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*Poles, Jews, and Auschwitz:
A Controversy over Historical Memory*

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Occasional Papers in Polish and Polish American Studies

The Endowed Chair of Polish and Polish American Studies at Central Connecticut State University has been fortunate to host distinguished guest lecturers on a variety of Polish and Polish American topics. The publication of these lectures as part of a series of *Occasional Papers in Polish and Polish American Studies* is an effort to contribute to the permanent record of scholarship, and to promote new scholarship.

On November 23, 1998, Professor Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska of the Marie Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland, spoke on "*Poles, Jews and Auschwitz: A Controversy over Historical Memory.*" Professor Adamczyk-Garbowska is a highly regarded literary scholar who has written extensively on Jewish Literature in Poland. She is the author of *Polska Isaaca Bashevisa Singera: Rozstanie i powrót* (The Poland of Issac Bashevis Singer: Separation and Return). Her articles about and reviews of Singer have appeared in *Akcent*, *Więź*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Kresy*, *Ex Libris*, and *Polin*. During the 1998 - 1999 academic year she was a Fulbright Scholar at Brandeis University.

Auschwitz, the nefarious Nazi-extermination camp, is the object of controversy between Jews and Poles. Over one million Jews perished there, only because they were Jews. Auschwitz is a universal symbol of the Holocaust. However, some 75,000 Polish gentiles also perished in the camp. For Poles, Auschwitz is also a powerful symbol of victimization. The conflict is over historical memory.

We are grateful to Mr. Henry A. Gajda, who established a publishing endowment in the CCSU Foundation, Inc., for the publication of Professor Adamczyk-Garbowska's paper. It is our hope that the publication of the *Occasional Papers in Polish and Polish American Studies* furthers the study of Poland and of the Polish immigrant and ethnic community in America.

Stanislaus A. Blejwas
CSU University Professor of History
Holder of the Endowed Chair in Polish
and Polish American Studies

**Poles, Jews and Auschwitz:
A Controversy over Historical Memory**

A Polish Studies Lecture
Central Connecticut State University
November 23, 1998

Professor Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska
The Marie Curie-Skłodowska University
Lublin, Poland

In a nonfiction story by Hanna Krall (b. 1937), the narrator and Thomas Blatt, a survivor of Sobibór concentration camp (Blatt published recently *From the Ashes of Sobibór. A Story of Survival*), drive through little towns in the Lublin region some time in the early eighties. Blatt mentions the names of the Jews who lived and perished there. "Why is nobody sad?" he asks. The sun is setting. "Everything became even uglier and greyer," we read. "Perhaps because ghosts are circling around. They do not want to go away when people do not regret their absence, when they are un-mourned. All this greyness comes from the un-mourned ghosts."¹

Literally speaking the greyness of Polish shtetlakh after the war, which can also be sensed in Charles Powers' novel *In the Memory of the Forest*, was less the result of the absence of Jews but one of the effects of the Communist economy imposed upon the country. Today a number of towns and villages look perhaps less grey but it does not change the message of the story, namely the fact that Jews on the whole were not mourned in Poland.

For forty-five years after World War II, like in other countries of the former Communist Bloc, history in Poland was the least independent subject, constituting a hot bed for manipulation. The selection of facts and, above all, their interpretation had precisely defined ideological dimensions to an extent unmet in the West. In the case of Jewish topics, their very absence or incidental and distorted presentation made Jews almost a taboo issue that could not be discussed openly. The resulting "mystery" around these questions made people either indifferent and ignorant or susceptible to biased opinions. A problem of equal importance is that up until 1989 very little attention was given to the long presence of Jews in Polish history. Most often they would appear in connection to the Holocaust and quickly disappear again. This was quite visible in the teaching about Auschwitz as well as in the museum displays there. The official version was that 3 to 4 million people died in the camp with an implication that a great part of them were Poles (according to the most reliable data more than one million Jews and 75 thousand Poles perished at both camps, that is Auschwitz and Birkenau). The international character of the place was

¹ Hanna Krall, "Portret z kulą w szczęce," ["A Portrait with a Bullet in the Jaw"] in *Taniec na cudzym weselu* (Warszawa: Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza "BGW", 1994), 94. Some ideas included in this lecture were initially presented at the conference on the Holocaust at Notre Dame University in April 1998.

underlined. For example on a plaque in Auschwitz you could read for many years that people of various nationalities were murdered there and indeed those nationalities were listed in alphabetical order. Since in Polish the work for Jew is "Żyd," the very last letter of the alphabet, the Jews were mentioned in the last place. It was not mentioned that all those nominal Bulgarians, Dutch, or Hungarians, were citizens of Bulgaria, Hungary or the Netherlands but in fact were predominantly Jewish.

As those who are familiar with the topic know very well, in Polish-Jewish relations after the war a kind of martyrdom rivalry can be observed. Each side believes that emphasizing the sufferings of the other may decrease the scope of one's own tragedy. Such a situation has to a large degree resulted and has been intensified by the fact that for many years it was not allowed in Poland to speak openly about numerous painful and/or controversial issues. Poles, who in the majority did not consider the end of World War II as a liberation of Poland, but as a transition from the Nazi to the Soviet occupation, devoted inordinate attention to their own heroism and suffering, often forgetting about the suffering of other nations. Due to a substantial ideologization of school curricula, outside of school in many homes a different version of history was given to young generations. Nevertheless both the official and unofficial versions aimed at shaping patriotism, but patriotism understood narrowly and one-sidedly, forgetting that wise patriotic education has nothing to do with nationalism and uncritical acceptance of one's history. Patriotic feelings of the prevailing groups of the Polish society were also the object of manipulation by the subsequent regimes.

Therefore some paradoxical situations and myths have survived until today, including the one about the Jewish domination and/or influences in Poland. For instance, according to one of the relatively recent opinion polls (1996), 37% of Poles thought that Jews had too great an influence upon the Polish economy, 39% had a similar opinion as to their influence upon political life, and 28% believed that they had too much power in the media. Every third person among the examined group believed that 250 thousand to 1 million Jews live in Poland today while in fact the Jewish community is estimated as five thousand to twenty-five thousand people, depending on what criteria we take into account. This part of the society, although not actively anti-Semitic, can be especially susceptible

to the nationalist rhetoric in which Jews appear as a group posing a threat for Polish culture, economy or foreign policy. We can only hope that together with the strengthening of the democratic system in Poland such views will be met with an ever ebbing response.

One of the main problems in the Polish-Jewish dialogue is the fact that Poles most often take a defensive stand and even when admitting their own transgressions, in the same sentence they mention some transgressions of Jews or, even more often, they give examples of anti-Semitism in other countries. One of the typical arguments is that of French anti-Semitism: "Why Poles? Weren't the French much worse?"

Another typical example of argumentation is that of admitting some guilt about anti-Semitism but immediately after counterbalancing it with accusations of anti-Polonism, Jewish involvement in communism etc. This type of 'dialogue' resembles a marital argument in which one side feigns regret but at the same time add: "But it's all because you always . . ." or "And don't you remember, your mother [twenty years ago] said that . . ." In this type of approach the domineering factor is not openness toward the other but demonstrating at any cost that you are right, which does not mean that such phenomena as anti-Polish prejudices among Jews or Jewish involvement in communism should not be researched.

Talking about the defensive stand taken by Poles the late Joseph Lichten, who was deeply involved in Polish-Jewish dialogue, observed in his article about Polish-Jewish relations in America, that in the Polish-Jewish controversy over the Holocaust, on the Polish side there is often the belief in Jewish ingratitude accompanied by a conviction that Poles did a lot to help rescue Jews: 'If there is one feeling which is likely to create a total agreement between a Polish American and a Polish Pole — whether he is a Communist, or non-Communist, government official or man in the street — it is indignation at this 'ingratitude' of the Jew'². Lichten's article was published 25 years ago in a completely different political context but it has not lost its validity.

Poles often say with indignation that Jews blame them more than they blame Germans. They usually do not understand or do not realize, that extreme cases apart, most Jews when they blame

² Joseph L. Lichten, "Polish Americans and American Jews: Some Issues Which Unite and Divide," *The Polish Review*, 4 (1973), 60.

Poles for their behavior at various stages of mutual relations do so not on account of Poles not rescuing them en masse; they know that active rescuing was very difficult. However a number of survivors remember indifference or nasty remarks, not to mention informers or people who made profit on their misfortune, and even if in some cases the people who made that profit were not directed by anti-Semitism but ugly human greed this does not change the general feelings. What made matters worse were the waves of anti-Semitism after the war usually instigated from above for political reasons but supported by some groups of the Polish society. So when sometimes Jews say that Poles were worse than Germans they usually do not mean it literally; it is often a rhetorical statement. The Germans' role was clearly that of a murderer so no one expected anything positive from them while Poles were neighbors or someone in the same slave camp but better off. We can perhaps compare this to a situation when you are attacked in the street and bystanders do not help you but pretend they don't see the attack or hide, because they are afraid, indifferent or ill-intentioned, not to mention if among bystanders are your relatives or people whom you consider your friends. Then your anger and frustration are directed very much at them because the attacker's role is obvious.

The evidence of how deep-rooted some stereotypes are, as well as a feeling that you should solve your problems at home without revealing them to the public, is visible in one of the reviews of Michael Steinlauf's book on Polish memories of the Holocaust³ in a Polish American newspaper, in which the reviewer while seemingly praising the book poses an argument quite typical in its irrationality, namely why is a Jew writing about the reactions of Poles instead of focusing on Jewish reactions — especially of American Jews — to the Holocaust of their brethren, and suggests that Steinlauf should have waited patiently until "a reliable and competent Polish author" takes on this topic and only then "display his cards" since these are the principles of "fair play".⁴

Such reviewers overlook the fact that scholars and writers like Michael Steinlauf or Eva Hoffman whose book *Shtetl* also touches upon the topic of Polish and Jewish memories of the Holocaust,

³ See *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁴ See Wojciech A. Wierzewski, "Michael Steinlauf spogląda na 'biednych Polaków,'" ["Michael Steinlauf Is Looking at 'Poor Poles'"] *Dziennik Związkowy*, May 30-June 1, 1997, p. A, 21.

born after the war and familiar both with the Polish and Jewish community and their differing sensitivities (e.g. Steinlauf at the beginning of his book states that he is proud of being considered pro-Jewish among Poles and pro-Polish among Jews which shows his difficult in-between position) are probably more able than scholars of an older generation to look at Polish Jewish history more objectively. To some extent this can be attributed to their privilege of being born late, that they themselves did not experience the Holocaust. A similar thing can be said about a number of scholars in Poland which does not mean that representatives of the older generation do not have this type of sensitivity.

Especially in the face of the Vatican documents on the Shoah published last year a question must be raised about the role of the Catholic Church in this issue. Catholics in Poland are as polarized in this respect as the rest of society, and in general I would say the scene is far from being satisfactory.

It is true that various documents have been issued on Polish-Jewish relations, including the pastoral letter of the Polish Episcopate in 1990, but they have entered and grown roots in public consciousness only to a very small degree. It happens quite rarely that you have a chance to listen to an ordinary Sunday sermon in which the priest would take a personal stand against anti-Semitism (I use the word 'ordinary', because you can certainly listen to such sermons but they would always take place on some special occasion, e.g. during a Jewish Culture Week or a Day of Judaism, etc.; however one must say that it demonstrates enormous progress that such events like a Day of Judaism (January 17) are organized, not to mention various cultural events, e.g. Festival of Jewish Culture in Kraków). I am not implying that the rare occurrence of such sermons has to be a result of ill will or widespread anti-Semitic views of the clergy. This may rather be the result of a lack of preparation, insensitivity or the inability to realize that such a need exists or — which would be even worse — a fear of how the faithful would respond. In the above mentioned novel by Powers one of the characters is a Polish priest who takes a very personal stand towards the fate of Jews and even leads his congregation to the old Jewish cemetery to commemorate the Jewish inhabitants of the village who perished in the Holocaust. I know of similar initiatives, e.g. in Ulanów an old Jewish cemetery was restored and fenced with the help of a local priest, but these are rather isolated cases.

Such actions or at least sermons in which priests would remind the faithful about the evils of anti-Semitism and tell them that Christians should be happy that in the face of what befell Jews during the war there is still a Jewish community in Poland would have a much greater impact than numerous articles written by intellectuals for intellectuals.

I do not like to resort to lofty words but quite often in the context of post-war Polish Jewish history Julian Tuwim's words come to my mind (Julian Tuwim [1894-1953] was an outstanding Polish Poet from an assimilated Jewish family). On the first anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising he wrote from America in his manifesto "We, Polish Jews":

Upon the armbands which you wore in the ghetto the star of David was painted. I believe in a future Poland in which that star of your armbands will become the highest order bestowed upon the bravest among Polish officers and soldiers [...] And there shall be in Warsaw and in every other Polish city some fragment of the ghetto left standing and preserved in its present form in all its horror of ruin and destruction [...] 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.⁵

Unfortunately, this was idealistic and naive reasoning. Another Polish poet of the same generation, also an assimilated Jew, Antoni Słonimski (1895-1976), sensed the whole matter more accurately (besides, he was richer in the experience of the first post-war years) when he wrote in 1947 in the last stanza of this "Elegy to Shtetlakh":

Gone are the little shtetlakh, passed into shadow
And this shadow shall lie between our words,
Ere two nations fed on centuries of suffering
Will draw near and unite anew.⁶

Undoubtedly the "shadow" that Słonimski points out in his poem lasted for long years largely due to the political system

⁵ Julian Tuwim, *My Żydzi polscy/We, Polish Jews*, ed. Ch. Shmeruk (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984), 19.

⁶ Antoni Słonimski, "Elegia miasteczek żydowskich," in: *Poezje* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1955), 356. Translation mine. Another translation can be found in *Stranger in Our Midst: Images of the Jew in Polish Literature*, ed. Harold B. Segel (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 363. Eva Hoffman chose a fragment of that poem as the motto to her *Shtetl*.

which hindered any free exchange of ideas. Nevertheless these two quotations refer to different types of memory. In Tuwin we encounter the idealistic concept that suffering ennobles and makes you sensitive to the suffering of others while in Słonimski a more pragmatic stand that suffering divides rather than unites.

Polish society has always been very polarized and one can see this polarization today even more than before due to the freedom of expression, among other places in different attitudes to the Holocaust.

The current conflict over the crosses in Auschwitz, not the first one of its kind, but never before on such a scale, can be treated as a symbol of that divided memory. Let us recall some facts: The so-called papal cross, 21 feet high, was originally placed in Birkenau when the Pope visited it in 1979. The cross had such a size because it was a very large gathering. On the occasion of other papal visits to Poland a number of crosses were erected but most of them were later taken apart and no one considered them sacred (they were not blessed as such). After the Carmelite Convent had been removed from the grounds of the former camp after numerous discussions and long negotiations, in 1988 some people secretly moved the cross from Birkenau to the so-called gravel pit at Auschwitz, the place where more than 150 Poles were killed in one of the first massacres (originally Auschwitz was established for Polish political prisoners). This parcel of land does not constitute a part of the Auschwitz museum as such, it is adjacent to it, but of course the cross is very visible from afar. What is more, that parcel of land, formerly owned by the Carmelite Order was leased to an organization of war veterans, as it turned out, of a chauvinistic character.

For a while the cross did not attract much attention because attention was focused more on religious symbols — crosses and stars of David — brought by a group of Polish scouts to Birkenau. Although the scouts had the best of intentions, a number of Jewish visitors felt uneasy in the presence of these symbols, especially the Christian ones. Eventually those symbols were removed. In the meantime the papal cross started attracting more and more attention, e.g. Elie Wiesel referred to it during one of his visits. The Committee responsible for the preservation of Auschwitz conducted negotiations that were purposely not publicized so as not to aggravate public opinion. At the beginning of this year the

negotiating sides reached an agreement according to which the cross would be removed and replaced by a monument commemorating Polish victims, most probably with a cross, but not such an imposing one. However, one of the Polish officials, Krzysztof Śliwiński, a minister in charge of the contacts with the Jewish Diaspora, revealed that secret during his visit to France in March this year.

His statement, widely publicized by the press, attracted a great deal of attention and inspired Kazimierz Świtoń, a former Solidarity activist to start a hunger strike in Auschwitz. It is doubtful if Świtoń did it because of his religious convictions; he rather wanted to attract attention to himself, perhaps frustrated by the failure of his earlier attempts to play a major role in the political life of Poland. In a sense his action was also stimulated by the Primate of Poland, Józef Cardinal Glemp, who just before Easter mentioned in one of his sermons that the cross should remain there. Unfortunately he did it in a rather aggressive and insensitive way by stating among others: "Many people have not liked and do not like the Eiffel Tower, but that is no reason to move or reconstruct it. In the same way, the cross at Auschwitz must not be the subject of bargaining, for it is among believers for whom the cross is salvation." Świtoń's appeal to bring more crosses, to create a field of crosses, found some public support and different people and organizations started bringing crosses to Auschwitz; a few of them were brought by Polish Americans. When later that year the situation seemed to have gotten out of control and the Polish government condemned the action, Cardinal Glemp made another unfortunate statement supporting the protesters and stating that he could understand their point of view. A day later another prominent representative of the Polish Episcopate, Bishop Henryk Muszyński, made a contradictory statement in which he condemned the action. Immediately afterward Cardinal Glemp issued a new statement in which he admitted that he had misunderstood the issue. All this showed a drastic variety of opinion among the Church hierarchy. One can suspect that Glemp was rather made to change his statement than acting with deep conviction. This suspicion also gave some support to some extremists because they could reason now that Glemp was under pressure from some liberal or Free-Mason forces within the Church.

But even if Cardinal Glemp was forced to change his statement, it is a positive symptom because it shows that the nationalist orientation in the Church hierarchy is not strong enough to dominate

the Episcopate. Bishop Muszyński's statement was very important. He said among other things that Jews who are our brothers perceive the cross in a different way and expect respect for their beliefs. Therefore an instrumental treatment of the symbolic meaning of the cross and using it to fight against someone is a denial of Christianity and the cross, the more so that the later is a sign of love. This series of statements was concluded by the official letter of the Polish Episcopate to the faithful calling them to stop the action that is a profanation of the cross. In spite of that appeal more and more crosses have been brought to the gravel pit.

There has been a great dose of political manipulation in the whole affair since a number of rightist politicians in Poland have tried to take advantage of it to gain attention or increase their popularity among voters. And thus some of the people who bring new crosses to Auschwitz do it for political reasons alongside those who do it in good faith. However, the very fact that they can be manipulated in such a way shows that these people do not realize the scope of the Jewish tragedy, perhaps they know nothing or have a very distorted idea of what the Holocaust really was. On the other hand, many Poles that realize the ideological context of the whole controversy dismiss it as a display of folk Catholicism resembling almost a pagan ritual. The fact that they critically look at the action does not necessarily mean that they are particularly sympathetic to Jews. Whatever the intentions and feelings of people directly and indirectly involved in this action, as a number of sensitive people put it, Hitler is winning in Auschwitz by antagonizing Jews and Poles and creating mistrust or even hatred between them. Different commentators see it as a terrible irony, historical paradox or a delayed success of the Nazi propaganda.

The question arises why the government or the Church have not used some radical measures to solve this issue. Ironically, the matter would be simple with the Communist regime. In the first place something like this would not have happened and if similar attempts were made, the authorities would immediately bring order or perhaps imprison the instigators. In a sense we go back to the starting point: the fact that history was manipulated for so many years in Poland now bears its bitter fruit. The fact that any public display of religious feelings was forbidden intensifies this ostentatious religiosity. Especially for uneducated people the rumor that the cross was being removed from Auschwitz awoke some negative

prejudices and sentiments and stimulated a hysterical reaction. "Yes, soon they (whoever they are: Jews, the government, the European Union) will close the churches and will not let us pray," some people believe. Another important aspect at play here is that of a sense of collective national dignity. Poland was partitioned for almost 150 years, then after 20 years of freedom it was suppressed by the Nazi occupation, then Soviet occupation replaced the German one, so Poles are very attached to their independence and obsessive about the idea that someone — in this case Jews — is ordering them around on their own territory. Realizing all these complex feelings the authorities do not want to use methods discredited by the communists, neither do they want to create martyrs (e.g. Świtoń threatened that he would immolate himself if anybody touched the crosses). That is why the government uses legal measures which are not very successful. We can only hope that in the nearest future the present leaseholders will be ousted from the gravel pit and the government and the Church will be able to find an adequate solution to the conflict.

This does not change the fact that some grave mistakes were made at the very beginning when both church and government showed a lack of foresight as to how the situation might develop. Perhaps it could have been stopped at the beginning by some quicker action; the Polish church missed the occasion to talk to people when the whole thing started. Cardinal Glemp instead of misinterpreting the Pope's statement about defending the cross as a symbol of Christianity missed the occasion to tell people why Jews are so distrustful of Christian symbols, the more so that this was soon after the Vatican issued the document on Shoah.

Is the conflict at Auschwitz a conflict between Poles and Jews, between different Jewish groups or between different orientations within the Polish society? I would say all these factors play a certain role and you definitely cannot talk about a Polish or Jewish position in general. One can observe different attitudes: extremists among Jews say that there should not be any religious symbols in Auschwitz and that the very consciousness that there are some Christian symbols in or near Auschwitz, no matter how big or small, is disturbing for them. Extremists on the Polish side believe that by planting a forest of crosses they will protect themselves against the Jewish conspiracy of making Auschwitz devoid of Christian martyrdom.

There were also some more or less fortunate ideas among people who have the best intentions and genuinely want to solve this conflict. Some of them suggested that there should be a distinction made between Auschwitz that was basically a concentration camp and Birkenau which was a death camp, or that some places like Treblinka or Sobibór should be given to Jewish jurisdiction while others remain under the rule and care of Polish authorities. Such concepts do not seem very promising because they lead to a further polarization and rivalry. A number of Polish intellectuals would be willing to have Auschwitz free of religious symbols either because of their secular views or according to the Christian principle that if something is very disturbing for your neighbor you should submit to his wish; on the other hand they realize that such a stand would not be acceptable for a significant percentage of Poles and therefore suggest a compromise solution like erecting a less imposing monument. The latter stand is accepted by a number of moderate Jewish activists who even if they themselves would prefer not to see a cross in Auschwitz, they understand Polish sensibilities. Good will and education is necessary on both sides. Christians should be educated about the Jewish position and told why the cross can be a disturbing symbol for Jews, while Jews should be informed that by erecting a cross or praying for both Christians and Jews murdered there, Poles do not want to take over their places of memory. Representatives of Jewish organizations should also make it clear that they realize that Poles were also victims of Nazi persecution. Such conciliatory attempts had been made even before the whole thing became so hot, e.g. in April, in a statement made before the Tenth March of the Living, the Polish Episcopate expressed their intention to join in their spirit in the sufferings of the Jewish people. A positive sign was also the fact that the prime ministers of Israel and Poland headed the march together, and Polish Christians participated in it as well. It's hard to say however what impact those statements and actions have made on the population in general. As in any society, educated people are less prone to prejudices and more capable of understanding and empathy.

Various articles published on the topic of Polish Jewish relations and contrasting Polish and Jewish memories of the Holocaust have revealed a polarity of attitudes. For example in 1987 a respected literary critic Jan Błoński published a very important article "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (a reference to Czesław

Miłosz's poem "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto")⁷ followed by a heated discussion. Now more than ten years later another article by a professor of sociology Hanna Świda-Ziemia published in the main Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* again aroused a heated discussion⁸. And one can see from the polemic that the opinions haven't changes so much. It is also symptomatic that after each such publication papers receive lots of letters of support very often signed by well-known people and anonymous letters of anti-Semitic character. Perhaps this is an optimistic sign that authors of the latter prefer to remain anonymous; it may mean that in a sense they feel insecure about their convictions.

Błonski's article was very important and perceived as a breakthrough in Polish-Jewish relations. Świda-Ziemia goes even further because she gives more practical implications. Błonski the literary critic discusses the issue mainly on moral grounds, Świda-Ziemia does it as a sociologist, besides her article was written in a changed political context. She considers the problem of the crosses exclusively as an internal Polish matter and treats it as an ethical challenge. She argues that the fact that the situation of Poles and Jews was asymmetrical during the war and since the majority of Poles were helpless witnesses of the destruction of European Jewry, Poles more than any other people should be concerned about the fact that Jews are able to remember their murdered brethren according to their convictions and beliefs. She claims that this is a question of moral sensitivity regardless of anybody's wishes or behavior. She also points out that at present Poles have to choose between two attitudes: either they will close themselves against sensitivity and the point of view of others and will fight blindly for the commemoration of their martyrs and symbols in order to emphasize their presence in their country, or they will try to comprehend the horror of the Holocaust and be willing to understand the position of Jews out of their free will and not under pressure from others. Of course this is idealistic reasoning which requires a great dose of altruism and moral integrity. Most human beings tend to focus on their own sufferings rather than seeing one's own fate in a wider context. But in fact almost always when you think of your own suffering you can think of someone who has suffered

⁷ See *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 2, 1987. The English translation was published in *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* 2 (1987): 321-32.

⁸ See "Hańba obojętności," [Disgraceful Indifference] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 17, 1998.

even more. It would be ideal if most Poles understood that although they themselves suffered a lot, Jews on the whole suffered even more. And by the very fact that the Poles know what suffering is they should have even more empathy for the Jews.

What is the attitude of the Polish society towards the conflict over the crosses? According to some recent opinion polls only 7% support the action of placing the crosses but at the same time only 6% agree with the idea that there should not be any religious symbols. Forty-nine percent want only the so-called papal cross to remain, 20% are for replacing the crosses with a monument to the memory of murdered Poles with a cross incorporated into it, 1% is for replacing the papal cross with a similar one, 5% are indecisive, 10% do not see a need of a separate commemoration of Poles and 15% are for leaving all the crosses that are already there but against placing more. Eighty-six percent think that Poles have the right to decide about how the site of the former camp is arranged but simultaneously 52% are for respecting the feelings of other religious groups.

The most recent polls as to how Poles perceive Auschwitz reveal a number of very telling facts as well. Auschwitz is specifically a place of Polish martyrdom for only 8%. Since this is close to the number of people who are for placing more crosses at Auschwitz one can expect that they are basically the same people. A drastically small percentage (5%) sees Auschwitz as the site of mass slaughter of Jews. The largest group 48% sees it as a site of martyrdom of people of various nationalities. Thirty-eight percent of people claim that the nationality of the victims is not important — they tend to universalize martyrdom. To the question which nation suffered most, 50% of Poles chose Poles, 28% Jews, 3% chose Russians and 11% stated that it is impossible to compare the suffering of different nations. Although these data might be shocking, what is promising in them is that they show that Poles haven't appropriated Auschwitz. On the other hand, in the West there is a prevailing belief that Jews were the only victims in concentration camps and Westerners are often surprised when they come to Auschwitz or Majdanek where they learn of a large number of victims among Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, etc.

Of course these statistics are approximate and they fluctuate almost from day to day. Comparing different surveys we see among

other things that the Episcopate has a strong influence in Poland, since after the decisive statement condemning the action one could see a rapid decrease in its support. One could think that if such a statement had been made earlier, the conflict at Auschwitz would not have reached such proportions.

There are also people in Poland who believe that the whole thing is a provocation by Russian secret police or some undefined forces aimed at hindering Polish aspirations to enter NATO and the European Union. This type of reasoning is quite popular in Poland, for instance similar argumentation was used in reference to the pogrom in Kielce that took place on July 1946. Although it is possible that some people instigating the conflict may be involved with the Russian intelligence service this version does not change the fact that so many people submitted to the provocation.

One of the most sensitive recent analyses of the Polish attitude toward the Holocaust was given by Andrzej Szczypiński (b. 1924), a well-known Polish writer (his novel about the Holocaust *Początek [The Beginning]*, was published in English as *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman*) who states among other things that "Jews have the right to come to terms with their past, but Christians do not have such a right. Jews can even allow themselves to forget about the Holocaust. Christians are not allowed to do this," and states explicitly that Christians who do not realize the scope of Jewish suffering "do not have God in their hearts"⁹. Fortunately Szczypiński's voice is not isolated; he represents a much larger group of people, including leading Polish artists and scholars.

As Kazimierz Brandys, a Polish writer from an assimilated Jewish family remarked a number of years back, there has never been just *one* Poland: "There was the Poland of hatred and darkness, the Poland of xenophobia and intolerance, but at the same time there was a wise and enlightened Poland."¹⁰ Let us hope that the latter will gradually erase the former. It is optimistic that since young generations of Poles who have the privilege of living in a free and democratic country no longer want to see themselves as victims, they are more ready to look at their own history with the eyes of others, minorities or neighbors, and confront their visions

⁹ Andrzej Szczypiński, "Marzec i Polacy," ["March 1968 and Poles"] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 17, 1998.

¹⁰ Kazimierz Brandys, *Paris, New York: 1982-1984*, trans. from the Polish by Barbara Krzywicki-Herbert (New York: Random House, 1988), 60.

with their own point of view. The more people in Poland choose this option, the greater will be the chance that the ghosts evoked in Hanna Krall's story quoted at the beginning will be able to "rest in peace" and Auschwitz will be a place of solemn commemoration and reflection rather than of political and ideological battle.

November 23, 1998

Polish and Polish American Studies

The Polish Studies Program at Central Connecticut State University is a unique endeavor. It contributes to the diversity and strength of Central as a University, and is the only active program of its kind in New England with roots both on the campus and in the community.

The Program, inaugurated in January, 1974, seeks to preserve and to stimulate an awareness of Poland's history and of her contribution to European and world civilizations. The Program's core are courses in history, culture, literature, and language, and on the Polish American immigrant and ethnic community. The Polish Heritage Collection in the University Library, numbering over 17,000 catalogued books and periodicals, supplements the course offerings. The Polish American Archives is a research depository available to scholars, students, and to the public. It is supported in part by the Alex M. Rudewicz Endowment.

The Program sponsors lectures, cultural events, exhibits, recitals and concerts, and literary evenings. Activities include the annual Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies, the annual Milewski Polish Studies Lecture, the biennial Godlewski Evening of Polish Culture, and, soon, an annual lecture about business and the Polish economy. The Martin & Sophie Grzyb Prize for Excellence in Polish Studies is awarded in recognition of student achievement. There is also a Polish Student Club.

The Copernican Polish Heritage Endowment, which is located in the CCSU Foundation, Inc., supports all aspects of Polish Studies. Donors are commemorated on the plaque in the University Library. Individuals, families, businesses, and organizations are listed in the following categories:

Founders	\$1,000
Benefactors	500
Friends	250
Patrons	100

An individual, family, business, or organization may wish to endow (\$10,000) a special lecture, a named scholarship, a book and publishing fund, a fund for exchange faculty and students from Poland, or some other activity. These donations are commemorated with individual bronze plaques which are also in the University Library.

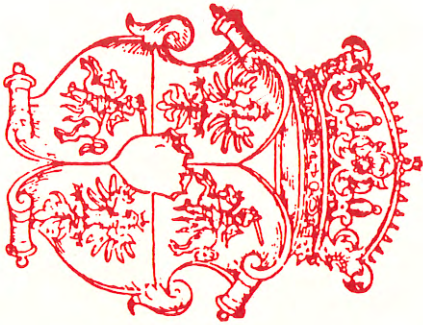
Over \$600,000 have been donated by Polish Americans and their friends in support of Polish Studies. In 1997, the State of Connecticut under the leadership of Governor John Rowland, matched these private donations and an Endowed Chair of Polish and Polish American Studies was established at Central Connecticut State University. This new chair, the first in the Connecticut State University system, is only the second funded chair of Polish Studies in the United States. The first is the Alfred Jurzykowski Chair of Polish Culture at Harvard University.

The objective is to fund the Chair of Polish and Polish American Studies with a minimum endowment of \$1,500,000 or more. Donors may take advantage of a new program in which, for every dollar donated, the State of Connecticut will donate an additional 50 cents. Your support and participation in this effort is invited. For further information contact the Endowed Chair of Polish and Polish American Studies [(860) 832-2814] or the Vice President for Institutional Development [(860) 832-1765], Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT 06050-4010.

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