

Ambivalence and Hope: Some Reflections of a Son of Czenstochover Jews

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For Professor Jerzy Mizgalski and the citizens of Częstochowa, with deep appreciation for their efforts to remember the Jews of our city.

Żydek

After Julian Tuwim

*I enter that courtyard on the first aleja
wrapped in a tallis of tattered memory,
past the rnezzuzah's desecrated unpainted imprint
staring at swastikas and Żyd graffiti
just like the old organ grinder
grinding out his melodies,
just a crazy Żydek singing Yiddish songs to himself
a groschen please my little father
from Zeyde Berl, from my Fetter Kasriel*

*Look my poor young fellow
we are still driven out*

*God plays with my wits,
time and exile have confused my tongue,
vainly hopeful searching
for remnant's time and place*

*The ghosts regard the pilgrim
an intruder looking
into the wasteland*

*Leer down at me
occupants of our evictions
fearful in our silent shrines,
but I come not to disinherit you
only to scratch and dance a totentanz*

*Where are you mister Jew from the first floor?
your crazy Żydek is searching for spirits
hovering on balconies of bullets and smoke*

*See what we have come to,
 gone astray
 in all of Częstochowa we haunt you,
 In the walls and rafters
 in the floorboards torn asunder
 in the holes searched for hidden plunder,
 stomp on our memory
 we are the air you breathe
 and blow through your nostrils
 and cover the whole wide world*

*Mister from the first floor, your raving brother
 dances through the cosmos with his burning head,
 the little boy, my father, peering through a window*

*has since become a Yiddish poet,
 his heart is wrapped in paper,
 his coin is struck for me,
 he casts it from his window*

*Just a crazy Żydek
 looking up still singing
 possessed,
 my katerinka shattered
 in the courtyard, we can hear its silent music, shrill
 bewailing*

*My coin, I keep it close to me,
 and I will go my way
 on my sad and frantic wanderings
 never finding peace nor harbor
 for souls that cannot rest*

*We singing Jews
 still hear the organ grinder*

“And immediately I can hear the question, ‘What do you mean—We?’ The question I grant you is natural enough.” With these words Julian Tuwim began his essay “We Polish Jews.” Immediately he switched to the first person singular and then went back and forth from the singular to the plural. He spoke personally and as a representative of Polish Jews. So, I too, take that awesome responsibility, although I in no way compare myself to Poland’s and our great

Jewish poet. I speak for myself, for my people, and for what we call the Second Generation, the children of survivors who recreated their lives after the war.

To those who ask me in English, I will explain that I am an American, an American—Jew. I am witness to all our nation's greatness and its faults, and to its struggle to root out the racial hatred that has seeped into our politics and economy, our schools and institutions. Sometimes this struggle proceeds in great leaps and bounds and sometimes with small footsteps and sometimes it backtracks.

In America, Catholic-Jewish relations, as Edward Cardinal Egan has reminded us, have reached an exemplary status. We are changing the way we behave towards one another as fellow Americans and we are rewriting our history books, admitting to all that was ugly and placing the blame where it belongs. From kindergarten through university, our curricula are being revised to include those who have been excluded and demeaned. I take it as the only example of what I expect from Poland. Of course, here we are no more than a faint shadow of ourselves, but there is still work to be done among those who are here and for those who are here no longer. In the Palace of Culture, Arthur Sandauer warned his audience “that repentance alone was not enough. If we must accept the principle that the machine can only be repaired by the man who wrecked it, then we are lost.”

Again, echoing Tuwim, you may ask me, what right do I, an American, have to such expectations? (The following was delivered in Yiddish). Ask me in Yiddish who I am, and I will answer, I am a Czenstochover Jew, and so I shall remain, because I have been raised among the saved remnant of this city. Our parents and ancestors live in us. We know their stories, not from what remains here - which is dust and decimation - but from all their tales and from their excellent Yizkor books that cite the Czenstochover names, addresses, their occupations, their glory, their trials and tribulations.

Since I was a child I have looked into these volumes, written in Yiddish and Hebrew, and recently in English, as if they were holy books. Now, finally, Poland has begun to tell our history too. And for that we are thankful. But the work of Polish historians is just beginning and they will have to read the sources in our languages if they are to truly understand us, and who we were. It will now have to be a collaborative effort between Polish and Jewish scholars just as white and African-American historians are working together and writing a history that is authentic to both.

There is a story we read on Yom Kippur about the rabbis who were tortured by the Romans for teaching Torah. Wrapped in its scrolls, they were set on fire. Rabbi Hanina ben Tradyon comforted his pupils by saying: “Do not despair because of our passion, for the scrolls may be burning but the letters are flying free for us to retrieve, reassemble and remember.” Jewish Czenstochov exists now in our hearts and minds and in our homes.

It is in our memoirs, letters, and poetry, and in archives, libraries, and institutions where those interested will be able to go and study our history as we have written it.

Yiddish, my *mame loshn*, and which I speak in the idiom of Czenstochover Jewry, was the language of nearly ten percent of your pre—war population. True, in the years just before the war, more and more young people were speaking Polish, but as late as 1931, according to the census of that year here in Częstochowa, 93.2 percent of the Jews registered Yiddish as their mother tongue. It was the language that was heard from the Warta through first Aleija and the first half of the Second Aleija.

In his *History of Polish Literature*, the Nobel laureate Czeslow Milosz includes Latin literature and that of related Slavic languages. So his book is really a history of the Literature of

the languages of Poland. Yet Yiddish and Hebrew, our Jewish languages which have also produced great literatures in this same land are not even mentioned; not the Ramu, not Y.L. Peretz, not Scholem Asch, not even Isaac Bashevis Singer whose works found as many readers as - if not more than - any Polish language writer. We are invisible in Milosz's history. And yet, by the way, I read this book with my father with great interest, because he was thoroughly versed in Polish literature and taught me to honor it.

Milosz's omission is a reflection of our ambiguous status in Poland and this country's difficulty in defining us. The problem is also implied in the ambiguous title of our proceedings "Czenstochover Jews, Coexistence and Memory." What, in fact, do we mean by "coexistence?" Was it harmonious or antagonistic? Were we not practically two separate, nearly isolated, peoples? These questions are not simple ones. Poland was, after all, our homeland, and we had regarded ourselves as Polish Jews.

In this city, Peretz told a large assembly of Jews who came to listen to their greatest living writer that "we are not guests in Poland." We lived in Poland alongside the Christians for a thousand years and we were an unmistakable part of the Polish landscape. According to the Midrash, our collection of legends and folk tales, when the first Jewish settlers arrived here, an angel revealed himself to them and with comforting words urged the Jews, *PO LIN*, which in Hebrew means "here shall you take refuge." Most of world Jewry dwelled here, and here is where they lived their ordinary and extraordinary lives.

But kings, princes, noblemen, burghers, craftsmen, merchants, students and particularly the Catholic clergy were negatively, and, at best, ambivalently disposed to us. We were invited to help in the development of this country but forbidden to become too prosperous and comfortable, or to integrate ourselves here, while maintaining our own traditions and identity. Poland has a history of continuous incitement of the people against us. Despite the fact that we were citizens of independent Poland we were treated as foreigners. The attitude of separation was, consequently, a mutual one.

To this day, we Jews are still ambivalently disposed to Poland. On the one hand, we remember this country sentimentally, and we are thankful for being allowed in, and to create in it a rich and pulsating cultural history, while Western Europe expelled us from one country after another. On the other hand, we are deeply disappointed and angry because of the persecutions and the ever present blood libels that were pretexts to murder us and which made our existence here so bitter.

The injustice implied in Milosz's history of literature in Poland is, I am glad to say, being rectified. Poland is struggling to redefine itself by, gradually, coming to see itself as having been a country of Jewish Poles and Christian Poles, rather than as one of Poles and Jews.

At these memorial services and celebrations, we cannot therefore, God forbid, recall our people and not hear their language spoken. It is the language in which we argued and uttered intimate words of love, in which children played, laughed and cried. It is the language in which mothers sang lullabies to their children, the language that was heard at weddings from Klezmer, and in which *Badkhonim* (bards), improvised words to songs for bride and groom. It is the language in which I, a son of the Yiddish poet, Chanan, "Chuncia," Kiel - who in a sense, though he lived most of his life in America, never left Czenstochow - have chosen to speak some words to you. It is your own, now nearly forgotten, Polish language. Yiddish is also a part of your cultural legacy. (End of Yiddish portion. Reprinted in *Forvets*, June 18, 2004, p. 21)

If our Jewish presence and achievements are rendered invisible, we do not have to look very hard to find egregious signs and relics of past and present xenophobia and Jew hatred.

When I visited the main cathedral in Sandomierz, a beautiful town that once had a sizable Jewish population, I saw an early eighteenth century painting by Karol de Privot hanging on the wall, depicting Jews draining the blood of a Christian infant. Dead babies were strewn on the floor, one half eaten by a dog. The plaque next to it speaks of the scene as if it were a historical fact. When I approached an elderly woman and asked her to explain it to me, she said, "Yes, this is the practice of a Jewish sect." I do not think the painting should be removed, but the plaque should be replaced with one that speaks with shame of what the painting represents and how it is a blot on Poland's past.

It reminded me of a story my father told me. When he played violin in the Polish Army orchestra that visited places throughout Poland. In a Churchyard in Silesia he saw a mural of a Hasid that was used for a shooting gallery for the local youth. The Hasid's mouth was the bullseye. Underneath it were the words: "Shoot straight for this is a..."

Last spring, after attending Shabbat services at the Nozyk Synagogue, I stepped into the All Saints Church facing the Shul. Situated in the Ghetto during the war, it had ministered to Jewish converts to Catholicism. In its bookstore, I found a leaflet hanging on the bulletin board that showed a hammer and sickle equals a Swastika equals a Jewish Star equals a Euro. The store was also full of antisemitic literature. I must tell you that I was not shocked by all of this; in fact, I found what I saw rather shameful and pathetic. Yet, one has to wonder how in this age, such grotesque impieties can be exhibited in holy places, with impunity, for all to see.

Of course, there are clergymen in Poland who do take an active role in honoring and restoring our memory. Last year I visited Sobienie Jeziora where a saintly priest, Father Roman Karwacki, took upon himself the task of removing the Jewish tombstones that, into the twenty-first century, paved the church's grounds. Father Karwacki, together with his townspeople, brought the *Matzevos* (monuments) back to the remains of the Jewish cemetery in the forest that is the only indication of the town once having been a shtetl.

Czenstochover Jews, though diminished in numbers, are still among the living. They, and those who have already departed, have transmitted their memories and traditional values to us. Wounded, their demons returned in nightmares, but during the day survivors and their children sublimated their tragedies and pursued life with a vengeance, achieving success in all field of endeavor. The Yiddish poet Hey Leivick wrote, "The world embraces me with barbed hands, she leads me to the fire, the funeral pyres, I burn and I burn, but I am not consumed, I pick my self up and resume my journey." And yet, as the years went by survivors' memories did not fade; on the contrary they grew sharper. So too, for the children of survivors, does our sense of injustice and the enormity of what was perpetrated against us grow keener.

In lands far away from here, in America, Canada, Israel, France, England, South America and Australia, Czenstochover Jews formed their own organizations where they found a meeting place and a second home. Before the war, these organizations generously supported their people in time of need and helped found the great social, religious, and educational institutions that stood here and were stellar signs of our vitality. The New York organization was formed in the earliest days of the great immigration waves to America, beginning in the 1880's. A grand synagogue that carries the name of Czenstochov on its gate still stands on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and is currently being renovated.

In their organizations, Czenstochover reacquainted themselves with those who managed to leave before the war, although an abyss separated them from each other, just as a deep psychological chasm separated us, their children, from our friends and acquaintances. In their

homes and in these organizations, the survivors told their stories to each other. We, their children, listened carefully or overheard their tales. I became a rabbi and Jewish historian to steep myself in my people's legacy. I was born in Brooklyn New York in 1948, but, you might say, I was raised in Czenstochov.

My Yiddish name is Mordkhe Volf Kiel. In English, my name, Mark William Kiel. Like other immigrants who changed their surnames, my parents shortened theirs from Kielczyglowski to Kiel in order to better adjust, however imperfectly, to life in America. Sometimes, I regret their decision to change our family name because the Kielczyglowskis were a proud and closely knit clan. I feel closer to my Jewish name. In it, I carry my maternal grandfather's name. He and his wife Brayndl still had the good fortune of dying, naturally, before the war began. Volf is after my uncle, who in Polish was called Vovek.

My father's and mother's family lived on Warszawska Street. Where my father's home stood is now an empty lot and a newer building has replaced my mother's home.

My paternal grandfather Ber, and my grandmother Rivkah Rayzl, my father's brother Itzik Hersh and his wife Hela and their daughter Frymetl, my aunt Frymet and her husband Faytl; Vovek, his wife Ruth and their daughter Eva, and all their families and relatives, young and old, as well as my mother's entire family, her sister Chana Rukhl and her husband Fayvel, and their children, Yisroel Yohanan and Rayzl; my uncle Yisroel Moshe, his wife Toybele and their child Shulamis, my maternal aunts Perele and Sarka - all were murdered by the Germans, some of them after being betrayed by Poles.

I do not have a single picture from my mother's family, nor any of her as a young girl. From her brother, my uncle Yisroel Moishe Kutner, I have only a Xerox copy of an accounting book he wrote and that was published in Czeŝtchowa. I found it in the Biblioteka Narodowa in Warsaw. When I held the book in my hands it was as if I touched a holy relic. Yisroel Moishe was a self-trained mathematician and linguist as well as a Talmudic scholar. He knew English well and had he come to America he would have prospered. Here he lived in miserable poverty. My *zeyde* Berl, together with our in-laws the Bercowics, owned a millenary store on Pilsudkiego 9. I was thrilled to find an advertisement for his store in one of the Czenstochover Yiddish Newspapers at the Jewish Historical Institute.

Had circumstances been otherwise, had history run its natural course, and these commemorations would not have been necessary, or if we were gathered to celebrate the living continuity of our own way of life, I would not be here.

I am painfully and profoundly aware that if not for the war, I would not have been born. This special consciousness is part of the complex of the Second Generation, and about which much has already been written. We of the Second Generation are substitutes for those who perished and whose names we bear. When my father used to play with me as a child, I had the distinct feeling - not a childish emotion - that he was thinking of how he used to play with his younger brother Vovek and that somehow his holy spirit rested on me. How does a child, a son of the saved remnant, understand such a grim reality? How does a child, knowing what I knew, come to terms with a family history of such unparalleled cruelty and horror? As I child, I never understood how my American playmates lived with the neat and tranquil reality of children's stories and fairy tales.

My mother's first husband, known to me only by his family name, Bocian, as well as their infant daughter, born in the ghetto, perished. I am an example of those who emerged from the whirlwind that blew together remnants of families. After the war my father married his wife's younger sister, Liebe Liza. His first wife, Sarka, was taken away at the Dom Polski Hotel in

Warsaw, whose location is situated behind what is now a Pizza Hut. My father's daughter Ruth, my half sister, also survived. With heroic efforts, survivors rose from the dead all around them and rebuilt their lives starting new families.

Together with my sister and the birth of the State of Israel, I was my parents' consolation. But they did not try to protect me from events others tried to suppress. There are two kinds of children of survivors: those who were told what happened and those that were not. Both kinds of parents suffered from survivors' guilt, and our guilt, that of their children, was that we could not fully share, much less, alleviate their suffering.

Those children whose families' histories were kept secret from them were more deeply scarred than those whose parents shared some, if not all, of their stories. Some parents hid what happened to them because they tried to escape their past, or they could not bring themselves to recount their experiences, or because they wanted to protect their children. Those children, who were not told, could not make sense of their parents being so different from other people. That is not to say that we who knew went unscathed. We absorbed secondhand all that they had suffered, knowing that whatever we did, we could never transform our parents into the "normal" people living the American dream.

But it was not only the bad that my parents shared with me. I knew a great deal of their, and our peoples' happy lives before the irrevocable change. I don't remember all their stories, not even the good ones, because even they were too painful for me, knowing how they all ended in suffering and murder. Now I wish that I could tell my family's story in its entirety, as if I were witness to it, and lull myself into the false belief that by being aware of it all, I could resurrect what was, and live in it myself.

Actually, that is part of what brings me here. I am looking for what was, even though I know that I will not find it. What I do find is of little comfort. Yet my being here fulfills a sense of obligation to my parents and to the citizens of this city who are facing their moral imperative, and have taken on the monumental challenge, of honoring our past. This is my third visit to Poland and Czestochowa and I am sure I will come again, but never as a tourist, only as a pilgrim visiting the sanctified sites of memory and martyrdom. After my first visit here I was deeply traumatized; the experience was too intensely painful. I believe that my parents, now passed away, would have had grave doubts about my coming here, but they would have been eager to know what I found.

Like most Polish Jews, my father had no interest in ever going back. My mother, however, felt differently. She came from a very Orthodox home. Yet, both she and her parents had close, devoutly Catholic friends who appreciated their Jewishness. My grandfather, Reb Mordkhe, even allowed her to spend Sabbaths with her Christian friends. He trusted them to make sure that my mother, then a little girl, ate only the kosher food she brought with her and that she observed all the strict laws of the holy day.

Although Yiddish was her primary language, my mother loved to speak Polish and was steeped in Polish folklore. She would fill our home with hundreds of Polish songs and was delighted when I was able to pick up a phrase or a few words in Polish. I, however, knowing how the Jews were treated in Poland, did not entirely share her enthusiasm for the language. I regarded Polish as an intrusion into the intimacy of our Yiddish home. For many refugees eager to assimilate, Yiddish became the language of parents' secrets. In my home, my parents sometimes spoke Polish to each other and to my sister but also when they wanted to keep something from me. I would resent it, and demanded that they speak only Yiddish. Now I wish that I had allowed my self to learn the major language of Poland. Polish is my lost language.

My mother once asked me, out of the blue, if I would accompany her to Poland and Czenstochov. I said “no,” afraid for her and for myself, and she never asked me again. After she passed away I began to regret my decision, and so you might say I came here for her. But having been here, I am glad she did not return. I know that she was looking for something that could never be found and that even the familiar terrain would have been a distortion of what she remembered.

I tell my elderly cousins and parents of my friends not to return. Those who want to, do not need me to counsel them; they have come and will come of their own accord. But I urge their children to come here, to see what has been done, to see the empty streets and feel the presence of the ghosts. I tell even the starkest realists among them that they will feel the uncanny presence of absence. I tell them to come here and to bring their children, as I have done, so that Poland will know that the second and third and fourth generation will keep watch over our memory in the place whence our heritage originated.

My father, as I said, was a Yiddish poet who was blessed with having the literary means to pour out his heart about Czenstochov. He was also a Jewish artist, a student of Peretz Wilenberg in the Hebrew gymnasium that was once headed by Mejer Balaban, the great historian. My father created a magnificent Golden Yizkor Book wherein each folio is dedicated to a Czenstochover family. In this book, you can find the monuments that were not erected on the sorrowful land of their demise. The book also includes special memorials for the anonymous masses of the liquidated streets and for the martyrs who were shot on the Kavia Street. The modest, barely visible tombstone here cannot compare to what is engraved in my mind, thanks to my father’s devotion to their memory. There will come a day when this book will find a permanent home in a museum that will give a fitting remembrance to *Khurbm Tsehnstokhov* (The Destruction of Czenstochover Jewry). As yet, I cannot bring myself to part with it.

From my father I learned how, in partitioned Poland, Jewish families began to arrive here from the surrounding shtetls - such as Proskhe, Amstev, Psherev, Klaybits, Volin, Yanov, Zsurek, Olshin, Lelev - and settled along the Warta. My great grandmother lived in Zolotshin where my father spent his summer vacations. My ancestors were among those pioneers who helped lay the foundations of the *Alter shil* (The Old Synagogue), the Mikveh (the ritual bath house), the *Beys medrish* (the study house), and various other institutions, including: libraries, Yiddish newspapers, theaters, the non sectarian Jewish hospital, political parties, and the youth movements attached to them.

As a young man, my father was active in *Hashomer Hatsair*, the Marxist Zionist youth movement where he met his first wife Sarke. He was a Yiddishist among Hebraists and somewhat of a religious Jew among atheists. The people who belonged to these parties and their movements cannot be easily labeled. My father’s love of Yiddishkeit was all embracing; nothing Jewish was alien to him.

It was not until I visited Israel for the first time that I saw pictures of what my father looked like as a young man. They were in the photo albums of his friends who came to Palestine during the “Grabski Aliyah,” and in the early thirties, to build the land. There he stood with his comrades, all of them athletes and gymnasts, beautiful, young, muscular, men.

My father told me how, with great vision of an urban future, our people built factories, workshops, iron and glass foundries, paper mills and toy factories, printing houses and a commercial center with many stores and county fairs.

He told me about the street people and tough guys in the Jewish underworld, the *Yidishe hitelekh* (the Jewish hats), and the *kapotes* (gabardines) that traditional Jews wore, and how the

city was famous for its cantors, Hassidic dynasties, their courts and *shtiblekh* (small prayer rooms). My extended family had their own *shtibl* where they gathered together to celebrate the holidays. My father told me about the cemetery, and where, as you entered, you could see the monuments of great rabbis and community leaders. Standing out among them was the tomb of my great, great, grandfather Itzik Hersh. Nearby was the monument of the martyrs of the pogroms carried out in 1919, when Poland was reborn.

My father told me of the courtyards which stretched from the Old Shul entrance to the Warte. Poor families, market Jews, merchants and middle class businessmen lived there in crowded rooms in low, one story ramshackle homes. There, my father would play with his friends, near his aunt Zlota's home where all the family would gather to share Sabbath fruits. Both my great grandfathers lived nearby, closer to the Old Shul.

Eyleh Ezkerah: And for all these, and all that was, I weep, disconsolate.

I must say that my tie to Czenstochov is not the same as to Częstochowa. One name is not merely a translation of the other; they represent two different worlds, a city within a city. Yes, our parents, to whatever degree, lived in both worlds. For the Second Generation, however, Częstochowa is marginal in our consciousness because we know that the Jews were deliberately and scornfully kept apart from their Christian "neighbors" — a word that rings with bone chilling irony since the publication of Jan Gross's book about Jedwabne.

We, Second Generation, feel That Czenstochov was a spiritual island in a sea of hostility. Before our parent's eyes, during the war, Poles said: "How good it is for us without Jews" (*Ach, jak nam dobrze bez Żydów*). Their wish to be a monolithic country before the war was realized. In this holy city, Poles demanded that we leave for the Holy land, "*Żydi do Palestina*." Under the shadow of the Jasna Gura we were treated with the old attitude of *non toleranudus Judeis*. In the streets we were taunted by Poles who routinely called us Beilis. It did not matter to them that Mendel Beilis, who was accused of ritual murder in 1911, was found not guilty and the charge dismissed as absurd. Yet even after the Holocaust, belief in the libel persisted. In 1946, then Bishop Stefan Wyszyński said to a Jewish delegation who asked him to denounce the Kielce massacre, "that the question as to whether Jews use blood for their rituals has not yet been clarified." (S.L Shneiderman, *Between Fear and Hope*, 1947, p. 117.)

We Second Generation often heard how during the holy processions that passed through our neighborhoods, the mood in the city was dangerous for Jews and that they were afraid of coming out of their homes and being attacked. In May 1936, twenty thousand, so-called National Students, sixty percent of Polish students at the time, gathered here, like the mass rally of the Ku Klux Klan in Washington a decade earlier, and in the holiest place before the Matka Boska, took an oath "not to rest until the last Jew, dead or alive, will leave Poland." And this happened with the stamp of approval by the Episcopate and Primate of Poland. (Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919-1939*, p. 356)

During the war Poles stood by, "*Swoi do Swego*," and with indifference witnessed our fate. While undergoing their own suffering, there were Poles who let us know that at least Hitler was doing their work for them. We have seen such ugly attitudes expressed in Claude Lanzmaan's film, *Shoah*. And indeed, far too often for a country to claim it was blameless, there were Poles who were complicit in the crimes committed against us by the Germans.

Not enough that 40,000 Jews met their gruesome end here; in Częstochowa we suffered a double dying. Until now our memory has been erased and desecrated. When I visited here for the

first time last year I could barely find a trace of our presence: a plaque here, a sign there, our, until now, neglected cemetery — used as a sewage dump for a local factory - and that tiny tombstone I mentioned earlier. The swastikas and Zyd graffiti, in the exact places where we once lived, testify to the open disdain in which we are still held. In America, when racist graffiti are scrawled on walls, they immediately become the subject of public scandal and are sandblasted away or painted over. In the courtyard by the Mikveh, I found a broken Jewish tombstone with the decorative sign of the Levite still visible. What was it doing there? Why wasn't it removed at once and returned to its proper place?

When I went looking for HASAG Pelcery, where my mother suffered as a slave in hell, the people I stopped in the street and asked for its location, not only did not know where it was, but what it was. Perhaps they did not wish to admit to knowing. When I found it, there was no indication of what it had been. At the entrance, I was stopped by a guard and had to persuade him to let me see it up close. Even though it was never a tourist attraction, it should have been preserved as a museum and holy place. And now, the former labor camp is being renovated for a textile firm as if it were an ordinary piece of real estate. Is it too late to remember it properly?

Tuwim's wish has not come to fruition in Częstochowa as he envisaged it. "There will come a time," he wrote, "when in every Polish city some fragment of the ghetto will be left standing and preserved in its present form in all its horror of ruin and destruction. We shall surround that monument to the ignominy of our foes and to the glory of the tortured heroes with chains wrought from Captured Hitler's guns, and every day we shall twine fresh live flowers into its iron links, so that the memory of the massacred people shall remain forever fresh in the minds of the generations to come, and also as a sign of our undying sorrow for them."

As shameful as this history has been, I am equally obligated, and am glad to remember, those shining lights who went against the stream, risking their own and their families' lives, to give aid and comfort to the Jews. These were Poles of all classes, from simple peasants to members of the clergy and intelligentsia. Their names are immortalized in Yad Vashem. There are Poles whose names are known only to those they helped, and there are those who are unknown and anonymously suffered our fate. There are also those who do not want to be remembered lest they incur their neighbors wrath.

Among those who remained alive, thanks to such Poles, were my own mother Liebe Liza and sister Ruth. My sister was betrayed by her keeper - when the money she was given by Ruth's mother ran out - and deposited at the doorsteps of the Gestapo. Because she was trained to be Catholic, Ruth managed to fool the Germans into thinking that she was not Jewish. She was then brought to a convent in Otwock. There she was protected for the duration of the war.

The nuns were well aware of this little girl's true identity. Despite Ruth's desire to become Catholic in order to fit in with the spirit and safety of the convent, they did not convert her. They waited to see if she would be reclaimed after the war. Nevertheless, Ruth thought of herself as Catholic for a number of years following the war. She tried to convert my mother, her aunt, when they were reunited and, then my father when he returned from Russia. Eventually my father rekindled her tie to Judaism. Ruth now lives in Israel where she is a tour guide, and often works with Polish visitors.

Other children, however, were converted and lost to their people. This happened despite the fact that it was well known that Jewish organizations and the Zionist movement searched for hidden children and brought many of them to America and Palestine. After the war between Hindus and Moslems in India, Ghandi said that people of both religions should adopt war orphans not of their own faith and raise them in the religion of their natural parents. Whether the

Church had the right to convert Jewish children to Catholicism poses a moral question that has yet to be addressed.

Before she was taken to HASAG, my mother was helped by a man from Częstochowa with whom she corresponded once she was settled in America. I still have his letters and remember the care packages of clothing and blankets as well as food items she sent him, although we were very poor at the time. My parents did not allow me to stereotype the Poles or its culture.

After the war, during the murderous pogrom atmosphere which greeted the survivors, Bishop Teodor Kubina distinguished himself by charging his parishioners not to dare harm the Jews. How much more could have been done had the Church taken such an active stand during and after the war? My father told me of the posters he saw with the Bishop's warning on the walls of the streets. What a contrast they were to those posters he saw as a boy during the time of Poland's war with the Bolsheviks, illustrating helpless Poles being driven by Cossacks with whips, and Jews with long noses, laughing in the background.

Just as the Poles, both our enemies and our many friends, we Jews will have to integrate the benighted past with this new beginning in Polish—Jewish relations and reconciliation taking place in our city. To be sure the process will not be an easy one. As I said, it will have to be on the basis of a full and honest reckoning. I speak as an American Jew who takes part in the efforts in my own country to create a full reconciliation between all ethnic groups, between women and men, as well as gays and straights. How can I expect less from Poland? In America this process is relevant to the living communities. In a sense, it will be harder here because we are almost absent and the problem is largely historiographical.

We, the society of Czenstochover Jews and her children and children's children, will keep a watchful eye on what happens, distinguishing that which is extended to us in bad faith from that which is genuinely offered. The reduction of the site of the mass grave on Kavia street to a narrow alleyway is an example of the former. It is difficult to imagine that if the Poles had suffered a similar tragedy in Częstochowa, that there would not be a more fitting memorial, marking the site as a sacred space. The effort made to clean up and rededicate the Jewish cemetery is a greatly appreciated example of the latter.

We have to honor with joy, and not underestimate that which is happening during these festivities and days of remembrance. But, as I say, this must only be a beginning.

We Americans and you Poles are now allies, battling evil forces and terrorists side by side in the name of democracy and a better life for all good people. I, an American Jew with roots here in this city, stand before you as a sign of hope. As the psalmist said, *Zeh Havom asah adonav, Nagilah ye Nismecha Vo*. "For surely this is a day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it."