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The Chief Rabbi's View on Jews and Poland

An interview with Rabbi Michael Schudrich

- *At least twenty thousand Jews live in Poland. The two leading organizations, the Union of Jewish Communities and the Cultural and Social Association of Jews, each have about two thousand members.*
- *The subject of Jews and Poland involves three interrelated matters. The first concerns what is currently happening to the Jews living in Poland. The second is Poland's Jewish heritage, including its physical remnants: cemeteries, synagogues, communal and private property. The third has to do with the nature of Polish- Jewish relations.*
- *Poland is still in a major state of flux. Since 1989, official Poland has wanted to reexamine its relations with the Jews. The main reasons for this are the teachings of Pope John Paul II, Poland's admiration for the United States, and the rejection among the younger generation of everything their parents and grandparents stood for.*
- *Although the main government force, the Law and Justice Party, is not anti- Semitic, the coalition now contains an anti-Semitic party, the Polish Families League, whose leader, Roman Giertych, is deputy prime minister and minister of education. This poses many dilemmas for the Jewish community, and Israel is boycotting Giertych.*

"The subject of Jews and Poland involves three interrelated matters. The first concerns what is currently happening to the Jews living in Poland. The second is Poland's Jewish heritage, including its physical remnants: cemeteries, synagogues, communal and private property. The third has to do with the nature of Polish-Jewish relations."

Rabbi Michael Schudrich began working in Poland in 1990. He has been Rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz since 2000, and since 2004 has also served as Chief Rabbi of Poland. As often happens, a particular incident made his name internationally known. On a Shabbat at the end of May 2006, he was punched and pepper-sprayed by an attacker in a Warsaw street who shouted "Poland for the Poles." Nevertheless, Schudrich does not feel fearful in Poland.

Although his is not a Polish state title, he is de facto recognized by the government as the senior religious representative of Polish Jewry. Schudrich remarks: "When it is appropriate, the government invites me as 'clergy' - that is, a minority theologian. This includes the inauguration of a new president and the first meeting of the new Sejm - parliament."

How Many Jews Are There?

He observes: "It is impossible to tell how many Jews there are in Poland. It leads to the question: who is a Jew in Poland? The best answer is that it is somebody who considers himself Jewish, or whom others see as such."

"There are many more Poles with Jewish roots left in Poland than anyone imagined at the time the communists ruled. I had been to Poland several times in the seventies and eighties and spent the summer of 1979 in Krakow studying Polish at the Jagellonian University. I met there some Jews of my age, so I knew there were not only elderly Jews there."

"When I started to work in Poland in 1990, I regularly encountered survivors who mentioned that they had met a family member or a childhood friend, adding that these were the only Jews in Poland. Putting these remarks together it was clear there were quite some Jews still."

Schudrich comments: "It is my conviction that the young people there deserve our attention. They were denied information by their parents and grandparents, persecuted by their own government, while the Jewish world was unaware that they existed."

Jewish Organizations

"My estimate is that there are at least twenty thousand Jews in Poland. There are two leading organizations. The Union of Jewish Communities is the umbrella body of eight Jewish communities. Warsaw with five hundred members is the largest followed by Wroclaw, Lodz, and Krakow. The others are Katowice, Szczecin, Legnica, and Bielsko Biala. Together these have about two thousand members. Fifty adult members is the minimum required by the union for a registered community. The smaller ones like Gdansk, Poznan, and Lublin are affiliate branches. Jews who live where there is no community can become members of the nearest one."

"After the war, Poland received parts of eastern Germany in compensation for its own lost eastern lands. The Poles expelled the Germans living there. Thus their houses stood empty. Returning Jews were sent to western Poland where this housing was available. That means relatively many Jews went to towns such as Wroclaw and

Szczecin. It is ironic that Jews, whose homes were stolen by others, ended up living in stolen homes.

"The second important Jewish organization is the Cultural and Social Association of Jews. It is a cultural body and also has about two thousand members. There is some overlap in membership with the Union of Jewish Communities. It originally was anti-religious and anti-Zionist; by now it is rather ambivalent on religion and no longer anti-Zionist.

"There are also some smaller organizations such as the Polish Union of Jewish Students and an Association of the Children of the Holocaust, who are child survivors. Maybe some day we will have an association of the second generation of the Holocaust. In Poland almost all Jews are either Holocaust survivors or their descendants. There is an argument about whether those who fled to the Soviet Union before 2 September 1939 are survivors or not. Psychologically, however, they are all survivors or their descendants.

"There is a Jewish hotline for those to contact who think they are Jewish. It is independent of the community, although all involved are community members. Initially there were many calls. Now these have petered out and the hotline is only open a few hours per week.

"The Jewish community receives funding from the AJDC [Joint] for helping the elderly, and also a small amount for education. The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation funds education directly, which means the Lauder Morasha School, the only Jewish school in Warsaw, and summer and winter camps. The Tad Taube Foundation, run by a donor who left Krakow at a young age, also supports activities. Furthermore, some money is obtained from the restitution of communal property, which is a slow process. The AJDC and the Jewish Agency are the two foreign Jewish organizations that have offices in Poland."

Schudrich defines Polish Jewry as "a tiny community struggling with reasserting its Jewish identity and with the historic responsibility of preserving a glorious past." He says that if Polish politics do not deteriorate too much, and the economy keeps up, the community will grow both in quantity and in quality even if there are some departures for Israel. "There is a younger generation now that is learning, and so are adults."

The Holocaust

Referring to Poland's postwar history, Schudrich remarks: "Before 1939 there were approximately 3.5 million Jews in the country. Ninety percent of these had been murdered by the end of 1944. This left 350,000 Jews in Poland after World War II. Such a figure, on today's basis, would have represented Europe's third largest Jewish community after France and Ukraine. The exodus of almost all Jews from Poland took

place in stages. After the war, the vast majority of survivors left for several reasons, often more than one.

"Many did not want to live in a communist country. Others did not wish to rebuild their lives in the places where their families were murdered. Yet others wanted to go to Palestine, which soon became Israel. Some of the survivors had relatives abroad. The dominant factor, however, was the country's major anti-Semitism. Jews incurred sometimes lethal risks. Postwar Poland was a chaotic country in which communists and nationalists fought each other.

"Estimates are that in the first years after the war, 1,500 to 2,000 Jews were killed by Poles. The best-known case is the Kielce pogrom on 4 July 1946 in which forty-two Jews were brutally murdered. Until today the debate in Poland continues whether the murderers were leftists or rightists. At the recent sixtieth anniversary of the pogrom, I remarked that from the perspective of the Jews it did not matter which Poles were the killers. The survivors wanted to live in a place where there was no risk of such atrocities."

Emigration and Expulsion

"After the war, the surviving Jews tried to restart a community, which could even be described as vibrant. By 1948, however, many had left. There was a great exodus again in 1956. Then there was a major emigration, which one might as well call an expulsion of Jews, in 1968-1969. Thereafter almost all Jews who decided to stay in Poland stopped being Jewish.

"This meant one did not tell one's children that one was Jewish. We don't know how many behaved so, but estimates are that there were tens of thousands. Most concealed even from their families that they were Jewish. This situation continued until after 1989, when the communist system collapsed. For outsiders, it is difficult to understand that the demise of communism led not only to economic and political turmoil but also to social upheaval. Suddenly taboo questions could be asked.

"What makes people in the postwar generations think they probably have Jewish roots without anybody telling them? One frequent cause is that they start wondering why one of their parents, or grandparents, has no living relatives. Although many Poles were killed by the Germans, to wipe out an entire non-Jewish Polish family was almost unheard of. The story of the surviving Jew who said that he had tens of relatives before the war, and only he and perhaps one or two others survived, was a very common one."

The Way Back

"I have to stress that I am in Poland not in the role of a historian or a social scientist but as a rabbi. Regularly young people come to see me who say: 'I think I am Jewish. My mother has no living relatives, however remote.' This is a dramatic way to realize the impact of what has happened.

"Since 1989, thousands of Poles have discovered their Jewish roots. They come in two broad categories: those who truly did not know and those who knew but considered it a subject one does not talk about in polite company. What is common to the two categories is that those born after 1938 had no Jewish education whatsoever. It does not matter whether they came from a religious family or not. The only ones having had Jewish education are some of the older ones. Those coming from the former Soviet Union are in an even worse situation since no open Jewish education was permitted there since 1917.

"Relating individual stories seems the best way to convey what is happening with those who rediscover their roots. A few years ago a successful lawyer, around sixty years old, visited me. He had shortly before heard from his eighty-nine-year-old mother that she was Jewish. He was perplexed and asked her why she had not told him in the past fifty years. She replied: 'I never had the occasion.'

"This phenomenon cannot be described as assimilation but has to be seen as an expression of fear. A person could not expect much good out of admitting that he or she was Jewish. From 1939 to 1989, a Jew could not feel safe in Poland."

Fear Remains

"How did these people's forebears hide their Jewishness? Some managed to get papers as a non-Jew during the war. Others survived the camps. After they returned they realized that if they wanted to stay in Poland, for whatever reason, it would be a bad idea to be identified as a Jew. This changed only in 1989 with the fall of communism."

Schudrich tells another story that occurred in the mid- 1990s. "The grandmother of a seventeen-year-old girl was killed in a car accident. As her parents were on vacation, the girl began with the preparations for the funeral. She found papers with her grandmother's real last name, which sounded very Jewish. She then asked her mother whether grandma was Jewish, which the mother denied.

"Afterward she asked her mother's sister, who answered that the grandmother was once Jewish. After being confronted with this, the mother admitted that her mother was Jewish. She added: 'Don't tell your father, my husband, he does not know.' All this happened several years after the fall of communism. It shows that fear does not suddenly vanish after the crumbling of a totalitarian system."

From Skinhead to Covered Head

Schudrich relates a third case. "A young couple met at high school, fell in love, and got married young. They soon had a baby. At the age of twenty, the wife discovered that she was Jewish. A second baby was on its way. Three years later she decided that she wanted to do something Jewish. Every Friday night, she prepared a Shabbat meal. Her husband went along with it, but his parents became very upset. They told him not to let his wife do this.

"The more the parents pushed the son, the more he supported his wife. Finally, the parents admitted why they were so opposed to doing Jewish things. They were both hidden Jews. The marriage of the young couple was thus that of two Jews, who have two Jewish children and who are now active Orthodox members of the Warsaw Jewish community.

"When these young people fell in love they were both skinheads. One might write a book: *From Skinhead to Covered Head*. The young man now wants to become a Jewish ritual slaughterer. He has three brothers, one of whom is a twin. This brother, also a skinhead, with whom he is in close contact, did not want to come to the Jewish wedding. He could not confront the fact that his brother was doing something publicly Jewish.

"Since then, most family members have been participating in various Jewish programs. One Friday night the twin brother could not reach his brother on the cell phone. He came to the synagogue to see whether he was there. He was not, but we were short of one person for the *minyan*, the religious quorum of ten men for collective prayers. I asked him whether he would be willing to stay in the synagogue to help out. He did. Does that make him Jewish? This story also illustrates why speaking about the number of Jews in Poland is so problematic.

"During the second intifada, we held a demonstration in favor of Israel. The young people present were asking themselves what would happen if they were seen on television and identified as Jews. There were cases where their parents were still concealing their Jewishness and pressuring their children not to do something publicly Jewish. Similarly, the granddaughter of the president of the Senate had her bat mitzvah a few years ago. He is not Jewish, but his wife is, and he did not want that to be publicly known. The grandparents pressured her not to hold the ceremony. The girl insisted."

The Current Rebuilding of Community Life

"A person who thinks about living a Jewish life in Poland can now find some of the basic elements of Judaism there. Community life has strengthened in recent years. In the

Warsaw synagogue there are daily collective prayers for all three services. There are also daily Talmud studies. There is a prekindergarten to ninth-grade school paid for by the Lauder Foundation. There is a youth group for ages twelve to fifteen, and one from sixteen years up as well as a university group. There is adult education. The number of women who regularly visit the *mikveh* [ritual bath] has gone up from two to over ten. We publish a monthly magazine, *Midrash*, as well as a community newsletter at irregular times. There is also a ritual slaughterer in Warsaw and a kosher store.

"In Lodz there is a communal prayer service every morning. Krakow, Katowice, Wroclaw, Legnica, and Szczecin have services on Shabbat and holidays. There are sometimes services in Poznan and Gdansk, which is a new development.

"Ritual slaughter has become very competitive. Many groups want to undertake it. Since Poland is now part of the European Union, meat slaughtered there can be sent all over Europe. Labor costs in Poland are low. Also, it seems that for an unknown reason a high percentage of cattle ritually slaughtered meet the highest religious demands of glatt kashrut."

The Jewish Heritage

"Preserving the Jewish heritage is a major task for a small community. The most pressing issues concern Jewish cemeteries, of which there are at least 1,400 in Poland. In our tradition, these maintain their holiness. Even though we do our best, preserving them all is a task beyond our capabilities.

"There are also mass graves and death camps. Today, many mass graves are still unmarked because they are unknown. More to the east, the Jews were killed by Einsatzgruppen in the forests. The Jews of Poland were murdered through starvation and disease in ghettos or in death camps.

"Often, though, the Germans killed tens or hundreds of Jews when they arrived to frighten the others. On the way to death camps, they would often murder the very sick somewhere. We now have the last opportunity to identify their graves. There are no Jewish witnesses to a mass grave, because no one survived. Those who committed the mass murder live elsewhere and don't talk.

"There is often, though, an anecdotal source. Young children often watched murders from a distance. They were not as smart as adults who stayed away. We regularly get information from people who tell us that before they die, they want us to know that Jews are buried in a certain place. We have not dealt with this in a systematic way, but I want to give more attention to it in future. We can then pay some tribute to those who were murdered during the war and make sure that their physical remains are properly protected.

"What happens more frequently with mass graves, and sometimes even with cemeteries, is that somebody starts digging somewhere and finds bones. We intervene to prevent desecrations of prewar cemeteries and mass graves. Such discoveries must have occurred under the communist regime as well, but then people were afraid to tell anybody. We now get calls both from individuals and the police to tell us about such finds. We bury these bones in the nearest Jewish cemetery."

Polish-Jewish Relations

"Poland is still in a major state of flux. I do not particularly deal with current Polish-Jewish relations, but am involved with them here and there. Since 1989, official Poland has wanted to reexamine its relations with the Jews. There are three reasons for this. The first is the teachings of Pope John Paul II, which had a huge impact both on Poland and the Catholic Church. One might say he did more to fight anti-Semitism than any other human being in the past two thousand years. To be evenhanded, one also has to say that the Church was the major force promoting this hatred during that period.

"Although many in the Polish Catholic Church listened to the Pope's teachings, not all did. A crucial test came about five years ago with the Jedwabne case. For a long time the Poles had been told that they were solely victims. It has only become widely known in recent years that during the war there were horrible murders of Jews initiated and executed by Poles.

"The most publicized case is the mass murder of perhaps as many as 1,500 Jews in Jedwabne, a small northeastern village, on 10 July 1941. It has been described in the book *Neighbors* by the American historian Jan Gross and in a movie by Agnieszka Arnold. These Jews were murdered in the cruelest ways not by professional German killers who came from far. The killers were dozens if not hundreds of their Polish neighbors, who knew them well. The hundreds of Jews initially surviving were burned alive in a barn by Poles."

A Moving Response

"The response to these revelations by many in the country was moving. Numerous people were willing to change the notion that Poles had always been victims. They realized that some had been murderers out of their own initiative. The response of the Catholic Church was much less forthcoming. Although part of the Catholic hierarchy has changed its views, another part is still anti-Semitic. The situation is better than before World War II when over 90 percent were so, at a time when that was normal in the Catholic Church. The process of banning this legacy, which started in Europe in the 1960s, began in Poland only with the fall of communism in 1989.

"A second reason for the change was Poland's admiration for the United States, even if it has declined in the last three years because of the Iraq war. Many Poles thought that, if they wanted to emulate the United States, they could not be anti-Semites because that was not politically correct there.

"A third reason is more speculative. Among the younger generation there is a rejection of everything their parents and grandparents stood for. They believe the opposite of the older generation, which was communist and anti-Semitic. Besides being a fad, there is a growing understanding that the Jews were part of the Polish landscape and that the Germans killed them, to some extent with Polish collaboration. This slow and painful process also leads to a feeling of obligation to perpetuate Jewish memory."

The Current Government

"The 2005 parliamentary elections were won by the Law and Justice Party, which is right of center but not anti-Semitic. It did not obtain a majority. A few percent of their votes came from listeners of Radio Maria, which is Catholic and virulently anti-Semitic. The party felt they owed them a debt and gave them exclusive interviews and scoops, which was both unnecessary and unacceptable. At the same time, these politicians were pro-Israeli and helpful on Jewish issues. So here we are confronted with people who are not anti-Semites, but who help them.

"The situation got worse in May 2006. The Law and Justice Party wanted to end their minority-government status. They entered into a coalition with an extreme-Left as well as an extreme-Right party. The latter is called the Polish Families League, which is the same name as that of a prewar anti-Semitic party. They were proud that their predecessors had instigated a *numerus clausus* for Jews at Polish universities and that those Jews who were admitted had to sit in the back of the lecture hall.

"To make matters worse Roman Giertych, the party's leader, became deputy prime minister and minister of education. The anti-Semites have thus been empowered. Many Poles want them out of the government. Large numbers of high school students have signed a petition against Giertych.

"This situation creates many dilemmas for a small Jewish community. One is always inclined to stay out of internal Polish political debates. The Israeli ambassador, David Peleg, said on television that Israel would be boycotting Giertych. The television thereafter approached me. I could not say 'No comment' in such a situation. I supported the ambassador because he was right."

Interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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New York-born rabbi Michael Schudrich served as Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Japan from 1983 to 1989. He began working in Poland in 1990 on behalf of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. He has been Rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz since 2000 and since 2004 has also served as Chief Rabbi of Poland.

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