

**WARSAW AND
JERUSALEM**

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**Polish-Jewish History, Culture,
Values, and Education between
Paradise and Inferno**

Edited by

Nitza Davidovitch and Eyal Lewin



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*Warsaw and Jerusalem: Polish-Jewish History, Culture,
Values, and Education between Paradise and Inferno*

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INTRODUCTION

POLISH-JEWISH EXISTENCE BETWEEN PARADISE AND INFERNO

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On February 1, 2018, despite Israeli and American criticism, Poland's Senate approved a highly controversial bill that bans any Holocaust accusations against Poles as well as descriptions of Nazi death camps as Polish. The law essentially bans accusations that some Poles were complicit in the Nazi crimes committed on Polish soil, including the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Once the legislation was signed into law, about a fortnight later, by Polish President Andrzej Duda, anyone convicted under the law could face fines or up to three years in jail.

Critics of the bill, including the US State Department and Israeli officials, feared that it would infringe upon free speech and could even be used to target Holocaust survivors or historians. In Israel, the reaction was fierce. "One cannot change history, and the Holocaust cannot be denied," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated. Israel's housing minister, Yoav Galant, condemned the bill after it was passed by Poland's Senate, tweeting that it constituted "Holocaust denial." Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Center similarly cautioned that the bill could blur the historical truths regarding the assistance the Germans received from the Polish population during the Holocaust.

"We are facing the biggest crisis in Polish-Jewish relations since 1989," said Agnieszka Markiewicz, director of the American Jewish Committee's central Europe office, referring to the year the Berlin Wall came down.

“The way this conflict has escalated is horrible. There are things that have been said and done on both sides – including by Israeli politicians who said that there were Polish camps – which have not been helpful. Polish people do not bear responsibility for the Holocaust, as such. But like other nations, they do bear responsibility for the behavior or attitudes of some.”

Warsaw-based political scientist and advocate Rafal Pankowski said he had never experienced as much anti-Semitism in Polish public discourse as he did in the current discourse. “Anti-Semitism is not a new phenomenon here, but we are seeing an explosion of that sentiment in popular media mainstream [...],” Pankowski said.

Netanyahu and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki spoke by phone; however, in spite of the diplomatic dialogue, the Polish government stood by its bill and pursued Senate approval.

Poles were especially dismayed when, in 2012, President Barack Obama incorrectly referred to a “Polish death camp.” Three years later, then-FBI director James Comey also appeared to equate the country’s role in the Holocaust to that of Germany. Both remarks outraged Poland and sparked a diplomatic crisis. Then-Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk accused Obama of ignorance, lack of knowledge, and bad intentions. When the Polish right-wing Law and Justice party won the overall majority in 2015, it vowed to stop critics from insulting and slandering Poland (*The Washington Post*, February 2, 2018).

The whole crisis, particularly the deteriorating relationship between Israel and Poland, should logically be puzzling. In light of the suffering of the Polish nation and the fate of Jews and non-Jews in Polish territory as a result of the Nazi occupation, it would seem that these nations would identify with each other and find common ground based on their painful past. Moreover, considering the large numbers of Israelis who visit Poland, it would be only natural for Poles and Israelis to form positive attitudes towards each other. No wonder that the two nations are in international political, economic, and cultural contact with each other. The number of Israelis visiting Poland rises each year, as does the number of Poles who visit Israel. Israeli businessmen invest in private industries in Poland, and Poles do business with Israelis. Israeli and Polish scientists visit each other and are cooperating more than ever before (Wróbel, 1997). Moreover, Jewish culture in Poland is enjoying a revival, with young Polish people in Cracow, Warsaw, Lublin, and Gdansk learning Yiddish, dancing the hora, eating chopped liver, and listening to Hassidic music (Horowitz, 2011).

On the other hand, one cannot deny that in practice, most Jews who come to Poland do so because of the historical context. While many Israelis travel to Germany as tourists, Israeli visits to Poland are almost always associated with the culture that was erased. Specifically, delegations coming to Poland primarily encounter historical Poland and memories of the Holocaust.

Is Poland to be considered an ally, a second homeland where Jews prospered for hundreds of years, or was it the hostile scene of generations of pogroms? Was Poland the paradise where Jewish life, religious as well as cultural, national particularistic as well as assimilationist, thrived, or was it a historical setup where a Jewish civilization would eventually be trapped to death? Were the Polish people brothers-in-fate, victimized like the Jews by the German conqueror, or were they a hostile ethnic group relieved by the Nazis who cleaned Poland of its Jews for them? Due to what historian Piotr Jan Wróbel (1997) called “the double memory,” there is no simple answer, though in the following pages we shall try to search for one. The Polish-Jewish relationship has always been based on deep inconsistencies, and between Warsaw and Jerusalem, for over a thousand years now, it seems that in this sense – nothing much has changed.

Poland as the Thousand-Year-Shelter for Jews

The Hebrew word for Poland is *Polin* [translation: “dwell here”]. Indeed, throughout much of Polish Jewish history, Jews have found in Poland a place to rest, to make their homes and to feel at home. Polish Jewish history is filled with extraordinary creativity and cultural achievement, and forms an ongoing story of intertwined narratives.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Jewish merchants and artisans settled in Poland. Persecuted and expelled from Western Europe, they found refuge and a haven under the Piast and Jagiellonian dynasties. When the first Polish coins were minted in 1206, some of them already bore Hebrew inscriptions, since the mint masters were Jews. In 1264 The Statute of Kalisz was issued by Duke Boleslaw the Pious. The Statute was a general charter of Jewish liberties in Poland that established a legal foundation for Jewish presence in Poland. Subsequently, Jews were granted special status subject directly to the king or the duke and were now excluded from municipal jurisdiction. Jews assumed positions in commercial and

economic life, becoming merchants, money lenders, tax collectors and innkeepers. However, at the same time, Jews were segregated into Jewish quarters, were ordered to wear special emblems, and were banned from holding public offices higher than those held by Christians. Yet the restrictions seem to have proved ineffective, because they were repeated in subsequent years.

The *kahal* [Jewish institutionalized community] in Kalisz was first mentioned toward the end of the thirteenth century. The *kahal* collected taxes, supplied the Jews with communal services, enforced Jewish law and was responsible for the education and social welfare of its members. In 1334 King Kazimierz the Great extended the 1264 Statute of Kalisz throughout Poland and broadened Jewish privileges. There is evidence that the king had a love affair with a Jewish woman named Esther, and whether true or not – the story would reverberate through Polish folklore through the ages. These were the years when waves of migration from Western Europe brought more Jews to Poland after the epidemics known as the Black Death for which the Jews were blamed in the West.

Until the sixteenth century, the number of Jews settling in today's Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia increased, as Ashkenazi communities [those located along the Rhine in Germany] migrated to the east. They served the king, as well as members of the Polish aristocracy, as tax collectors, becoming merchants and innkeepers. They brought with them Jewish religious practices and political and commercial experience, as well as *Yiddish* – the German-based Hebrew-mixed dialect that would become for Jews the *lingua franca* and would later preserve the Jewish culture and heritage of Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe.

In 1525 King Zygmunt I for the first time knighted a Jew, Michał Ezołowicz, without requiring conversion. Jewish converts to Catholicism, until the partitions of Poland, were usually granted noble status.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was formed in 1569 and would last until 1795. It was also known as the Republic of the Two Nations, with a unified federal system and an elected monarchy, and became one of Europe's major political and cultural powers. Its first century is considered the Golden Age of Jewish life in Poland, often referred to as *Paradisus Judaeorum* [Jews' Paradise]. Granted relative autonomy, Jewish communities enjoyed economic growth and stability. Jewish culture thrived with the opening of Talmudic academies and centers of learning, as well as a proliferation of Jewish literature, secular and religious.

In the late sixteenth century an autonomous Polish Jewish ruling institution was formed, which would effectively act for almost two centuries: *Va'ad Arba Ha-Aratzot* [Council of the Four Lands]. The Council ruled over the Jewish communities of Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Lithuania and Mazovia. Its primary function was to levy and collect taxes among Jewish communities. It was made up of delegates from the different Jewish communities, and it became the central body of Jewish self-government, recognized by the king – the only institution of its kind in the history of the Diaspora.

The Thirty Years War in the first half of the seventeenth century brought the last major wave of Jewish refugees from Western Europe to Polish lands. However, as soon as the war ended, Bogdan Chmielnicki, a Polish nobleman who rebelled against his country, led a Ukrainian Cossack uprising against Polish and Polonized gentry, Jesuits and Jews. Tens of thousands of Jews fell victim to the massacres; many were sold into slavery and later ransomed by a multinational effort of *pidyon shvuyim* [redeeming the captives] among Jewish communities throughout the Four Lands and as far as Amsterdam. Jewish communities, in spite of being affected by loss of life and property, managed to re-establish themselves as quickly as possible; they fully recovered from the recent historic calamities, and Jewish cultural life was soon prosperous again throughout Poland.

In 1791 Poland became the first European country with a constitution. At the same time, Catherine the Great of Russia established the Pale of Settlement, restricting Jewish settlement in the Russian Empire. The Pale, the only region where Jews were allowed to reside, included eastern Poland and parts of present-day Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. In 1793 the second partition of the Commonwealth, by the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia, created new territorial divisions. In 1794 Many Jews joined Tadeusz Kościuszko, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War, in an insurrection against the Imperial Russian rule. Berek Joselewicz joined the Kościuszko Insurrection and formed a Jewish cavalry regiment, probably the first Jewish military unit in the history of the Diaspora. Later, as a colonel, he would lead another regiment during the Napoleonic wars and would die in battle against the Austrians.

By 1795, as a result of the third partition of Poland, the country was essentially erased from the map of Europe, and did not regain independence until the end of World War I. During the partition, the Polish population fell under the domination of one of the three empires: Russian,

Prussian or Austrian. Polish Jewish families found themselves on different sides of the borders, serving in different armies, and integrating into different cultural traditions. However, Yiddish culture and increasing Jewish involvement in Polish society were some of the cohesive forces defining these communities. Hence, Jewish life under the partitions, in spite of the challenges and difficulties, continued to expand and develop.

In 1807 the constitution of the Duchy of Warsaw, a Polish state set up under Napoleon, granted Jews equal rights. In spite of the suspension of this ruling in 1808, it allowed Jews to integrate into the wider society. Jews living under Austrian rule were granted equal rights in 1861, under Prussian rule in 1869, and under Russian rule in 1917. Each regime required that Jews take on hereditary surnames for purposes of tax collection and the draft. In 1815, following Napoleon's defeat, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, with Warsaw as its capital, functioned as a semi-autonomous Polish state under Russian rule. It granted Jews limited rights and permission to work in banking and industry. In 1821 the Congress Kingdom abolished the institution of the *kahal* and replaced it with Jewish community boards with limited powers.

To a large extent, for better or worse, Jews fully supported – and in fact, often identified with – Polish nationalism. In 1830, during an unsuccessful uprising in the Kingdom of Poland against the Tsar, Jewish militias took part in the defense of Warsaw. This was a typical historic pattern, and in 1846 a failed uprising against Austrian rule in Kraków was supported by local Jews. In 1861, Jews in the Kingdom of Poland participated in the Polish national movement against Russian rule. Michał Landy, a rabbinical student in Warsaw, was killed by Cossack fire during a patriotic demonstration, having picked up a cross that a slain Catholic protester had been carrying. In 1863, during an uprising against Russian rule, Chief Rabbi of Warsaw Dov Ber Meisels, a political activist in the fight for Polish independence, was arrested and deported from Warsaw and moved, temporarily, to Kraków. Jews, one ought to mention, did not only participate in Poland's violent struggles for national independence, but were also part of its cultural aspirations. In the mid-1850s, Samuel Orgelbrand, a Warsaw-based printer and publisher, began to work on what would become the first modern Polish twenty-eight volume encyclopedia. Among many works published, Orgelbrand printed a twenty volume edition of the Babylonian Talmud; Polish nationalism and Jewish tradition presented for him and for so many others no contradiction.

When Poland regained independence in 1918, Józef Piłsudski, interim head of state, invited Jewish parties to participate in coalition talks. In 1919 The Jewish Delegates Committee represented Polish Jewry at the Versailles Peace Conference. The conference obliged newly independent countries, including Poland, to sign a treaty guaranteeing minority rights. That year, the first parliamentary elections gave seats to Jews in the Sejm and the Senate. Roza Pomerantz-Melzer, a member of a Zionist party, became the first woman elected to the Polish parliament. Jewish life and culture flourished unprecedentedly: schools, youth movements, sports clubs, theater, cinema, literature, and the press all developed exponentially to meet the needs of the growing Jewish population and the diversity of Jewish expression.

In 1921, following a year of bitter war and a strategic Red Army defeat at the gates of Warsaw, the Polish-Soviet peace treaty was signed in Riga. Thousands of Jews, in particular shopkeepers and professionals forbidden to work in the Soviet Union, moved to Poland and were granted full citizenship, since the Polish constitution granted legal equality to all citizens. In addition to the formal legal protection of Jews against discrimination, in 1926 Piłsudski seized power in a coup and instituted a quasi-authoritarian regime. His opposition to anti-Semitism would now protect Jews and other minorities.

By the 1930s, the world Jewish population was estimated at 15 million, with 4 million in the United States, 3.5 million in Poland and 2.7 million in the Soviet Union. Jews constituted more than 10 percent of the population in Poland and provided 50 percent of all the lawyers, over 30 percent of all the doctors in Warsaw, and 25 percent of all the university students in Poland. After looking into a millennium of Jewish life in Poland, then, one has to agree that this country and its people generally embraced the Jews (Bergman et al., 2011; Lehrer, 2010; Rubinstein, 2015).

With such a historical review in mind, the Polish people have good reason to believe, as indeed most of them do, that as a nation they have always been most tolerant towards the Jews and that anti-Semitism has existed only on the margins of society. They contend that Poland served as a shelter for European Jews for centuries, when they were exiled from almost all other countries. Historically, then, Poland proved to be, for about a thousand years, a relatively safe haven for Jews, as Polish President Lech Walesa put it in his address to the Knesset Plenum in Jerusalem, during his visit on May 20, 1991:

Jews from all over the world would arrive in Poland. They found in our country hospitality and an atmosphere of tolerance. They found in our country a sense of security and the conditions to develop their great culture. Distinguished Jewish scientists and great spiritual leaders were active on Polish soil. Poland was home to both Poles and Jews.

However, in a sense, looking into Polish-Jewish history is like rotating a kaleidoscope and watching an eternally changing picture. Another glance at the same historical course of events might leave us with a totally different impression.

Poland as the Cradle of Anti-Semitism

One thousand years of Jewish residence in Poland were also a thousand years of constant friction, with hatred towards Jews orchestrating history's events. As early as 1267 The Catholic Council of Wrocław created segregated Jewish quarters. Jews were ordered to wear special emblems and were banned from holding public offices higher than those held by Christians. These measures were constantly repeated in subsequent years and in other locations in Poland.

The 1340s waves of Jewish migrations from Western Europe, following the Black Death epidemics, brought with them new allegations, blaming the Jews for the disease. Anti-Jewish riots were perpetrated in Silesia and later in Poznań and Kraków. A little more than a century later, in 1483, the Jews were expelled from Warsaw, and were permitted to live only outside the city limits. The expulsion order was repeated over and over again in subsequent years, for decades to come. In 1495 Jews were expelled from Kraków, the capital of the Polish Kingdom, as Kraków was granted the royal privilege *de non tolerandis Judaeis* [to not tolerate Jews].

In the midst of the so-called Jewish Golden Age in Poland, one ought to remember that tensions between the king and the nobility provoked instability; embroiled in wars with Sweden, Russia and Turkey, the Commonwealth began to deteriorate. Growing poverty and discontent eventually gave rise to increasing anti-Semitism, and limitations on Jewish settlement within the Polish cities were renewed. The war with Sweden was followed by pogroms, with Jews accused of complicity with the enemy. Consequently, Jewish communities were shaken both by the ferocity of the

attacks and the heavy loss of life and property, as well as by assaults by their Polish neighbors.

The Catholic Church added its portion of hatred with blood libels throughout the sixteenth century. In 1761 a provincial court ordered the burning of the Talmud, the last such event in Europe until the Third Reich's burning of books.

It is true that Jews supported the Polish uprisings, hopeless and unsuccessful as they were, throughout the nineteenth century. However, when in 1848 a failed uprising against Prussian rule in Poznań was not supported by the Jews, they were subsequently accused of treason by the Poles.

In the 19th century, when the modern Polish nation was about to emerge, anti-Semitism was the ideological glue of great political nationalistic formations. Simultaneously, anti-Semitism in Poland was strengthened by the country's Russian occupiers in a divide-and-rule manner. In 1876 Jan Jeleński published "The Jews, the Germans and Us," the first manifesto of modern Polish anti-Semitism.

The failed 1905 revolution in Russia incited pogroms. A boycott of Jewish businesses, the first of its kind, was organized in Warsaw by Polish nationalists, when Jews refused to endorse their candidate.

It was not until 1918 that Poland became an independent state once again. During the turbulent years immediately following World War I, Jews were among the thousands who perished in pogroms instigated by Polish, Ukrainian and Russian civilians and military forces. In Lvov and in Vilna, both incorporated into newly-independent Poland, Jews often suffered at the hands of the Polish military. Additionally, the Jewish community all over Poland now suffered massive unemployment and a rising number of anti-Semitic incidents and pogroms; they also fell prey to the growing tension between a multicultural Poland and increasing nationalism.

During the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Semitism became a fixture among radical right-wing nationalists and was largely supported within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Jews began to be increasingly discriminated against and unsafe. With the rise of noisy anti-Semitic groups calling for pogroms, they were segregated at universities. Many Jews, therefore, claim that anti-Semitism was very common among the Polish people.

In 1920 many Polish Jewish army volunteers in the Polish-Soviet War were interned by Polish authorities as potentially untrustworthy. In 1923 various Polish universities introduced *numerus clausus* [quotas], limiting the number of places for Jewish students, based on their percentage

of the population. In 1931 clashes in universities in Wilno (Vilna) and Lwów between the anti-Semitic National Democratic Party and Jewish students left one Polish student dead, as tensions and the imposition of quotas at universities increased. In 1937 “bench ghettos” [separate benches for Jewish students] were introduced in the majority of Polish universities. While academic segregation was opposed by the democrats and by members of academia, the right and others demanded the total exclusion of Jews from the universities.

In 1924, due to the restrictive economic policies of Prime Minister Władysław Grabski, thousands of Jewish businessmen, threatened by bankruptcy, were forced by economic conditions to leave Poland. In 1936 violent boycotts of Jewish businesses became commonplace, and Jews sometimes organized in self-defense. In the small market town of Przytyk, members of one such group attacked an organized anti-Semitic group, killing one member. A pogrom ensued, in which a Jewish couple extraneous to the incident were murdered. Members of both the Jewish self-defense and the anti-Semitic group were subsequently sentenced, but the latter were treated with lenience. Boycotts and pogroms, sometimes with fatalities, occurred elsewhere in Poland in the late 1930s. In 1936 extremist leader Adam Doboszyński and his followers organized a March on Myślenice, occupying Warsaw, arresting local authorities, plundering Jewish shops, and attempting to set fire to the synagogue. Doboszyński was arrested and sentenced to three and a half years in jail. However, several months later the prime minister and Catholic Primate both endorsed an economic boycott of Jewish businesses and shops proclaimed by the extreme right, albeit condemning physical violence against Jews.

In 1938 the Polish Sejm reintroduced a draft law banning *shechitah* [kosher ritual slaughter], generating heated debates. The Sejm also passed a law stripping Polish citizens who had resided abroad for more than five consecutive years of their citizenship. This particularly affected 17,000 Polish Jews deported by the Germans to the border at Zbąszyn, who were consequently denied admission (Aleksiun, 1999; Blatman, 2001; Zimmerman, 2003; Bergman et al., 2011; Lehrer, 2010; Rubinstein, 2015).

So it seems that, all in all, the narrative of a mutual history of Jews and Poles has its flaws. Historian Regina Renz portrays the *shtetl* as a locality dominated by a Jewish community, organized according to its own rules and in its unique manner, detached from Polish customs. The Jews were an ethnic community with a marked consciousness of their cultural

distinctiveness, which had been strengthened through the centuries by their common history, and which manifested itself in the cult of tradition and religious ties. Apart from tradition and religion, other important factors binding the Jewish community were the Yiddish language, clothing, customs, and communal institutions. Poles and Jews, therefore, even when living in the same town, formed two separate environments. Hence, the model of bilateral contacts was at best one of peaceful isolation, of a life devoid of conflict, not necessarily one of mutual friendly feelings (Renz, 2004).

The seventh Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was born as Yitzhak Yezernitsky and raised in Poland, where his father was murdered by the local villagers who had been his childhood friends, and the rest of his family was killed in the Nazi death camps. Pointing out how the Poles were deeply imbued with hatred toward Jews, he asserted that they “suck anti-Semitism with their mother’s milk” (*JTA*, May 10, 1989). Were Walesa’s words right, then, and Poland was a refuge for Jews, or was it just another European environment of Jewish hatred, where a historical illusion would eventually turn into a national lethal trap?

The Polish People as World War II Victims

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. For two weeks, Poland resisted the German army’s Blitzkrieg, and 100,000 Polish soldiers died before the Polish army collapsed, trapped between the Wehrmacht and the Soviet Red Army (Tzur, 1995). Even then, the Polish people continued to fight individually. In particular, residents of the city of Warsaw did not give up even after Poland ceased to exist. Mayor Stefan Bronisław Starzyński provided this description of Warsaw:

Hundreds of homes have become mounds of rubble, ancient churches and castles are going up in fire. Priceless art treasures are being destroyed. Our human losses are much more severe. Women and children are dying... The hospitals are full of the injured. We are unable to bury all our dead. There are cemeteries all over: in gardens and yards... We have no caskets. We are burying those who fell and those who died directly in the earth... But we continue to defend ourselves... Poland’s isolated capital – Warsaw – is bravely holding off all enemy attacks, on land and from the air (Starzyński, in: Ben Arieh, 1987: 209).

During the war, the local Polish population suffered from the German occupation in several ways. Many were deported from areas intended for German residence and were forced to settle in the area of the General Administration. Hundreds of thousands were deported to Germany for forced labor in the weapons and agricultural industries, and many died there due to poor hygiene and nutrition. In all of Poland there was a general shortage of food, fuel for heating, and medication, and consequently mortality rates rose significantly. Thousands more died in cruel acts of retaliation initiated by the Germans for various reasons (Noakes and Pridham, 1990; Lukacs, 1989).

Most non-Jewish Polish victims died of hunger, poor health, or forced labor, or in individual executions wherever they happened to be, and not as a result of transports to concentration camps. However, many Poles died in *Gemeinschaftslager* [labor camps], and hundreds of thousands died in concentration and death camps as well. Thus, for example, the first non-German prisoners in Auschwitz were Poles, who constituted the majority of prisoners until 1942, when the systematic extermination of Jews at this camp commenced. The first to be killed with gas at Auschwitz were 300 Poles and 700 Russian prisoners of war (Noakes and Pridham, 1990; Lukacs, 1989).

From the German point of view, the Poles, primarily those who belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, were *untermenschen* [subhuman], a group destined to serve the Aryan race – inferior slaves only slightly above the level of the Jews. The general idea of the Nazi occupation was to use Polish territory as the *lebensraum* [living space] for the Germans, and to turn Poles of Slavic descent into German servants and slaves. Elimination of the Polish nation was essential for this purpose.

The German policy of occupation included various types of oppression and terror employed against the Polish people. The Germans created a rift within the population, by separating and dividing them into ethnic groups of different racial grades. The intellectual and financial elite was exterminated in order to prevent the possibility of organized resistance and to create circumstances in which the Germans need to handle only simple farmers with no leadership (Noakes and Pridham, 1990; Lukacs, 1989).

In 1939–1940 the Germans employed draconian means against the Poles. Citizens suspected of resistance to the Nazi occupation, or those marked by their social status as capable of resisting, were exterminated by the *Einsatzgruppen*. Tens of thousands of affluent landowners,

entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, and government officials were murdered or sent to concentration camps. As part of the destruction of Polish culture, the Germans closed or demolished universities, schools, museums, libraries, and laboratories. In order to prevent the emergence of a new intelligentsia, Poles were forbidden to study beyond elementary school. The Germans sought to create an illiterate, obedient population, incapable of resistance (Steinlauf, 1997).

In areas annexed to the Third Reich, the goal was to “Germanize” the geographical territory – Polish speaking elementary schools were closed, street names changed, Polish industries were nationalized, and Poles were forbidden from accessing public places. Over 325,000 Poles were deported from the annexed territories to those of the General Administration, and all their possessions were confiscated. Some 50,000 Polish children meeting Aryan standards were taken from their parents and forcibly given to childless Germans for adoption. As part of the oppression of the Polish population, Nazi authorities performed daily mass executions. Dozens of villages were completely annihilated. A total of 1.5 million Poles were taken to perform forced labor on behalf of the Third Reich. They were required to wear a purple patch on their clothes, marked with the letter “P”. They were forbidden to use public transportation and were subjected to a strict curfew. They were forbidden to have any social interaction with Germans after work. Sexual relations between Germans and Poles were considered a violation of racial purity and was punished by death. A total of three million non-Jewish Poles died as a result of the German rule of Poland – 10 percent of the non-Jewish Polish population. Combined with the three million Polish Jews murdered, one in every five Poles died as a result of the German occupation (Noakes and Pridham, 1990; Lukacs, 1989).

In all, then, one ought to view the Polish people as part of the Holocaust’s victims. As Polish Historian Czesław Łuczak phrased it in 1979:

The murder of the Jews in Poland deeply shocked the Polish people, who denounced it unequivocally. The underground movements and Polish individuals expressed their feelings. Only few agreed to collaborate, these were corrupt people from the criminal world [...] (Zimmerman, 2003: 73).

The unique nature of the Nazi occupation resulted in disintegration of the foundations and values that held Polish society together.

The disintegration of Polish society, combined with the fact that the Poles were not only witnesses to the Nazi horrors but also their victims, who were exposed daily to senseless violence, created a situation in which ethics and values disappeared, and survival became a major goal. Considering the circumstances, the Polish people did the best they could to protect the Jews (Steinlauf, 1997; Zimmerman, 2003).

Alongside the Polish people's sufferings, one ought to remember that Poland was the first country to oppose Hitler's demands and the first to stand against his aggression. Unlike other European countries, Poland never had a Quisling. No Polish regiment fought on behalf of the Third Reich. Betrayed by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, Poles fought alongside the anti-Nazi forces from the first day until the last. And inside Poland, armed resistance to the German occupation was widespread throughout the war. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill praised the Poles for their role in the Battle of Britain and US President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the Polish people were an inspiration to the free world. However, all this respect towards them failed to prevent the leaders of the West from delivering Poland into Stalin's clutches at the Yalta Conference. Stabbed in the back, the heroes of the Polish resistance – enemies of Stalin's Communism – ended up in Soviet gulags and Polish Communist prisons (Michnik, 2014). In this sense, the Polish people were not only Hitler's victims, but also the prey of the treacherous West.

The Polish People as Perpetrators

There is, however, vast disagreement concerning historical memories among scholars. Some even claim that the Polish narrative of the Holocaust is one of denial – particularly in light of the lack of symmetry between the fate of Jewish Poles, 90 percent of whom were annihilated versus non-Jewish Poles – with only 10 percent murdered (Michnik-Coren, 1999). A close look raises further uncertainty – in particular, the great question of whether the Polish people were victims, bystanders, or perpetrators.

One cannot ignore the fact that as early as the 1930s, right-wing led Poland turned toward Germany as a political ally to face the potential threat to the east of the Soviet Union, and began to adopt the Nazi model. As earlier conveyed, pogroms in Polish towns and villages took place increasingly, alongside riots at the universities. Propaganda campaigns against Jewish business were backed by legal discriminatory measures in all

fields of life, and consequently – thousands of Polish Jews left for Holland, France, Belgium, and Palestine.

Some of the answers to the question as to whether Poland really belongs on the side of the victims of the Holocaust were given firsthand in the testimony of Calel Perechodnik. Perechodnik was a Polish Jew from Otwock – a small town near Warsaw whose eight thousand Jews were all murdered. In the vain hope of protecting himself and his family, Calel Perechodnik, a twenty-seven-year-old engineer of agronomy, decided to become a Ghetto policeman. The true tragedy of his choice became clear during an August 1942 *aktion* where he helplessly witnessed how his own wife and his two-year-old daughter were forced aboard a train bound for the Treblinka death camp. Perechodnik fled the Ghetto, found shelter with a Polish woman in Warsaw, and wrote his story in a diary. Shortly before his death in 1944, he entrusted the diary to a Polish friend, and the document was eventually given to the Yad Vashem Archives.

Perechodnik admitted that there were certainly Poles who willingly helped Jews, some of them unselfishly. In fact, he mentioned how the best proof of this was the fact that he was still alive to write his diary. However, he also pointed out how the lower classes of the townspeople as well as the peasants understood that they had an opportunity to enrich themselves, one that came only once in a great while. One could pillage without penalty, steal, kill people, so that many using the slogan “now or never” got to work. They raised their hands to heaven, thankful for the favor that they had lived to see such times. Consequently, in every town where there was an *aktion*, the ghetto was surrounded by a mob that participated in a formal hunt on Jews. Countless Jews perished at the hands of the Poles. In Perechodnik’s original words:

In the best case, the beaters took money from Jews, resigned to lead them only to the gendarmes. It was in any case a sentence of death. What could the Jew do without money? He could go to the gendarme himself and ask for a bullet. I myself saw and heard from the mouths of Poles about such cases.

Our janitor, Jan Dabrowski, caught Jews by force and delivered them into the hands of the gendarmes after first robbing them. [...] When the conductors on trains noticed a Jew, they communicated to one another, “I caught a bird.” [...] In Warsaw there was even a new occupation: a tracker of Jews. [...] That was how the masses reacted [...] (Perechodnik, 1996: 97).