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Being a Jew Today...

The beginning of the great Jewish Diaspora is considered to be the putting down of the Jewish rebellion by the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. From 135 AD, after going into exile, being sold into slavery and being spread over northern Africa, southern Europe and the Caucasus, the majority of Jews lived outside of Palestine. From the times of the Middle Ages, they lived spread around the world, in various surroundings, speaking different languages. The only element binding Jews together, serving as the basis for a national consciousness and as an indicator of Jewishness, was the Jewish religion.

Jewish immigration ("Aliyah") to Palestine and, after 1948, to Israel, began in the 19th Century. At that time, more than 300,000 people lived on Palestinian soil, among them around 5,000 Jews. The first wave of Jewish immigrants (*The First Aliyah*) headed to Palestine between 1881 and 1903. It comprised 25,000 Jews, mainly from Russia and Yemen. During *The Second Aliyah*, about 40,000 Jews arrived in Palestine – those who had experienced pogroms, supporters of the socialist-zionist ideologies and ideas, developed by Theodore Herzl, of a Jewish state. Since that time, the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe accelerated, not only the process of "returning to the fatherland of one's fathers", but also the process of developing a contemporary, Jewish national consciousness.

Aliyah during the War years of 1941-1947 was the least numerous and gathered in only those who had managed to escape the Holocaust in Europe². The Zionist movement expressed the optimistic outlook that Jewish immigration would contribute to the development of Palestine from which the Arabs would also benefit. Arab immigration to Palestine began to increase from the end of the 19th Century.

The Jewish community in Palestine was never homogenous. Deep divides separated the Zionists from the centres of Orthodoxy who, for the most part, were comprised of Jews who had lived in Jerusalem for generations. Their anti-Zionist views were manifested by the creation, in 1912, of *Agudat Israel*³. It saw, in Zionism, a threat to the Jewish religion and, initially, strongly rejected the idea of a Jewish state. It also recognised Hebrew as a holy

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² Por. A. Chojnowski, J. Tomaszewski, *Izrael*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2002, s. 45-49.

³ Agudat Israel (Agudas Jisroel) – a conservative political party, declaring that orthodox Judaism and the principles of Halacha should be treated as the foundations for Jewish community life, see further: J. Tomaszewski, A. Żbikowski (red.), *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon*, Wydawnictwo Cyklady, Warszawa 2009, s. 3-11.

language and Yiddish as commonplace and secular. Only after a concluded, unofficial agreement with the first Prime Minister, the co-founder of the State of Israel, David Ben Gurion, with the orthodox, religious members of *Agudat Israel*, did they temper their position and accept the existence of a Jewish state, although qualified with certain stipulations.

Currently, of more than 13 million Jews living in the world, 6 million are United States citizens and only 5.5 million are citizens of Israel. The majority of Jews, more than 7 million, from the establishment of the State of Israel, still live outside of its borders. During the last census conducted in Poland in 2002, only 1,100 individuals identified themselves as Jews, but those with Jewish roots is presumed to reach in excess of 10,000. The lack of disclosing one's origins is due to several reasons. Apart from it being a habit to conceal one's Jewish identity as the result of bitter, practical experience, there are many who have been brought up as Catholics and Poles and are not even aware of their Jewish origins. Also, many people have consciously cut themselves off from the Jewish faith. If we characterise Jewish identity on the basis of religion, then it is particularly troublesome and problematic for secular Jews – and certainly a delicate issue. Jewishness, for centuries, has been unambiguously associated with religion and, in principle, meant a belief in Judaism

For a religious Jew, being a Jew still means performing certain activities and living according to rules written within Jewish law, e.g. observing the Sabbath, maintaining *kashrut* or praying in synagogue. But the Zionists rejected a number of elements formed in centuries-old, Jewish traditions. In this context, contemporary citizens of the State of Israel do not need to be Jews and an Israeli Jew does not have to obey religious laws. Rejecting religion as the indicator of Jewishness has, today, made the passing on of identity from generation to generation problematic. This constitutes dissociation from traditions as understood by Jews in the history of this nation.

The next dividing line differentiating Jews is based on the already-mentioned formation of organisations in the forms of Zionist, anti-Zionist, Bundist, supporters of the Hebrew or Yiddish languages. The Diaspora does not facilitate the unambiguous self-definition process. It makes it more difficult to answer the question of what is at the core of Jewish identity.

The view on who is a Jew has undergone historical changes⁴. According to Jewish religious law, belonging to the Jewish people is decided on the basis of being born of a Jewish mother. But, in accordance with the principles of Reform Judaism, constituting a departure from traditional *Halacha* in effect within Orthodox circles, any person born of at least one Jewish parent, even one who has converted to Judaism, and who considers himself to be a Jew and obeys Jewish law, can be among the members of this nation. There are also

⁴ After the war, Oswald Rufeisen (brother of Daniel) provoked most heated debate about who was a Jew. He demanded the right to emigrate to Israel and be granted Israeli citizenship on the basis of the Right of Return Law of 1950. However, the authorities refused him this right because of his Catholic faith, see. N. Tec, *Daniel w jaskini zła, Życie Oswalda Rufeisena*, Wydawnictwo Nowy Świat 2008.

occurrences where contemporary Israelis, living in Israel, are not always Jews nor are they believers in Judaism.

In addition, Jews differ from each other in external appearance. Apart from those with white skin, there are also Jews who came, for example, from Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia or India, and have a difference appearance from the traditional inhabitants of Israel. Do they all have the same identity since, apart from their external appearance, they also differ, for example, in culture not associated with Western civilization, in tradition or in language?

The vast majority of Jews, almost 7 million, speak English, 700,000 speak French, and 4.5 million Jews living in Israel speak Hebrew. Of these, only a section identifies itself with the reactivation of traditional Israeli culture following the creation of the State of Israel. Are Jews, whose everyday language is other than modern Hebrew, the same sort of Jews?

Szewach Weiss, a Polish Jew who chose a life in Israel, and Marek Edelman, a Polish Jew living in Łódź - a meeting between two Jews stuck in two worlds, but worlds which have always been permeated or even intermeshed. How do they perceive their own Jewish identity? What shapes it? How is it expressed? How is it defined? What is its nature? A year after Marek Edelman's death, speaking provocatively about the nature of Jewishness, sometimes expressing controversial views on the philosophy of life, it is possible to give some thought, anew, to the versatility of identity or the hybrid nature of its variants.

The contemporary processes of civilization influence the dynamic modernisation of the cultural core of national/ethnic identities. The process of mutually perceiving differences among ethnic/national groups is becoming more and more dependent upon the attitude of the individual.

Szewach Weiss's identity was formed under the influence of his life experience connected with surviving the Holocaust, coming to Palestine in 1947⁵, belief in the principles of Zionism and, in the end, an active involvement in Israeli politics⁶. As he, himself, emphasises, it is both Israeli and central European, particularly Polish. Even though he is a Zionist, he is proud of the Jewish heritage, Polish language and culture, stored in his memory. During his three-year stay in Poland as Israeli Ambassador, he fought to overcome anti-Semitism, xenophobia and racism.

Marek Edelman's identity, in Szewach Weiss's eyes, is that of a European, of a lover of Polish culture and of a Jew who simultaneously considers that Jews not only have the right to live in the world, but also to spread humanism⁷ – who decided to remain in the country to fight for an open Poland which guarantees the rights of minorities. Until the end of his life, he was sensitive to the issue of the freedom of man which he expressed many times. He was an

⁵ Szewach Weiss's family came to the already independent Israel in 1952 see Sz. Weiss, *Między narodami*, Rebis, Poznań 2008, s. 63.

⁶ From 1981, he was a member of the Knesset, 1988-1992 its Deputy Speaker and then between 1992-1996 the Speaker of the Knesset.

⁷ Sz. Weiss, *Edelman nigdy nie przestał walczyć o wolność człowieka i Polski*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 2nd October 2009, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,7106359,Szewach_Weiss_Edelman_nigdy_nie_przestal_walczyc.html.

anti-Zionist, critical of the State of Israel. To the question of why he did not leave the country, he did not always respond unambiguously. Perhaps he had never even thought about moving to Israel. He was a great Polish patriot⁸. How do we define his identity? Are both the same types of Jews?

MAREK, WHY DO YOU STILL WANT TO BE A JEW?⁹

Weiss: Marek, I know that you don't like Israel very much, but you'll admit, however, that it is a wonder that, after so many centuries of wandering around the world, living amongst other nations, in the end, Jews have their own country.

Edelman: Israel is not a Jewish state, merely a religious one!

Weiss: Yes, there are many religious Jews there but, on the other hand, there are plenty who are not religious.

Edelman: It makes no difference. I am concerned with the very idea and the idea of this state was that all Jews, who are persecuted – and Jews are persecuted in various countries because they have a different belief – and arrive believing in the Jewish god are citizens of Israel, and if they are circumcised, so much the better!! There are no other criteria here.

Because what bond is there between people who live in Warsaw, Morocco or Addis-Ababa? What unites them? The one thing that links them is religion – and persecution too. Israel had an awful ideology to separate itself from Jewishness. Still, they showed in Israel that what remained in Europe was tragic. Yet these were Jews from Poland, not America, who built the first kibbutzim; also the ideology of kibbutzim was obtained from here, from Eastern Europe. And Ben Gurion (Prime Minister of Israel in 1948-53 and 1955-63) did everything to separate from this Diaspora, from these 6 million, and create some earthly paradise which is for those who have no paradise. And that is why he gave in to all these religious Jews, because he got money from religious Jews from America.

But let's leave that alone. Israel exists and what policies does it implement in relation to the Arabs? How many times could peace have been achieved? Always. How many times has something begun and then extremist voices on both sides are heard? Why did I think that Sharon had any hope? Because even Begin concluded a peace agreement with Egypt. But so much time has passed and still there is an enormous hatred on both sides that I don't know if

⁸ Edelman, was a member of the Bund, co-founder of the Jewish Fighting Organisation and, after the death of Mordechaj Anielewicz, its last leader in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He also participated in the Warsaw Uprising (first in the Old Town, and later in Żoliborz). He was also an opposition activist. He worked with KOR and "Solidarność". He was one of the signatories of the 101 List of intellectuals opposed to constitutional changes. He was interned under Martial Law. In 1988, he was Director of the National Minorities Commission of the Citizenship Committee under Lech Wałęsa, see. Witold Bereś, Krzysztof Burnetko, *Marek Edelman. Życie. Po prostu*. Świat Książki, Warszawa 2008.

Conversation between Szewach Weiss and Marek Edelman, 5 March 2003, Warsaw, residence of the Israeli Ambassador.

any sort of peace is possible. (Ariel Sharon – at the time of the conversation, the Prime Minister of Israel, enjoyed public opinion as a hawk with respect to Palestinian affairs. In the following year, against the opinion of his party, Likud, he will announce a plan to remove Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip; Prime Minister Menachem Begin concluded a peace agreement with Egypt at Camp David in 1978).

Weiss: Marek, you are a Jew. Not only a Jew, but a Bundist (someone linked to the *Bund*, a party of Jewish socialists). You consider that the Jewish language is the most essential part of Jewish life.

Edelman: Yes. Because that's the way it was... 6 million people between the Wisła and the Dniepre spoke in Yiddish. Jewish literature came into being here, Jewish art came into being here, Kramsztyk and Rubinstein were born here. That was all because there was a common culture here, and that culture was alive, but now it has gone.

Weiss: And who speaks Yiddish today?

Edelman: No one.

Weiss: No. In Israel, it is precisely the pious, the religious who use Yiddish and use it to their children. There are almost 250,000 of them! So the language is alive there!

Edelman: Only that has no meaning because, from within this language, nothing new arises, no culture.

Weiss: Marek, you are not a religious person...

Edelman: That's all I need!

Weiss: You live in Poland because you want to live in Poland. You are not a Zionist because you don't want to be a Zionist. There were millions like you in Poland, but they were murdered. And after all that, you decide to remain a Jew. This is not meant to be a provocative question, only a little naive: Marek, why do you still want to be a Jew?

Edelman: I don't want to be... It's not a matter of wanting. It's just my fate. And it's that fate that has decided that I am this and that. I lived midst an environment which had this fate: it was both creative and persecuted, and I am connected to it. Having a nationality is not something that someone can decree. I simply have this feeling that I am linked to this community which spoke this language, which had this fate, which gave rise to painters, writers and musicians – and I am one of that family.

Weiss: Let me return to Zionism. An independent and self-sufficient State of Israel is, however, the child of Zionism.

Edelman: No. Where do you get that from?

Weiss: Without the Zionist movement, without this world organisation, who would have created the State of Israel? Who would have returned then to Palestine, to *Eretz Yisrael*?

Edelman: Of course the idea of Zionism arose because Jews were afraid of what was going on in Europe, above all, this horrible anti-Semitism, and wanted to have their own place where they would not encounter persecution, and because Herzl (Theodore, 1860-1904, the founder and ideologist of Zionism) wanted to create a national homeland. But he didn't want to create that state in Palestine at all. It was, generally speaking, a time when ethnic states were established because, prior to that, no one thought of a country as an ethnic existence, Austria-Hungary was a multi-ethnic state.

Weiss: It appears to me that, at that time, the single, most important, common issue for the Jews was that they were being persecuted everywhere and, everywhere, they were considered to be foreigners. Leo Pinsker, a psychiatrist as a matter of fact, wrote the book "Auto-Emancipation", in which he stated that anti-Semitism is a sickness, an epidemic, which will never end. That is why the Jews do not have a place in the world. What's your opinion on this matter?

Edelman: I don't know. Man is a bad invention. It's easy to hate and very hard to love. And if you want to play politics, then it's easier to do it in hatred. Since Jews are everywhere, it's a global issue. Politics always exploits this hatred of Jews because they were different. Who published "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion"? The Tsarist guard. So, everything is politics. Because in politics, one needs to find an enemy against whom society will unite.

Weiss: Marek, you have such a cynical approach to politics and politicians. I'm trying to understand you. But tell me, is it possible to live totally without politics? After all, there is no other way of organising communal life apart from politics. You have such a deep, moral attitude according to which politics is something bad and all actions of politicians are manipulation. But that's life – politics rules inside countries and in relations between countries. Simply, that's the way it is.

Edelman: Yes. But the whole issue rests on this, that man has within him more evil than good. And that evil is easy to awaken, and the good very difficult. And politicians exploit the worst side of man. And the same thing happens in Israel, where politicians are people who were once prosecuted and today they persecute Arabs. They have power, they have strength, they want to stay in power, they want to create their own state of prosperity, and so they must grind down those who will interfere in that. And in Israel, they also obtain power through the communal hatred of others. I still remember, I don't know in what year, when I was first in Israel, and Arabs had to ride in the back of the bus. Today, no one will admit to that, and no one remembers it, because it is embarrassing.

Weiss: I remember that. It was horrible. It was Ben Gurion's idea. As a young man, I protested against it.

Edelman: So, you see, Jews are just as deplorable as everyone else. There are no good Jews, bad Jews, good Arabs, bad Arabs. There are bad people on both sides.

Weiss: How would Jewish life in the world and the Jewish people look if there had not been a Holocaust? Would there have been a State of Israel without the Holocaust, without Zionism?

Edelman: The idea of Zionism was the establishment of a Jewish state. Not everyone supported the concept that it should be established in Palestine. But the State of Israel was established as the result of international politics.

It was established, not because six million Jews were killed, that someone was compassionate for the animals. Not true. If they had that compassion, then they would have bombed Oświęcim and Treblinka. They would have told the Germans that, if you continue to kill Jews, then all German cities will burn...

And what did Roosevelt say? What did Churchill say? What did Eden say? They said, "We know that it's all true". And Roosevelt said, "I cannot defend the Jews like that, because they will say that it's not the "New Deal", but a "Jew Deal" because my economic advisors are Jews. Yes, I know that everything that's happening there is terrible, and it's true, I can't do anything to help you. When the War is over, everyone will be equal. And what if there'll be no Jews left by then? That's tough – they're the victims of war".

What does that mean? You could bomb anything you wanted, but Oświęcim could not be bombed because it was too far away? It's all untrue! No one wanted to do it. Even though Poles communicated to the West about what was happening to the Jews – the West didn't want to hear about it!

The first news of the ghetto uprising came on 19th April [1943], even though that that information was not sent to the West until the 24th April, when London gave Klepfisz a medal [Michał was killed in the first days of the uprising]. I'm very sorry! The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first armed resistance in that fascist sea. It was a major event! There was the Polish Underground, but before the uprising in the ghetto, the Polish Underground was not very active in an armed sense.

It was only after the Ghetto Uprising that there was the "Rudy" affair and the operation near the Arsenal. Why did that happen? Those boys said, "He's our friend, we'll rescue him". The command was against it, because you could not allow all of Warsaw to be pacified for the sake of one man. Then they said, "but these boys in the ghetto, almost defenceless, could they have set off an uprising?! We also have weapons, we can do the same". And so they gave permission for an operation near the Arsenal. And that's when it started.

The ghetto was the first Polish uprising, the most Polish possible, because it was so hopeless. And why was the State of Israel established? Szewach, don't delude yourself that it was because of Zionism! It was established for economic reasons! The Middle East is very sensitive economically. Whoever rules there has a huge influence on world oil prices. After

all, the Russians wanted to throw the English out of there and were sure that they would enter the region! But the Americans were cleverer and blocked the Russians. And that was the international conflict, the result of which was the establishment of the State of Israel.

Weiss: Let's return to the Jews.

Edelman: No, let's return to Israel.

Weiss: Let's return to those years before the War - 1938, 1939... There is still no Jewish state. What would it be like for the Jews of the world if the Bund would have prevailed and Jews, everywhere, would have been autonomous in one form or another?

Edelman: It's no good talking about "what if". It doesn't concern me at all! But I'll tell you something. The Bund ideology did prevail.

Weiss: Uh, alright, the European Union is also Bund.

Edelman: Not only that. The European Union is also a Bundist idea, but look at the situation before there was a European Union. Spain was under Franco. And look at what happened. A people like the Catalonians wanted the same as did we in the Bund – ethnic-cultural autonomy. That type of ethnic-cultural autonomy as the Basques have in Spain, no one else has. Of course, I'm not talking here about those extremist groups.

And furthermore, on the Danish-German borderlands, there is a small Danish minority and that community has its own representative in the Bundestag. They also have their own schools. Conditions varied on the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands, but now there are Lithuanian schools, they speak Lithuanian and no one is persecuted. There is full Lithuanian autonomy there. Look at how the Lemko people, previously driven out of their towns by the communists, are now returning. The first school for their children has even been set up. What the Bund was promoting is now being realised: democracy and ethnic-cultural autonomy. And that's a victory.

Weiss: Before the War, how did you, brought up with Bund ideology, imagine the world would look?

Edelman: First of all, that it would be democratic - that there would be something along the lines of the European Union. I was even a great optimist, believing that there would be a World Union. But, above all, I thought that there would be tolerance. But later, it turned out that this was impossible because man is evil.

It's hard to expect something good from mankind. And it appears to me that the human mentality has even changed for the worse. Now it's force that is the dominant factor – force and authority have dominated everything. And terrorism. Terrorists! After all, it's not clear what they want. They just want to destroy someone. What is the ideology of terrorism? That, if they kill 3,000 people, it will show that they are a force and that's it? What do they want? Nothing! They want to kill people! They kill here, they kill there. Jews kill also.

Those Jews are also stupid! You have to be crazy to conduct a war with urban guerrillas because, until now, no one has defeated urban guerillas. Because if you can hide yourself in any house, if a printworks or arms factory can be in any house, there is no such force that is capable of destroying that.

Let me alone with that! These same people, on both sides, are of equal value. Arafat sustains Sharon and Sharon sustains Arafat. Two semi-dictatorial governments sustain each other, tightening the strings of war! Enough!

Weiss: Marek, if you could create a peace plan for Israel, what is to be done? If you were the chief advisor to Israel, with this government, with this political map, what would you say to Israel and to the Palestinians today?

Edelman: Contact needs to be established with Hamas and with Jihad. That's the first thing which may lead to something. Because I draw your attention to the fact that, during the Warsaw Uprising, the rebels were also called "bandits" by the Germans. And despite that, they managed to reach an agreement with them. There was a ceasefire agreement between the uprising participants and General von dem Bach.

If you acknowledge a person with whom you are fighting and who has some strength, then you must talk with him. But first you need to talk with the military, meaning those who decide whether there will be a war or not. Because until there is a ceasefire, there can be no politics. And a Palestinian state must be established.

Weiss: Sharon says that he agrees. But Sharon also says that there will be no peace talks until there will be a ceasefire. You know, what you say makes sense. So good, they'll stop shooting. What next?

Edelman: You know what? You start with the first step and the rest will fall into place somehow. You won't fix, in a few months that which has been damaged by both sides over 50 years. Of course, it is beyond doubt that they have to have their own state.

Weiss: Sharon is prepared for that.

Edelman: So he should talk not with Arafat, but with Hamas and Jihad. The shooting needs to stop and that's that.

Weiss: Marek, did you ever think about leaving for Israel?

Edelman: Are you crazy? Never! It's too hot there.

Weiss: You see, we always return the Polish land and clouds... Do you think that, there, they will ...

Edelman: hate me?

Weiss: And the Bund will be disregarded... Honestly, no one is interested in the Bund there, only a few historians for whom it is interesting, but generally – no one.

Edelman: Because that was the politics of Israel - to let rot everything that was in Europe, apart from Zionism. Look at how the Ghetto Uprising is regarded in Israel. There was no one else there apart from Dror and Hashomer Hatzair [Zionist parties]. But the situation is this - that, of all the Jewish organisations during the War, the Polish authorities could only rely on the Bund. Only the Bund was recognised by the government in London. But not that communist Berman.

Weiss: But, Marek, you could have been a leader of the Uprising. Why weren't you?

Edelman: Leave me alone. Let's not talk about that. They are personal matters. Antek Cukierman also could have been.

Weiss: You all knew that the fighting was hopeless, but you still wanted to fight. You wanted to fight against fascism, against the Germans.

Edelman: And we certainly didn't fight for a free Jewish state, for Israel. Antek wrote of how, in the bunkers, people spoke of a free state. He wrote about how, when they introduced gas into the bunkers, the Zionists spoke of their dreams of a free Jewish state.

Weiss: That's already poetry... We're attributing to the dead that which we want them to say to us.

Edelman: Well, yes, but Antek was a poet...

In the perception of stereotypes of Jewish identity, only external features are articulated, avoiding cultural, political, ethnic diversity, and the like. The question of what is Jewish national identity is a complex and, at the same time, an open issue, because the Jewish community, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, is subject to the diverse multicultural influences from the countries in which they have settled. In the independent State of Israel, through a process of socialisation, a return to the traditional elements of Jewish culture is being achieved, with a new quality of Jewish identity, within second and third post-Holocaust generations, citizens of *Eretz Yisrael*.