet are we right to judge human behaviour by such absolute standards of morality? Or must we submit to the dark and primitive instincts that cause humans to be base and cruel?

In talking about Polish anti-Semitism we must give due weight to the contrary, moreover. If it was so bad in Poland, why was it so good? – as the saying goes. A full, rich, varied and creative Jewish life blossomed in Poland. Jews had total freedom of worship, religious autonomy, rabbis ranging from ultra-Orthodox to Progressive (like to-day in perpetual conflict), Hasidic courts, Hebrew-speaking schools, Yeshivas for talmudic studies and newspapers in Yiddish, Polish and Hebrew. Marian Fuchs, of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, has identified 30 dailies and 130 periodicals in Poland in 1939. There were also political parties of all shades – Zionist, religious, workers', assimilationists – as well as Jewish members of Parliament (the Sejm) and Senate, men of science and letters, theatres, charitable and educational institutions and sports clubs. This amounted to a specific civilization, flourishing on Polish soil.

Painful as it may be for both sides, we must face up to the events of the Nazi occupation that brought all this to an end and its legacy of friction, aggravated by the silence that has since surrounded the extermination of the Jews. In Poland this destruction has been treated grudgingly, half-heartedly and in a sadly formal way. The official line is that the majority of Poles sympathized with Jews and helped save them whenever they could. The sporadic blackmail, informing and handing over of Jews to German occupiers (which Poles so resent being emphasized almost everywhere outside Poland) they regard as isolated incidents perpetrated by 'the scum of society', whom the underground consequently sentenced to death. Polish society as a whole, according to this version, came through the trial with moral credit intact and honour untarnished.

⁶ Teresa Prekerowa (Preker) (1921–97) was a writer and was awarded the title in Israel of Righteous Among the Nations.

I can understand why Poles might wish to believe this account, and indeed would give a great deal to be able to believe it myself. But the overwhelming majority of Jews who lived through these events unfortunately think the contrary. According to them, ethnic Poles, with some exceptions, showed no sympathy to Jews and did not try to help or save them. Jews in hiding or in disguise feared Germans less than Polish neighbours or passers-by who could identify them, with their acute sensitivity to Jewish features, speech or sense of fear, and betray them to the Nazis. Had Jews been able to depend on mere neutrality, so that a Polish passerby might be relied on to look the other way – let alone offer the sort of active help which called for heroism – the chances of survival would have been vastly increased. Had they been allowed to join partisan units, many more could have been saved.

The case of Jan Karski is indicative.⁷ This daredevil and hero, who witnessed the extermination of Jews in Bełżec death-camp, brought the first account of the gas-chambers and crematoria to the West. As one of the first couriers to leave occupied Poland, Karski had arrived in Angers in France, the seat of the Polish Government-in-exile, in February 1940. He was well acquainted with the situation in Poland, and Stanisław Kot, the Minister of Home Affairs, avid for every detail, asked him to write a report on the treatment of Jews, among other things.⁸ Karski gave an acute and farsighted account, declaring that many Poles were openly hostile to Jews and in principle sympathized with the objectives of the Germans in the occupied territories. In his words, ‘the solution to the “Jewish Question” by the Germans – I must state this with a full sense of responsibility for what I am saying – represents a very dangerous tool in the hands of the Germans, leading toward the “moral pacification” of a broad section of Polish society ... Although the nation loathes them [the Germans] mortally, this question creates a kind of a narrow bridge on which the Germans and a large part of Polish society find themselves in agreement ... This situation threatens to demoralize broad segments of the populace and this, in turn, may present many problems to the future authorities

⁷ Jan Karski (1914–2000), originally Koziński, was a historian and philosopher who, as a secret courier of the Polish government-in-exile, brought eyewitness reports of Nazi atrocities to the Allies.

⁸ Stanisław Kot (1885–1975) was an historian, member of the Polish Peasant Party and minister of the Polish government-in-exile.

endeavouring to reconstruct the Polish State ... Hitler's lesson is well taken ... Might it not be possible in some way, taking the existence of three adversaries (if, of course, one should currently regard the Jews as an adversary), for the two weaker partners to form something of a common front against the third more powerful and deadly enemy, leaving the accounts between the other two to be settled later? The establishment of such a common front would be beset with many difficulties, for a wide segment of the Polish population remains as anti-Semitic as ever.'

This is not a Jewish fantasy or forgery, but Karski's report, and there is a good deal more of it. Mikołajczyk, Stroński and Kot, members of the Government (the annotations show the report to have been accessible to only a select few), realized how incendiary the argument was.⁹ If the extent and persistence of anti-Semitism among ethnic Poles became public knowledge, Poland's cause would be damaged in the eyes of her allies. It was therefore decided to prepare a revised version of the report in which ethnic Poles were portrayed as united in their condemnation of the German anti-Jewish activities.

A few years ago, in a debate in the Paris monthly *Kultura* with Andrzej Szczypiorski, a Polish writer and friend of mine,¹⁰ I argued that had it been thought – as trains rolled night and day to Chełmno, Sobibór, Bełżec, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz, as crematoria were stoked and as smoke billowed from the chimneys – that it was not Jews who were being incinerated but ethnic Polish fathers, husbands, mothers, wives and children, the explosion of wrath would have been uncontrollable, to the point, as I wrote, of 'tearing up the rails with bare teeth'. Szczypiorski disagreed, emphasizing the impotence of Poles in the face of round-ups and deportations, public executions, the decimation of the intelligentsia and the crushing of Warsaw. Even then, Szczypiorski pointed out, no one 'tore up rails with their teeth'. Yet my argument still stands, I believe. The fact that the gassing and burning of Jews took place over years without ever being interrupted by an act of blind rage strengthens my conviction

⁹ Stanisław Mikołajczyk (1901–66) of the Polish Peasant Party was Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile, 1943–4. Stanisław Stroński (1882–1955) was a professor at the Jagiellonian University, Cracow, an essayist and minister in the Polish government-in-exile.

¹⁰ Andrzej Szczypiorski (1924–2000), writer and essayist.

that ethnic Poles, although many may have watched with compassion, did not feel sufficiently moved to intervene individually or collectively. What the Germans did in the death-camps could have been done only to the Jews.

It is a singularly Polish paradox, however, that even under the occupation an ethnic Pole could be at once an active anti-Semite, a hero of the resistance and a rescuer of Jews. The Polish nationalistic and anti-Semitic right did not collaborate with the Nazis, as did the right wing elsewhere in Europe, but actively fought with the underground. Some even rescued Jews, although such an act was punishable by death.

This ambivalence is illustrated by the appeal published by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, a Catholic writer, in August 1942, in connection with the Warsaw ghetto and the apparent indifference of the world, including Britain, America, Poles and even Jews abroad.¹¹ 'The dying Jews are surrounded by Pilates washing their hands', she wrote. 'This silence cannot be tolerated any longer. No matter what the reason might be, this silence is a disgrace ... Our feelings toward the Jews haven't changed. We still consider them the political, economic and ideological enemies of Poland. Moreover, we are aware that they hate us even more than they hate the Germans, that they hold us responsible for their misfortune ... The knowledge of these feelings does not relieve us of the duty of condemning the crime. We don't want to be Pilates. We have no chance to act against the German crimes, we can't help or save anybody, but we protest from the depth of our hearts, filled with compassion, indignation and awe ... The compulsory participation of the Polish nation in this bloody show, taking place on Polish soil, can breed indifference to the wrongs, the sadism and above all the sinister conviction that one can kill one's neighbours and go unpunished.' This appeal, idealistic yet poisoned by anti-Semitic stereotypes, reflects widespread Polish attitudes. The anti-Semitic tradition inclined ethnic Poles to perceive Jews as aliens, even while their heroic tradition prompted them to save them.

The same Kossak-Szczucka, in a letter to a friend after the War, described how, on a Warsaw bridge, 'A German saw a Pole giving alms to a starving Jewish urchin. He pounced and ordered the Pole to throw the child into the river or else he would be shot together with the young beggar. "He is not allowed to be here. There is nothing

you can do to help him, I shall kill him anyway. You can go free if you drown him, or else I will kill you both. I am counting – one, two ... ” The Pole broke down and threw the child over the rail into the river. The German patted him on the shoulder – “*Braver Kerl*” [“Good man”]. Two days later I heard that the Pole killed himself.’

One cannot today discuss Polish-Jewish matters without mentioning the Jedwabne affair, which filled the Polish press for months and has fundamentally changed the tone of Polish-Jewish dialogue. On 10 July 1941 some 1600 Jewish men, women and children, 60 per cent of the population of Jedwabne, a town northeast of Warsaw, were burnt alive in a barn by their Polish fellow-citizens. Seven Jews survived to tell the tale, having been hidden by Antonina Wyrzykowska, an ethnic Polish neighbour who was later forced out of her home by fellow Poles and had to move to Chicago. The postwar authorities erected a monument, but the inscription attributed the deed to the Nazis, even though the truth must have been well remembered by everyone. This text has now been amended and apologies were expressed at a ceremony in Jedwabne in 2001 by the Polish President Kwaśniewski and by Cardinal Glemp, the head of the Catholic Church in Poland.

The atrocity in Jedwabne was the culmination of a series of local pogroms which had begun soon after the Germans occupied the previously Soviet-held region. Convinced that the Germans – who were clearly not disinterested observers – were encouraging them, the local men armed themselves with axes and nail-studded clubs, and made the stronger Jews carry a Lenin monument that the Soviets had erected out of the town and to sing as they dug graves, intended for the monument and themselves. The 1600 Jews were marched four abreast, with a red flag pressed into the hands of leaders, who included a ninety-year-old rabbi, into a barn at the edge of the town. While their houses were looted and searched for invalids or fugitives the barn was drenched in petrol and set ablaze, music being played to drown the cries of those inside. Gold teeth were later removed from the ashes.

But the affair was unknown until it was brought to light, sixty years

¹¹ Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1890–1968) was a writer and a member of ŻEGOTA, the Council to Aid Polish Jews.

after the event, by a little book published first in Polish and then in English entitled *Sąsiedzi* ('The Neighbours'). The author, Professor Jan Tomasz Gross, who has a chair of political studies at the New York University and has written widely on wartime Polish history, calls the murderers 'ordinary men', by analogy with Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, in which Browning describes how fathers and husbands recruited in Hamburg descended, under peer pressure and brainwashing, to commit atrocities. Gross in turn identifies ninety-two perpetrators by name – including two shoemakers, a watchmaker, two locksmiths, a bricklayer, a cabinetmaker and a postman – ranging in age from twenty-seven to sixty-four and one of them a father of seven.

The basic facts cannot be denied, but the long silence about them shows how difficult it is for Poland to come to terms with the truth about itself, its behaviour towards its Jewish co-citizens during the Holocaust and the knowledge that some of its citizens, whether aided by Germans or not, committed atrocities. It should not be surprising that there are Jews who cannot forget this.

A Jew could die in many different ways in wartime Poland: from disease, hunger, during an *Aktion*, because a German had a whim to shoot him, by suicide when life became unendurable or by being worked to death in a labour camp or tortured to death in a concentration camp. He could even, concealed among ethnic Poles, have died as a Pole. I discovered at least one member of my family in every one of those categories. How does one cope with the knowledge that almost everybody one knew – family, friends, teachers, neighbours, shopkeepers, beggars – died a horrible death, and that only by some twist of fate one did not go the same way? When I want to recall a face I knew, I see it contorted, gasping for breath, in a mass of swirling bodies. The Germans could have used Zyklon C, a gas swifter in action than Zyklon B. But it was somewhat more expensive to produce. The Jews could suffer a bit longer.

How does one adjust to what, in ordinary life, passes for normality? How does this awareness shape one's view of the world and perception of history, religion, morality or humanity? Post-Holocaust Jews, 'survivors' in the broader sense, are a people apart. Burdened by memory, walking wounded, in eternal mourning, I do not think an outsider can understand this condition.

I read somewhere that 'love is a physiological function which made a career for itself'. Anti-Semitism, it seems to me, is a primitive idea which made a career for itself. Another definition is a Christian disease from which Jews die. The target is well-chosen, since Jews have a mysterious gift for provoking simultaneous jealousy and contempt. They are weak, despite the myth of their power, and dispersed, so it is easy to get at them. Anti-Semitism is a light sleeper and is proving a very durable product. It survived the destruction of millions of Jews and can thrive even in their absence. Poles certainly did not invent anti-Semitism, but this last variant – anti-Semitism without Jews – can be called a Polish invention.¹²

During a recent visit to Poland I was struck that despite the passage of time and the birth of a new generation, changes for the better have been slow to come. There is still a core of prejudice, ignorance and ill-will and a tendency to demonize Jews, permitting the thought that there must be some truth in the accusation that Jews commit ritual murder and that Jews as a race, nation or community have in them an ineradicable element of evil. A mere handful of Jews lives in Poland today, a sorry remnant of their once three-and-a-half-million-strong presence, yet many ethnic Poles cultivate their grudges and are ready to activate their hostility.

What have Jews done, what unpardonable sin have they committed to produce this picture in the mind and subconscious of so many Poles? Is this merely the common, ordinary hatred of 'the other', 'the alien' and the result of the traditional Christian doctrine of deicide? Or is it something more specifically Polish, the roots of which must be sought in the Polish psyche?

Whatever the cause, the effect is a psychopathological phenomenon, a neurosis which obscures a true picture of the world. Were I a 'true' Pole, I would deplore this national obsession not on account of the Jews, to whom it no longer matters very much, but because I care for the health of the nation. I would grieve not only because of the misdirected energy and the stupidity of it all, but because of the nagging question: whose side are you on in this matter? On the side of Hitler?

¹² *Editor's note:* A similar phenomenon has been remarked in Japan, where the absence of a Jewish community has not prevented the growth of an anti-Semitic movement.

Another approach is of course possible. If many Poles hate Jews and the hatred is so deeply rooted and long-lasting, perhaps there are good reasons for those feelings? If so, what are these reasons and can the causes of hatred be removed? It seems to me that the question is based on a false premise, however, since it assumes that Jews are hated because they exhibit certain failings, and that if these are removed Jews will no longer be hated. But I believe that Jews are hated because they exist, and that the only remedy would be for them to cease to exist, although at times it seems that even that does not suffice. The incurable failing of Jews (and they have many) is their Jewishness. Room for improvement may well be vast, but what precisely would constitute improvement and how would one go about achieving it? Had Jews been better, would they have avoided their fate? Or does the wish that they be better really amount to the wish that they cease to be themselves?

An inviolate element of Polish self-perception is the view that Poland itself is without blemish. Nobody in Poland will deny that Poles are capable of committing deeds foul or treacherous – Poles are prone to self-criticism. But Poland, as distinct from Poles, remains paradoxically unsullied, always the innocent victim, the Christ of Nations. Woe unto those who attempt to tarnish that dogma. Many Poles will confess openly that Poland was and is the home of many anti-Semites. But the accusation that Poland was an anti-Semitic country surprises them. They resent it and seem not to understand why their country should have this reputation. They believe it is the Jews who have spread this opinion, repaying with ingratitude the good they received. And why should Jews be doing this? Because they feel guilty about the role that some of them played in Poland, such as Julia Brystygierowa, Józef Różański and Józef Światło, high-ranking members of the Security Police, and their ilk.

Moreover, Jews in America and in the West are ashamed they did nothing to save their fellow-Jews during the War. What precisely they could have done and what sin of omission they are supposed to have committed is not clear. Rabbi Stephen Wise confessed after the War that he regretted not having blockaded the entrance to the White House with his own body. But that gesture would have had no effect. Roosevelt had the same answer to all Jewish appeals – Allied victory will bring release to all, including Jews.

After a recent lecture in Poland I was asked by a member of the audience: 'Now that you have talked about anti-Semitism in Poland, please tell us about anti-Semitism in Great Britain'. I did not find it difficult to point to various recent manifestations in the press, especially in the form of 'anti-Zionist' criticism of Israel that challenges its right to exist. But I went on to say that in all my sixty years in England, I had not experienced a single anti-Semitic incident directed against me personally, whereas in interwar Poland not a day passed without my being made aware that I was a Jew. I took it as something to be expected in the Diaspora.

For many years a rigid frame of official doctrine in Poland, combining misrepresentation and outright lies, made honest, open discussion on many issues impossible. Mental habits die hard, making it essential now to learn how to face the truth, even if the image of Poland does not emerge unsullied as a result. In the short interwar period, when Poles were at last responsible for their own fate and for that of their ethnic minorities, the Jews were left in no doubt that they were far from fully fledged citizens, equal in all respects. Their formal equality was guaranteed by the Constitution, but even a Jew outwardly indistinguishable from his Polish neighbour knew he was there as a guest and not as of right, and would be reminded of it at every step – at school, on the street, in the press, in every professional and political walk of life. An anthology of articles and statements of the period, many of which are illustrated by cartoons that could have been taken from Streicher's *Der Stürmer*, may serve as an antidote to any rose-tinted view.

What would have happened had Jews returned to their places of birth and residence after the War to reclaim their property? The reception accorded to those Jews who did return fills one with melancholy. Postwar Poland was an inhospitable place for Jews, with pogroms in Cracow and Kielce and a campaign in the late sixties which forced a final Jewish exodus from Poland. It is common for Jews to feel the world is against them and to see no reason to exclude Poles from the charge of hatred. But it is essential for them to be fairer and more selective in their judgements. Polish anti-Semitism, even in its ugliest and most brutal form, was a phenomenon of a different order and category from that which resulted from Nazi doctrine and practice. What the Germans did was beyond the imagination of even the most rabid Polish anti-Semite.

Yet there was in the postwar years a widespread feeling among Poles that the 'Jewish problem' had indeed been 'solved', that this had been done in a manner for which they could not be blamed and that Poland was the better for it. Jews who survived the camps and emerged from hiding places often heard it said that Hitler had done a good job. Hitler's lesson – as Karski foresaw – found adept pupils.

As a result of the continuing dislike, most of those few who survived with the help of Aryan documents realized it would be safer to continue the masquerade, in some cases not betraying their real identity even to their own children. Even those returning from Russia took note of the climate and whenever possible assumed some sort of cover, and it seemed these latter-day Marranos would somehow survive. But changes of name were marked in files, and for anyone known to the authorities the future held dangers. During the post-1967 wave of anti-Semitism, a former Jewish name became a stigma which disqualified its holder from acceptance. This was the final signal that Poland had no place for Jews. Those who were forced to leave Poland during the prewar years, the occupation and the postwar period and settle in various parts of the world have a deeply embedded feeling of having been wronged. Poles who complain that Jews have damaged Poland's reputation should ask themselves why, in view of their experiences, they expect Jews to be ambassadors of goodwill.

Above all there is the trauma of unreciprocated, unrequited love. Many Jews of the generation now nearing its close cannot erase from their hearts this country in which they were born and grew up and where, as Tuwim wrote, 'in Polish they confessed the disquiet of their first love and in Polish stammered of its rapture and tempests', where they loved the landscape, the language and the poetry, for which they were ready to shed their blood as her true sons. That this was not enough leaves them broken-hearted.

The paths of 'two of the saddest nations on earth' have parted for ever. Are Poles aware that with the Jews an authentic part of Poland has been obliterated? Will Poland ever be better and materially or spiritually richer without Jews?

Soon there will be no eyewitness to describe how it was to pass through the inferno, survive the camps and bunkers, owe your life to Aryan papers or be saved by exile to Siberia. The historical perspective will change as a result and with time it will become clear that our

debate is merely incidental to something larger and more comprehensive. The extermination of Jews on Polish territory was a turning point in history, marking a crisis of Christianity and of civilization. It cannot be forgotten or ignored and will weigh on future generations.

How will human beings face up to the evil they are capable of perpetrating? How will they renew their faith in morality while living in a world of which, in Adorno's words 'we cannot be too much afraid', and which contains instruments of destruction that put even gas chambers in the shade? On the answers to such questions hang all our tomorrows.

PUBLISHED LECTURES OF THE
OXFORD CENTRE FOR
HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES

A

Abramson, Glenda, *The Distant Self: Aspects of Alienation in Contemporary Hebrew Poetry* (1st Schreiber Lecture).

B

Balcombe, The Rt Hon. Lord Justice, *The Attitudes of the Law to Religion in a Secular Society*.

Baron, Salo W., *Ethnic Minority Rights: Some Older and Newer Trends* (10th Sacks Lecture).

C

Carmichael, Calum, *The Ten Commandments* (9th Sacks Lecture).

Cigman, Gloria, *The Jew as an Absent-Presence in Late Medieval England* (17th Sacks Lecture).

Cosgrave, Patrick, *The Origins, Evolution and Future of Israeli Foreign Policy* (6th Sacks Lecture).

D

Daiches, David, *The Valley of Tears and Dover Beach: Modes of Sadness in English and Hebrew Poetry* (1st Sacks Lecture).

Daube, David, *Ancient Hebrew Fables* (Inaugural Lecture).

Daube, David, *Esther*.

Daube, David, *Medical and Genetic Ethics: Three Historical Vignettes*.

Daube, David, *Witnesses in Bible and Talmud*; Carmichael, Calum, *Biblical Laws of Talion*.

DellaPergola, Sergio, *World Jewry Beyond 2000: The Demographic Prospects* (3rd Frank Green Lecture; Occasional Papers · 2).

E

Eban, Abba, *The Intellectual Climate in Israel Today* (2nd Sacks Lecture).

Eckardt, A. Roy, *Comedy versus Tragedy: Post-Shoah Reflections* (1st Maxwell Lecture).

F

Finestein, Israel, *Post-Emancipation Jewry: The Anglo-Jewish Experience* (7th Sacks Lecture).

Fishman, William J., *Morris Winchevsky's London Yiddish Newspaper: One Hundred Years in Retrospect* (2nd Stencl Lecture).

Frankel, S. Herbert, *Modern Capitalism and the Jews*.

G

Gilbert, Martin, *Britain, Palestine and the Jews 1891-1939* (3rd Sacks Lecture).

Goodman, Martin, *Who was a Jew?*

J

Jackson, Bernard S., *The Teaching of Jewish Law in British Universities* (2nd Jewish Law Fellowship Lecture).

Jacobs, Louis, *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Jewish Legal Decisions: The Debate on AID* (3rd Jewish Law Fellowship Lecture).

K

King, Robert D., *The Weinreich Legacy* (5th Stencl Lecture).

L

Levenberg, Schneier, *From Czar to Glasnost: Yiddish in the Soviet Union* (6th Stencl Lecture).

Litvine, Mordechai, *Translations into and from Yiddish* (8th Stencl Lecture).

M

Malamat, Abraham, *Early Israelite Warfare and the Conquest of Canaan* (4th Sacks Lecture).

Mandel, George, *Who was Ben-Yehuda with in Boulevard Montmartre?*

Maxwell, Elizabeth, *Why Should the Holocaust be Remembered and Therefore Taught?*

Mendelovitch, Bernard, *Memories of London Yiddish Theatre* (7th Stencl Lecture).

Mendelsohn, Ezra, *The Ambiguous 'Lessons' of Modern Polish-Jewish History* (1st Goldman Lecture).

Mendes-Flohr, Paul, *Jewish Philosophy: An Obituary* (4th Frank Green Lecture; Occasional Papers · 3).

N

Neusner, Jacob, *Max Weber Revisited: Religion and Society in Ancient Judaism* (8th Sacks Lecture).

P

Patterson, David, *A Darkling Plain: Jews and Arabs in Modern Hebrew Literature*.

Patterson, David, *Out of Bondage* (15th Sacks Lecture).

Patterson, David, and Uriel Tal, *Changing Approaches to Society in Nineteenth-century Hebrew Literature and Jewish Thought* (Inauguration of the Schreiber Fellowship).

Polonsky, Antony, *The Failure of Jewish Assimilation in Polish Lands and its Consequences* (3rd Goldman Lecture; Occasional Papers · 4).

Prawer, S. S., *A. N. Stencl, Poet of Whitechapel* (1st Stencl Lecture).

R

Ran, Leyzer, *Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania* (4th Stencl Lecture).

S

Schäfer, Peter, *Gershom Scholem Reconsidered: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism* (12th Sacks Lecture).

Shamir, Shimon, *Acceptance of the Other: Liberal Interpretations of Islam and Judaism in Egypt and Israel*, with an introduction by HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal (21st Sacks Lecture; Occasional Papers · 5).

Shapiro, E. Donald, *Birth, Law, Medicine and Morality* (11th Sacks Lecture).

Simpson, W. W., *Freedom, Justice and Responsibility: A Retrospective Prospect* (13th Sacks Lecture).

Solomon, Joseph, *Jewish Rights in a Jewish Land*.

Sufott, Zev E., *Israel and the Diaspora: Roles and Responsibilities* (Occasional Papers · 1).

T

Temkin, Sefton D., *On to America: The Great Migration and the Development of Jewish Life in the United States*.

U

Ullendorff, Edward, *The Bawdy Bible* (5th Sacks Lecture).

V

Vermes, Geza, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Forty Years On* (14th Sacks Lecture).

W

Wasserstein, Bernard, *Herbert Samuel and the Partition of Palestine* (16th Sacks Lecture).

Webber, Jonathan, *The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections* (1st Frank Green Lecture).

Wistrich, Robert S., *Antisemitism in the New Europe* (2nd Frank Green Lecture).

