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The Survivors – In Search of Their Place in a Post-War Reality

When considering the theme of today's Conference, I posed myself the question: To what extent today, 20 years after the end of the Cold War and on both sides of the "Iron Curtain", have the perceived stereotypes by Jews of Poles and by Poles of Jews been retained? Do the words of Piotr Kuncewicz still stand, when he talks about the issues concerning Polish-Jewish relations in the afterword of the Polish edition of Isaaca Bashevis Singer's book, "The Slave": "We are here on ground that is both sticky and slippery. Discussions between nations, which begin with accusations, mostly lead to nothing good. And already, Polish-Jewish dialogue has been almost acidic and full of misunderstandings. Poles can be very critical of themselves, but for a Jew that is something unthinkable. On the contrary, for Jews it is the same. Singer can, with impunity, point out the various defects within his compatriots. However, if I wrote one-tenth of what he wrote about Jews in "The Slave", then I would become known as an antisemite for ages".²

Bearing in mind the warning to which P. Kuncewicz referred, I will begin with myself. Allow me to share the answer to the question often put to me: "What is the reason for your interest in Jewish issues?" The answer is simple – research curiosity. It began with preliminary archival research which led to various Polish archives in search of material relating to local government education issues within the Second Polish Republic. I then found that, among the many archives, there were documents confirming wide educational activity conducted by Jews. In the course of discussions with my colleagues Dr hab. Janusz Lipiec and Dr Zbigniew Jakubowski, we established a new research project: Jewish Education Within the Second Polish Republic. That's easy to say, but where does one begin? Following a preliminary examination, I realised that the available Polish-language literature (beginning in the 1990's) was not overly substantial. I paid a visit to the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. There, I met a wonderful man – Zygmunt Hofman. After long discussions with him, I became convinced that such a multi-faceted issue could not be worked upon without a deeper study of Jewish history and culture. The death of Zygmunt Hofman, and later of Janusz Lipiec and Zbyszek Jakubowski, spurred me on to more intensive work. Zygmunt Hofman and Janusz Lipiec, despite their age, and Zbyszek Jakubowski, despite being seriously ill, were, until the end of their days, full of enthusiasm, considering the statement "to rescue from being forgotten", not as a passing slogan, but as a serious program of research. Janusz Lipiec, a Polish underground soldier (ZWZ AK) during the years of Nazi occupation, an inmate of Pawiak prison and a prisoner in Auschwitz and Dachau

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² I. B. Singer, *The Slave*, Alfa Publishing, Warsaw 1991, p. 275.

concentration camps, pointedly reminded me daily that the history of Polish Jews is a part of the history of the Polish nation and that the Holocaust was the greatest crime in recent history. It was a tragedy for the Jewish people and an enormous loss for the whole civilised world and, specifically, for Poland - and that it was impossible to forget the contribution made by Jewish people to the civilised world and, again specifically, to Poland. To point out the truth about pre-War Jewish communal life in Poland was a duty owed to the Jews who had survived the hell of World War II, and a duty also to the Polish people who had, for centuries, hosted on their soil the descendents of David.

The years passed. Uncertainly, I published the results of my research in humble articles. I was concerned, and am still concerned, as to whether I am interpreting archival material correctly. Raised in a Catholic culture, I neither knew nor understood the religious traditions connected with the everyday life of Jews. A visit to Częstochowa by Prof. Elżbieta Asz Mundlak-Zborowska, the great-granddaughter of Chief Rabbi Asz, gave my work a new impetus. Participating in the preparation of Elżbieta's documentary film, "I Was Lucky", created a need for me to undertake detailed research on the history of the Jewish community of Częstochowa. The resultant amount of material collected was far more than which could be accommodated in just one film. Then a project was conceived of a small exhibition with the working title of "The World of Rabbi Nachum Asz". The exhibition was to have drawn attention to the life of the Częstochowa Jewish community prior to the Holocaust. Rabbi Nachum Asz, who was Rabbi of Częstochowa for over forty years, died in 1936. His world, namely his life in Częstochowa, was the life of the city in which Poles and Jews lived as neighbours. At the turn of the 20th Century, new social and cultural processes took place, which intensified during World War I and with the rebirth of an independent Poland. These modernisation processes still remain an interesting subject for research. The variety within the cultural, social and political aspects of Jewish indicate this community's vitality before the tragedy of the Holocaust. Elżbieta introduced me to Zygmunt Rolat, a Jew born in Częstochowa. The basic idea for the creation of a major exhibition, "The Jews of Częstochowa", was conceived as a result of this introduction. Zygmunt Rolat greatly inspired me and the colleagues with whom I worked. The result of our intensive and creative work was a Polish-language book containing post-conference papers, the preparation of an exhibition and its accompanying album, "The Jews of Częstochowa" – all emanating in 2004 from the 1st International Conference - "The Jews of Częstochowa – Coexistence, Holocaust, Memory".

Five years have now passed. The ensuing cultural events, conferences, meetings and research which have taken place under the watchful eye of our patron, Zygmunt Rolat, have been well remembered by the people of Częstochowa. The effects of these events are self-evident and are highly valued by Częstochowa's younger generation. An interest in the history and culture of the Jews gave rise to new artistic pursuits inspired by Jewish culture, to youth dramatic performances, to competitions amongst secondary school students testing

their knowledge of Jewish history and culture, and to student conferences devoted to the tragedy of the Holocaust, etc.. Thanks to these events, post-War Cześćochowa generations have been given the opportunity to see a picture of the Jewish past and to understand the broken thread of life which connected them to the many generations, living with their own traditions and culture, who contributed materially and culturally to our city, region and nation. Introducing these facts, particularly to generations born after World War II, outlines more strongly the ideological blindness that ended in genocidal tragedy. It is difficult to understand how so-called *homo sapiens* can not only intentionally not respect their fellow human beings, but also try to destroy their traditions and culture and to eliminate the life of their community in accordance with egotistical, ideological slogans. Born through racism, intolerance, enmity and underpinned by a chauvanistic ideology, the danger of a modern-day holocaust is threatening, heightened by the rapid development of weapons of mass destruction. I regard the events of the 1940's as the most important warning for the generations of the 21st Century. No ideology can use religious sentiment in order to justify a crime against humanity. May the prematurely ended lives of the victims of World War II serve as a cause for reflection and as a warning for the future.

In response to the question as to why I chose this topic for research, I reply:

1. To better understand others and myself;
2. To reconstruct, as much as possible, the life of the generation which preceded my generation;
3. To draw attention to the fact that multiculturalism and life with multicultural tolerance is not enough. We can live side by side, yet still not know nor understand each other;
4. Cross-cultural awareness and understanding differences are ways to get to know and understand the culture in which I grew up. I am a Pole. My grandparents and parents were deeply, devout Catholics. I grew up in that culture and I am also a believer and, in accordance with the historic words of John Paul II about our "elder brothers in faith", I recognized the importance of understanding the culture and life of that community which lived together with my grandparents' and parents' generations. Together, they built a future for their children and grandchildren;
5. It is not enough to talk and to write about the tragedy of the Holocaust in order to get to know and understand it. One needs to get to know the world that was destroyed by the Holocaust, where entire generations of Jewish families made their contribution to the culture of the world, to Poland, as well as to my city of Cześćochowa and its region - the world of this community, which was not only intended to be annihilated, but also to be wiped from memory.

Experience, which has been derived from many years of working with young people, has confirmed in me the conviction that Polish youth, attentively examining current affairs, is open to a perception of history and to draw from it conclusions for the building of a better

future. In an era of globalisation and of development in interpersonal communications on a scale unprecedented in the history of human civilisation, new possibilities have arisen for nations to better understand each other. And yet, how little sometimes neighbours know about each other. How can we understand another person without getting to know them better? How can we value another people, their religion and culture, if we do not understand and take note of the characteristic differences which created them through the wisdom of generations drawn from their traditions and personal experiences?

Speaking in the language of “politicians”, there exists “a public demand” for scholarly research devoted to the fate of Częstochowa Jews and their descendants – to those who whom we commonly refer to as “survivors” because, as we know, they are very frequently the only ones, from their large and multi-generational Jewish family, to have survived the Shoah. After the end of World War II, they linked their fate with the building of the state of Israel and to other countries of the world to which they emigrated, thereby increasing the numbers of the Jewish minority living in the Diaspora.

And so, the following questions are raised:

- 1) We are the generation of Jews and Poles born after World War II who know pre-War reality through the memories of grandparents, parents and older acquaintances, and, of course, basing our knowledge (formed on both sides of the “Iron Curtain” for determined goals and political interests) on mythologised historical narratives. Should we not look at ourselves in a different manner?
- 2) For us, the first, second and already third post-Holocaust generations. are not the deaths of millions of innocent people an instruction to struggle for peace among nations? The road from ethnocentricity and nationalism to chauvanism is a short one and an ideology that relies on chauvanism which especially comes to the fore in times of economic, social and political crisis, becomes a tragic cause of the effects of social and political conflicts.

It is also worth giving some thought to the evolutionary processes of our own identity. A national as well as a political identity is not the only one, constituted and everlasting, which relies on evolutionary and revolutionary, determined changes – e.g. the processes in the development of civilisation, social, economic and political conditions, accepted ideologies and a system of values. Identity is also affected by place of residence, by mutually-permeating cultures, by the flow and accuracy of information regarding everyday living conditions and by the cultural elements of tradition not only of those Jews who remained in Częstochowa, but also of those who emigrated to Israel and to other countries of the world. Continuity and endurance are fundamental elements of the life of every nation. Every nation, when thinking of enduring among the other nations of the world, undergoes a modernisation which develops and which passes new values from generation to generation – the previous generation leaving its mark through its achievements. Every human life saved

from the Shoah brings with it a tragic experience which constitutes a significant historical lesson with the message of tolerance, peace, individual and national security and the building of a future for oneself and for future generations, without violence and human tragedy.

Identity also has a dimension outside of nationality – I am speaking of the process of globalisation and the creation of a “cultural universe”. Referring to contemporary reality on a macro scale, we often forget about the problem of “ego” and of one's individual identity. In searching for our identity in our surrounding reality, it is worth benefitting from the experience of that generation which, unfortunately, in the natural order of things, will leave this earthly reality. Not many contemporary problems would seem all that difficult to resolve if we could look at them differently, asking ourselves how the “survivors” would have coped during those difficult post-War times:

- 1) In solving the dilemmas connected with feelings of loneliness “amongst the living” caused by the tragic tearing apart of family ties and friendships, living in the hope of finding one’s nearest and dearest, being a stranger in a strange land, the feeling of helplessness due to a lack of a livelihood, frequent disorientation due to isolation from the outside world resulting from the occupation?
- 2) In aspiring to regain the “normality” of everyday life, i.e. satisfying essential needs such as an apartment, employment, restoring one’s health, rebuilding family life or attempting to find one’s place in a new post-war political and social reality?
- 3) In searching for traces of a world which had gone and in attempting to rebuild that life: their religion, reactivating Jewish communities, culture through a Jewish upbringing, education and care, social activity expressed through the re-establishment of Jewish social, cultural and political associations.

“Survivors”, being guided by the old principle that it is easier and better to solve problems together, endeavoured to build Jewish organisations, even under the difficult political conditions of the Stalinist era. They aspired to retain elements of their native Jewish identity through establishing educational and cultural activity linked to Jewish history and tradition, teaching the Yiddish and Hebrew languages and popularizing the literature of these languages. Great attention was paid to the improvement of health including physical fitness and mental health.

In articulating only some of the problems which touched the “survivors” in the post-War reality, I wanted, at the same time, to stress the significance and need for the conduct of research into the fate of Cześćochowa Jews following the Second World War. In historiographic presentations, the Polish relationship to the Jews and the Jewish relationship to the Poles decidedly predominate research on a macro scale. They are characterised by a high level of generalisation. They do not take into account those elements which, whether they lived sometimes in the same street or in the same building, constituted daily life for Poles and Jews. The common problems of living in a contemporary city, neighbourly contact

or even common business interests, brought both communities closer together. Evidence of the active participation of the Jews in city life was their essential contribution to the preparations for, and the participation in, the work of the City Council connected with visits to Częstochowa of eminent personages such as General Foch, President of the Polish Republic, and the like. Members of both communities met each other at sporting events, in the theatres, the cinemas, the coffee shops and the restaurants. And it is impossible to omit day-to-day interactions in shops on the market or with artisans plying their trade. The structure of organisations – political, educational and pedagogical, social welfare – and cultural, sporting and tourism activities – are best perceived on a micro scale. On a macro scale, making generalizations, it is not always possible to fully depict the atmosphere, to stress the emotional commitments and activity of the members of these organizations, but, above all, to substantiate the influence of the social effects and also the mutual cross-cultural influence.

This research will clarify the conditions under which further modernisation processes took place both with respect to individual identity and collectively amongst Częstochowa Jews who survived the Holocaust. It could succeed in providing answers to a whole series of other questions:

- 1) How, and to what degree, did stereotypes of Jews in the minds of Poles, and of Poles in the minds of Jews, hamper or simply prevent the rebuilding of Jewish identity in post-War Poland?
- 2) Which contemporary social or political events or even personal experiences influenced the ultimate decision to leave Poland?
- 3) How, and to what degree, did traditional stereotypes in the minds of the “survivors” hamper the processes of finding one’s own social place in the country in which they settled?
- 4) In the eyes of the first and second generations after World War II, has there been any change to the mutually perceived stereotypes of both peoples?
- 5) Has the intensification of contact, of the current residents of the city with Jews originally from Częstochowa and their descendants, brought about any change to attitudes to Jews amongst Poles and to Poles amongst Jews, and, if so, to what extent?

I propose conducting research amongst contemporary residents of Częstochowa, amongst members of the *World Society of Częstochowa Jews and their Descendants* and amongst members of the *Association of Częstochowa Jews in Israel* and with those who have settled in various other countries.