

## REVIEW ESSAY

Piotr J. Wróbel

### **Modern Syntheses of Jewish History in Poland: A Review\***

After World War II, Poland became an ethnically homogeneous state. National minorities remained beyond the newly-moved eastern border, and were largely exterminated, forcefully removed, or relocated and scattered throughout the so-called Recovered Territories (Polish: *Ziemie Odzyskane*). The new authorities installed in Poland took care to ensure that the memory of such minorities also disappeared. The Jews were no exception. Nearly two generations of young Poles knew nothing about them, and elder Poles generally avoided the topic. But the situation changed with the disintegration of the authoritarian system of government in Poland, as the intellectual and informational void created by censorship and political pressure quickly filled up. Starting from the mid-1980s, more and more Poles became interested in the history of Jews, and the number of publications on the subject increased dramatically. Alongside the US and Israel, Poland is one of the most important places for research on Jewish history.

\* Polish edition: Piotr J. Wróbel, “Współczesne syntezy dziejów Żydów w Polsce. Próba przeglądu,” *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016), 2: 317–330.

The special edition of the journal *Studia Judaica*, containing the English translation of the best papers published in 2016, was financed from the sources of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for promotion of scientific research, according to the agreement 508/P-DUN/2016.

## Jewish Historiography during the Polish People's Republic (PRL)

Reaching the current state of Jewish historiography was neither a quick nor easy process. The generation of Poles born at the end of the 1940s and in the 1950s received no education on Jewish history from either schools or universities. Unless they knew about Jews from their own home environment, they were most often ignorant. This was even true with respect to the Holocaust. Textbooks and historical publications portrayed Jews as one of the many nations that fell victim to Nazi crimes. Indeed, the murder of Jews was not treated as anything special. The PRL authorities blurred the differences between the Polish and Jewish experiences of World War II, and the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto became the only acceptable symbol of Jewish resistance. At the same time, Polish aid to the Jews was emphasized, and an international, class-based interpretation was developed, according to which the Polish and Jewish left fought together against the international right (ranging from the Nazis to the Polish fascists). Few people treated this interpretation seriously, yet it was rarely challenged, and the “Jewish question” was almost never discussed.

In 1967–1968, the question was readdressed when nationalism and antisemitism became important elements of the ideology of the authorities. Official propaganda referred to Jews as “Zionists,” and painted them as a symbol of anti-Polish activity. The new narrative, embedded in the tradition of the National Democracy movement, blurred the differences between the Polish and Jewish war experiences, accented the demoralization and passivity of the Jews towards their occupiers, recalled the Judenrats and the Jewish police, and highlighted Polish aid to Jews.<sup>1</sup> “March soiled Polish consciousness”—said Adam Michnik in the discourse *Między Panem a Plebanem* [Between a Lord and a Priest]. “It was then that the myth was created that anyone who claims there was ever a trace of antisemitism in Poland is a slanderer and an enemy of Polishness.”<sup>2</sup>

After March, the “Jewish question” became a banned topic, and about fifteen thousand Jews and Poles of Jewish origin emigrated. The Jewish community in Poland shrank to miniscule proportions, and its institutions

<sup>1</sup> Tadeusz Szafar, “‘Endecized’ Marxism: Polish Communist Historians on Recent Polish Jewish History,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 8 (1978), 1: 57–71.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Michnik, Józef Tischner, Jacek Żakowski, *Między Panem a Plebanem* (Kraków, 1995), 167.

underwent a deep crisis. Polish history textbooks rarely mentioned Jews; and when they did, it was almost exclusively in the context of World War II, where they were portrayed alongside other Polish citizens as victims of the “extermination policy of the occupying forces.” The Holocaust and—to a large extent—the history of the Polish Jewish community were erased from Polish history. The censorship office in Warsaw did not have to intervene too often—around twenty writers and journalists of Jewish origin were completely banned from publication, and others addressed Jewish issues very rarely. In short, Jews disappeared from Poland.

Mirosław Mikołajczyk, in his 1997 *Bibliografia dialogu chrześcijańsko-żydowskiego w Polsce za lata 1945–1995*<sup>3</sup> [Bibliography of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Poland: 1945–1995], writes that from 1945 to 1949, 42 titles were published on the Christian-Jewish dialogue in Poland. In the next decade, there were only 29, with no publications being made in 1950 and 1956. In the 1960s, there were 182, and in the 1970s, 160. In the 1980s, this number grew to 833, including 622 titles published between 1986 and 1989. Then, from 1990 to 1995, there were 1,347; and 2,016 from 1996 to 2000. What do these numbers mean for a country where thousands of articles and books were published every year? That before 1980, there were almost no writings on the Polish-Jewish dialogue. Confirmation of this fact can be found in many places. *Przegląd Historyczny* [The Historical Review], one of the most important Polish academic journals in the field of history, between 1945 and 1981 published only one article related to the history of Jews. Similar was the situation with *Kwartalnik Historyczny* [The Historical Quarterly].

The breakthrough began in 1980, when the authorities lost total control over publications. As the “white spaces” in history were being filled, the history of Jews was increasingly addressed. An important role in the process of restoring Polish historical memory was played by *Tygodnik Solidarność* [Solidarity Weekly]—half a million copies of each issue were printed starting from 3 April 1981. From the beginning, the publication addressed Jews. On 4 December 1981, a large text by Krystyna Kersten, entitled *Kielce – 4 czerwca 1946 roku* [Kielce – 4 June 1946], was published therein. When discussing the Kielce Pogrom, the author boldly broached the subject of antisemitism in Poland and considered the possibility of communist provocation. For many readers, especially young readers, this

<sup>3</sup> Mirosław Mikołajczyk, *Bibliografia dialogu chrześcijańsko-żydowskiego w Polsce za lata 1945–1995* (Warsaw, 1997).

was a real revelation, but its influence on public opinion was limited, as martial law was imposed on Poland just days later—on 13 December 1981.

After this event, the number of publications on Jews fell temporarily, but the growing interest in their history could not be contained. Indeed, Pope John Paul II was already a powerful supporter of the idea of a dialogue between Poles and Jews, and Christians and Jews. At the end of the 1970s, the Warsaw branch of the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia launched an annual Jewish Culture Week. In the 1980s, Poles and western historians organized a series of conferences devoted to Polish-Jewish topics: at Columbia University in 1983; at Oxford in 1984; at Brandeis University and Jagiellonian University in 1986; and in Jerusalem in 1988, which was attended by as many as 80 Polish historians. In 1984, a group of Israeli scholars visited Poland, and two years later, the yearly *Polin. A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* entered into circulation, whose editorial board and council included more than 20 Polish historians. In 1985, a heated discussion was triggered by Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*; in 1987, there was a debate over an article by Jan Błoński, entitled "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto" [Poor Poles are Looking at the Ghetto]; and in 1989, a dispute broke out over the Convent of Carmelite Sisters on the outskirts of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

### After 1989

Over the past three decades in Poland, thousands of publications on Jews have appeared. Most of them concern short periods of history, individuals, and phenomena. The need therefore arose for a synthesis that would organize knowledge of Polish Jews and present a broad picture of their history from the beginnings of Jewish settlement in Poland to the twentieth first century. For a long time, there was no book in Polish—and only a few books in other languages—offering a comprehensive overview, or at least a more extensive treatment, of the history of Jews in Poland. One attempt at a partial synthesis was a book published by Jerzy Tomaszewski in 1993, entitled *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 1950 roku)* [An Outline of the Modern History of Jews in Poland (until 1950)].<sup>4</sup> The individual parts of this book are devoted to Jews on the former lands of Poland in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth

<sup>4</sup> *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 1950 roku)*, ed. Jerzy Tomaszewski (Warsaw, 1993).

century (by Piotr Wróbel), the interwar period (by Jerzy Tomaszewski), World War II (by Teresa Prekerowa), and Poland after 1944 (by Józef Adelson). This book, conceived as a project of the Mordechai Anielewicz Center for the Study and Teaching of the History and Culture of Jews in Poland, which was created in 1990 as part of the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw, was a courageous attempt to break the deadlock in the synthesis of the history of Jews in Poland. Today, it is only helpful to a limited extent, as the majority of its contributing authors were not familiar with the latest foreign research, and wrote the history in a very traditional way.<sup>5</sup>

Students, researchers, and other persons interested in synthesizing the history of Polish Jews were able to overcome these limitations in a few ways. The first was to revisit works from before the Second and even First World War.

Very few people had examined the syntheses of Ozeasz Ludwik Lubliner (1809–1868), Aleksander Kraushar (1842–1931), Ludwig Gumpłowicz (1838–1909), Hilary Nussbaum (1820–1895), and other historians of times passed. Their works, published before the establishment of modern Polish-Jewish historiography at the turn of the nineteenth century, were correctly regarded as obsolete.<sup>6</sup> Many people based their general knowledge of Polish Jews on the multi-volume *Historia Żydów w Rosji i Polsce* [History of Jews in Russia and Poland] by Simon Dubnow (1860–1941). The first version of this book was published in 1896 in Russian. Then, after several subsequent editions published in various languages, it finally took the form of a ten-volume work entitled *Weltgeschichte der jüdischen Volkes*, published between 1925 and 1929 in Berlin. Dubnow rejected the religious-martyrological version of Jewish history, and instead adopted a political and secular approach intended to aid the creation of a secular national identity for Jews and the theory of Diaspora nationality. He believed that the Jews, as a separate nation, should strive for cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe, and presented Jewish social institutions

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Tomaszewski, "Training the Younger Generation: The Mordechai Anielewicz Centre," *East European Jewish Affairs* 25 (1995), 1: 43–47.

<sup>6</sup> François Guesnet, "Geschichte im Kontext: Entwicklungsbedingungen der jüdischen Historiographie im polnischen Sprachraum im 19. Jahrhundert," in Ulrich Wyrwa (ed.), *Judentum und Historismus: Zur Entstehung der jüdischen Geschichtswissenschaft in Europa* (Frankfurt–New York, 2003), 133–135; Maria Dold, "A Matter of National and Civic Honour": Majer Bałaban and the Institute of Jewish Studies in Warsaw," *East European Jewish Affairs* 34 (Winter 2004), 2: 56.

as a potential substitute for the state. This view, reflected in his book, is difficult to reconcile with the achievements of historiography today.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the three-volume *Geschichte der Juden in Polen und Russland* (Berlin, 1921–1925) by Josef Meisel (1882–1958) contains a plethora of factual material, but it does not stand up to contemporary methodological requirements.<sup>8</sup>

This is also true of three popular science publications from the interwar period. In 1921, Samuel Hirschhorn (1876–1942), a journalist for the Polish-language Jewish magazine *Nasz Przegląd* [Our Review], published a book entitled *Historia Żydów w Polsce od Sejmu Czteroletniego do wojny europejskiej, 1788–1914* [The History of Jews in Poland from the Four-Year Sejm until the World War, 1788–1914]. Written in simple language for a wide audience, it was a bestseller. Less popular, yet more erudite, was Jakub Schall's *Historia Żydów w Polsce, na Litwie i Rusi* [The History of the Jews in Poland, Lithuania, and Ruthenia], published in Lwów in 1934. However, both of these books were overshadowed by the grand and well-illustrated (539 pictures and drawings) two-volume work *Żydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej: Działalność społeczna, gospodarcza, oświatowa i kulturalna* [Jews in Restored Poland: Social, Economic, Educational, and Cultural Activity], published in Warsaw in 1934–1935 by “Żydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej,” a special publishing house established just for this purpose. This remarkable publication was edited by several prominent academics: historian Ignacy Schiper (1884–1943); sociologist and demographer Aryeh Tartakower (1897–1982); and sociologist, journalist, and civil servant Aleksander Hafftko (1892–1962). The first volume (574 pages) contains texts written by these and a few other prominent academics and writers such as Meir Balaban (1877–1942), Filip Friedman (1901–1960), and Samuel Hirschhorn. The second volume (617 pages) has a longer list of contributing authors, and, aside from a review of the history of Jews in Poland, contains many chapters devoted to culture and economy. Some of these chapters (e.g. “Literatura rabiniczna Żydów polskich w czasach porozbiorowych” [Rabbinical Literature of Polish Jews after the Partitions]

<sup>7</sup> Laura Jockusch, “Introductory Remarks on Simon Dubnow’s ‘Let us Seek and Investigate,’” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 7 (2008), 344; Kristi A. Groberg, “The Life and Influence of Simon Dubnov (1860–1941): An Appreciation,” *Modern Judaism* 13 (1993), 72–80; Koppel S. Pinson, “The National Theories of Simon Dubnow,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10 (Oct. 1948), 4: 335–358.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Friedman, “Polish Jewish Historiography between the Two Wars (1918–1939),” *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (Oct. 1949), 4: 377.

and “Żydzi w bankowości polskiej” [Jews in Polish Banking]), as well as statistics on Jewish agriculture, banking, trade, and crafts are still relevant. In 1949, Filip Friedman called it the best existing synthesis of the history of Polish Jews. Indeed, it was as close as anything had come to being a Polish-language encyclopedia on Polish-Jewish affairs.<sup>9</sup>

In the second place was Ignacy Schiper’s *Dzieje handlu żydowskiego na ziemiach polskich* [History of Jewish Trade on Polish Lands], published in Warsaw in 1937, and reprinted using photo-offset technology in 1990. The same was done in 1982 with *Historia i literatura żydowska ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem historii Żydów w Polsce* [Jewish History and Literature with a Focus on Jews in Poland], which was originally published from 1916 to 1924 as a richly illustrated, three-volume work (*Od najdawniejszych czasów do upadku świata starożytnego* [From Antiquity to the Fall of the Ancient World], *Od upadku świata starożytnego do końca wieków średnich* [From the Fall of the Ancient World to the End of the Middle Ages], and *Od wygnania Żydów z Hiszpanii do rewolucji francuskiej oraz od Zygmunta Starego do trzeciego rozbioru Polski* [From the Exile of the Jews from Spain to the French Revolution, and from Sigismund the Old to the Third Partition of Poland]). The idea for this work was born a quarter of a century earlier when its author, Meir Bałaban, a senior Jewish historian in Poland, before his brilliant academic career and after many years of working in secondary schools, realized that there was no textbook for his students at the Polish-language Jewish school in Lwów. However, like Dubnow’s and Schiper’s works, Bałaban’s three-volume book is unable to stand up against modern syntheses of the history of Polish Jews.<sup>10</sup>

### Synthesis Works in Other Languages

Also useful are older and newer synthesis works in other languages. A few are devoted exclusively to the history of Jews in Poland, but most only address it as part of a larger context. This is true of Heinrich Graetz’s (1817–1891) great work, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 378; Jolanta Żyndul, “Topical Book Reviews: ‘Żydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej’ (‘Jews in Restored Poland’) by Ignacy Schiper, Arieh Tartakower, and Aleksander Haffitka;” “Głos Gminy Żydowskiej” (“The Voice of the Jewish Community”), *Shofar* 29 (Spring 2011), 3: 121.

<sup>10</sup> Dold, “A Matter of National and Civic Honour,” 62; Michael G. Müller, “Majer Bałaban (1877–1942) und das Konzept einer polnisch-jüdischen Geschichte,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 2 (2003), 388–390.

*auf die Gegenwart* (11 volumes, 1853–1875),<sup>11</sup> which portrayed Polish Jews only marginally and very negatively. Works of this type were once few, but today they are many, and various in terms of academic quality and interpretation.

An example of a very useful synthesis is *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia, 1973). Its author, Bernard Dov Weinryb (1900–1982), was from Turobin in the southern Lublin region, but he studied in Wrocław, where he earned his doctorate in 1933. A year later he emigrated to Palestine, and in 1939 to the US, where he lectured at several universities, including Columbia. A prolific academic, Weinryb was mainly interested in economic and social history. This was clearly reflected in his book. Yet the basic theses therein appeared as early as in his doctorate, *Wirtschaftsleben der Juden in Rußland und Polen*, published in 1934. Nevertheless, the book is still useful.

Also containing several important sections on the history of Polish Jews is the monumental work *Social and Religious History of the Jews*. Its author, Salo Wittmayer Baron (1895–1989), was from Tarnów. In 1929, after receiving a solid education in Vienna, Columbia University appointed him the first chair in Jewish history to be established in America. He was also the first Jew to receive tenure at the university. The first three-volume edition of his *opus magnum* was published in New York in 1937; the second, both corrected and expanded, was published as an eighteen-volume edition from 1952 to 1983. The sixteenth volume is especially important with regard to Jewish history in Eastern Europe, but it does not go beyond the mid-seventeenth century. Baron worked out and presented the basic theses of his narrative at the end of the 1920s. It is also worth noting that his writing style was very dense and difficult to read.<sup>12</sup> It also seems that he lost contact with the latest research on the history of Polish Jews near the end of his life. Ismar Schorsch, another prominent Jewish-American historian and theologian, wrote the following of Baron in a farewell article after his death:

Sadly, Professor Baron had fallen out of sync with his time long before he died, in part because of the one-sidedness of the final ten volumes of the second edition of

<sup>11</sup> The Polish edition of Graetz, *Historia Żydów*, vols. I–IX, was published in Warsaw in 1929, and as a three-volume reprint in Kraków in 1990.

<sup>12</sup> “A Conversation about Salo Baron between Robert Liberles and Steven J. Zipperstein,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (Spring 1995), 3: 67–68.

his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* abandoned the balance and integration of external and integral events vital to his own understanding of Jewish history.<sup>13</sup>

Much more contemporary and easier to read is *A History of East European Jews* (Budapest, 2002),<sup>14</sup> which was first published in 1990 in Munich as *Geschichte der Ostjuden*. Its author, West German historian and specialist in East European history, Heiko Haumann (b. 1945), presents the most basic facts from the political history, religious history, and everyday life from the Middle Ages to the post-World War II era. The book *should* be called “History of the Jews in Poland with Elements of Jewish History in Russia,” and is in fact addressed to an audience that knows little about the subject matter.

Slightly thicker and more demanding is a rarely-cited synthesis by Henri Minczeles, entitled *Une histoire des Juifs de Pologne*.<sup>15</sup> Strangely, this carefully planned, systematic, and relevant book was neither translated into English nor Polish. The same was the case with Daniel Tollet’s expanded edition of *Être Juif en Pologne. Mille ans d’histoire: Du Moyen Âge à 1939*.<sup>16</sup> However, the older edition of the book from 1992—*Histoire des Juifs en Pologne du XVIe siècle à nos jours*—was translated into Polish only as an abridged version.<sup>17</sup>

Before a full synthesis of the history of Jews in Poland was produced, there were a few collections of articles devoted to specific time periods and the most important issues in Polish-Jewish history. Three of these collections deserve special attention. The first, *The Jews in Poland*, a selection of papers presented in 1984 at a conference in Oxford, contains seventeen texts by eminent academics such as Aleksander Gieysztor, Jakub Goldberg, Stefan Kieniewicz, and Israel Gutman.<sup>18</sup> Collectively presenting a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland, some of these are extremely relevant. For example, Ezra Mendelsohn in his brilliant essay “Interwar Poland:

<sup>13</sup> Ismar Schorsch, “The Last Jewish Generalist,” *AJS Review* 18 (1993), 1: 39.

<sup>14</sup> Polish edition: Heiko Haumann, *Historia Żydów w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej*, trans. Cezary Jenne (Warsaw, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Henri Minczeles, *Une histoire des Juifs de Pologne: Religion, culture, politique* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Tollet, *Être Juif en Pologne. Mille ans d’histoire: Du Moyen Âge à 1939* (Paris, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Tollet, *Historia Żydów w Polsce od XVI wieku do rozbiorów*, trans. Dorota Zamojska (Warsaw, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> *The Jews in Poland*, eds. Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, Antony Polonsky (Oxford, 1986).

Good for the Jews or Bad for the Jews?” describes two historiographical “camps” dealing with the history of Polish Jews—one Polish, and the other Jewish. Of similar value for synthesis is a volume inaugurating the publishing activities of the Jagiellonian University Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland, as well as a *Festschrift* for the founder and chair of the Centre, Professor Józef Andrzej Gierowski, entitled *The Jews in Poland* (1992).<sup>19</sup> Such a collection of synthesis articles can also be found in *The Jews in Old Poland, 1000–1795*, published by the Oxford Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in 1993.<sup>20</sup>

### Popular Science Publications

Several popular science publications are worthy of mention. One, in particular, is a 1997 book, entitled *Żydzi* [Jews], by Andrzej Żbikowski of the University of Warsaw and the Jewish Historical Institute.<sup>21</sup> Published as part of the series *A to Polska właśnie* [This is Poland], this small book (313 small-format pages) contains a few hundred illustrations and a concise overview of the history of Jews in Poland, written in a neutral and informative style. More polemic is a 2006 book by well-known journalist Stefan Bratkowski, entitled *Pod tym samym niebem* [Under the Same Sky].<sup>22</sup> Also very useful is the large *Atlas historii Żydów polskich* [The Atlas of the History of Polish Jews], published under the auspices of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw in 2010.<sup>23</sup> The dozens of clear maps, diagrams, and illustrations therein are accompanied by an extensive text by prominent specialists such as Hanna Zaremska, Marcin Wodziński, Andrzej Żbikowski, and Jolanta Żyndul.

Furthermore, the lexicon *Żydzi w Polsce: Dzieje i kultura* [Jews in Poland: History and Culture], published by Tomaszewski and Żbikowski in 2001,<sup>24</sup> contains not only short entries, but also longer texts, including “Antysemityzm” [Antisemitism], “Historia” [History], “Judaizm” [Judaism], and “Język hebrajski” [The Hebrew Language]. Of a similar nature, yet lesser

<sup>19</sup> *The Jews in Poland*, vol. 1, ed. Andrzej K. Paluch (Kraków, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> *The Jews in Old Poland, 1000–1795*, eds. Antony Polonsky, Jakub Basista, Andrzej Link-Lenczowski (London, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, *Żydzi* (Wrocław, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Stefan Bratkowski, *Pod tym samym niebem: Krótka historia Żydów w Polsce i stosunków polsko-żydowskich* (Warsaw, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> *Atlas historii Żydów polskich*, ed. Witold Sienkiewicz (Warsaw, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> *Żydzi w Polsce: Dzieje i kultura*, eds. Jerzy Tomaszewski, Andrzej Żbikowski (Warsaw, 2001).

academic value, is *Historia i kultura Żydów polskich: Słownik* [A Dictionary of the History and Culture of Polish Jews], published by Alina Cała, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Gabriela Zalewska in 2000.<sup>25</sup>

### Breakthrough Publications

In spite of the above, the real breakthrough in synthesizing the history of Jews in Poland occurred only recently, with the publication of three important works.

Aimed at those with only entry-level knowledge is *Historia Żydów* [History of the Jews], published in 2014 by the weekly magazine *Polityka*,<sup>26</sup> which has a long tradition of editing the “historical aids.” These are published quarterly and concern important events, historical figures, and key issues such as the Cold War, Borderlands (*Kresy*), the history of the Church, Józef Piłsudski, Winston Churchill, and the history of Russia. Two other relevant “aids” were published several years ago: *Historia Żydów – trzy tysiące lat samotności* [History of the Jews: Three Thousand Years of Desolation], and *Dzieje Żydów polskich* [History of the Polish Jews]. Inspired by the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the editorial staff of *Polityka* re-edited the Jewish “aids” and combined them to form one large, popular science volume. It contains a timeline of Jewish history, a short bibliography, 48 concise articles, and 36 encyclopedia entries separated from the text in frames. Together, the articles form a chronological sequence, and the encyclopedia entries concern general matters related to Jews. Compiled in an accessible and compelling way, the volume contains numerous pictures, illustrations, and maps.

The text, which is divided into two parts—“Dzieje narodu żydowskiego” [History of the Jewish Nation] and “Dzieje Żydów w Polsce” [History of Jews in Poland]—resembles a colorful mosaic in which some elements repeat, and others are missing. For example, the article “Narodziny jidysz” [The Birth of Yiddish], p. 58, is duplicated in the frame “Jidysz” [Yiddish], p. 198, and in another fragment, entitled “Język. Hebrajski i jidysz” [Language. Hebrew and Yiddish], pp. 198–199, within the article

<sup>25</sup> *Historia i kultura Żydów polskich: Słownik*, eds. Alina Cała, Hanna Węgrzynek, Gabriela Zalewska (Warsaw, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> *Historia Żydów. Dzieje narodu od Abrahama do Państwa Izrael. Żydzi w Polsce: 1000 lat wspólnych losów*, eds. Leszek Będkowski, Anita Brzostowska, Biblioteka *Polityki* (Warsaw, 2014).

“Kultura” [Culture]. Among the missing pieces of the mosaic is a text about Jews in the Soviet Union. However, the most serious deficiency of the volume is the varying quality of the articles therein. In addition to excellent essays by prominent specialists like Hanna Zaremska, Ewa Geller, Anna Michałowska-Mycielska, Marcin Wodziński, and Jolanta Żyndul, as well as remarkable journalists such as Adam Krzemiński and Roman Frister, there are a few weaker texts by other academics and journalists. Nevertheless, *Historia Żydów* is capable of captivating all audiences.

Much more systematic and precise is the history of Polish Jews presented in the popular didactic book *1000 lat historii Żydów polskich: Podróż przez wieki* [1000 Years of Polish-Jewish History: A Journey through Time], published in 2015 by Robert Szuchta, a historian, teacher, and employee of the Education Department of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.<sup>27</sup> Szuchta is an expert in Holocaust history and methodology, as is evident in his book. The chapter “Żydzi podczas II wojny światowej – Zagłada” [Jews during World War II: Extermination] is excellent. Both balanced and easy to read, the chapter presents the most important facts, while also conveying the tragedy of the Holocaust. The chapter “Żydzi w Polsce po II wojnie światowej (1945–1981)” [Jews in Poland after World War II: 1945–1981] is also very good. However, the author’s treatment of earlier history leaves something to be desired. Indeed, he completely omits World War I, whose occurrence and aftermath had an enormous influence on the situation of Polish Jews. Likewise, the chapter on the interwar period could be less “annalistic,” and more analytical. For example, it does not address why the “Grabski Agreement” between the Jews and the government never came to fruition, or why the death of Józef Piłsudski and conflicts surrounding the establishment of *Sanacja* (Sanation) had such a significant influence on the situation of Jews. Other chapters also could have been edited differently. For instance, only ten lines of text are devoted to the Duchy of Warsaw, during which the modern Polish-Jewish bourgeoisie appeared. Nevertheless, disputes about the proportions should not overshadow the fact that Szuchta’s work should be mandatory reading for all secondary-school students in Poland. After a few small corrections, it should be translated into English.

Antony Polonsky’s *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce i Rosji* [The Jews in Poland and Russia] belongs to a special category of works.<sup>28</sup> Polonsky is one of

<sup>27</sup> Robert Szuchta, *1000 lat historii Żydów polskich: Podróż przez wieki* (Warsaw, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Antony Polonsky, *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce i Rosji*, trans. Mateusz Wilk (Warsaw, 2014).

two or three most outstanding modern specialists in the history of Jews in Poland. Throughout his long and fruitful career, he has occupied many important academic positions in Great Britain and the US. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the above-mentioned academic journal *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, whose contribution to the development of Polish-Jewish research cannot be overstated. Published since 1986, the 29 volumes of this journal paint a comprehensive and panoramic picture of Jewish history in Poland. In the 1980s, Polonsky was the initiator and principal organizer of a series of international academic conferences that began a new era in the study of Polish-Jewish history, and helped rebuild relations between Poland and Israel. The world's largest online library catalog, *WorldCat*, lists 167 of his works.

In 2010–2012, Polonsky published the three-volume *The Jews in Poland and Russia* (vol. 1: 1350–1881, vol. 2: 1881–1914, vol. 3: 1914–2008). The work was very well received by scholars, who compared it to Simon Dubnow's epochal *Historia Żydów w Rosji i Polsce*. Yet for many readers, the size of Polonsky's book (2,024 pages), as well as its extensive and specialized approach, was an insurmountable barrier. So, in 2013, he published a single-volume summary of his *opus magnum* as *The Jews in Poland and Russia: A Short History* ("only" 648 pages). There is no doubt that this was a difficult undertaking. For instance, Polonsky had to condense the entire 492-page second volume concerning the period of 1881–1914 to 60 pages in the short version. In 2014, the short version was translated into Polish as *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce i Rosji*.

In his book, Polonsky managed to achieve several difficult tasks. Firstly, he presented all aspects of East European Jewish civilization, while conveying a sense of their wealth, complexity, and multithreading. Secondly, he proved that it is not enough to simply describe the history of Polish or Russian Jews in the context of the history of Poland or Russia; because in reality, the history of Jews is an inseparable part of the history of both countries, and the contribution of Jews to local politics, economy, and culture was essential to their development, and thus cannot be left out of an honest and serious analysis. Polonsky painted a tragic picture of the Holocaust, but he took care to ensure that it did not dominate the whole book. Interesting is his parallel description of the twentieth-century history of Jews in Poland, the USSR, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus. Polish readers can compare how others "solved the Jewish question," i.e. what they did differently, better, or worse—both from the point of view

of Jews and non-Jews. Polonsky ends his analysis in 2008, which allows us to juxtapose our own experiences with his views.

Polonsky's book is very succinct. It offers so many facts and interpretations that it could be the subject of a university course. Some teachers do this, including me, and with great benefit for students. During discussions, they raise many noteworthy questions, such as "shouldn't the title of the book be 'The History of Jews in Poland and Russia from the Mid-Eighteenth Century,' as earlier periods, especially the Middle Ages, are treated of so briefly?" or "shouldn't more attention be devoted to the Prussian Partition, and was it really the only area where Jews were able to successfully integrate?" (p. 656). Jewish relations with communism are a particularly difficult subject, of which Polonsky provides careful interpretations. In fact, he is sometimes almost too balanced. For example, in the chapter about the Holocaust, he writes that "in the period between the conclusion of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact in August 1939 and the invasion of the Soviet Union, both countries [the Soviet Union and Germany] were in a certain sense allies" (p. 496).

Each of these three recent books is very necessary. Fantastically written, beautifully rendered, and full of fascinating details, they will certainly allow us to overcome the current crisis in history education at various levels in Poland. However, this does not mean that the subject has been exhausted. We are still in need of further great syntheses of Polish-Jewish history.

*Translated by Jack Ramsey Zagorski*

*Piotr J. Wróbel*  
University of Toronto  
piotr.wrobel@utoronto.ca