

Łukasz Krzyżanowski

Why is the Holocaust part of the history of everyone living in Poland today?

The victims of the Holocaust included more than three million Jews who were citizens of Poland. Nazi persecution – carried out not only by Germans but also by Austrians and local collaborators of various nationalities, including Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Poles – struck Jews with particular severity. It would be more accurate to say: those whom Nazi law and Nazi perpetrators classified as Jews. The degree to which victims identified with Jewish culture or religion had no relevance whatsoever. Among those murdered during the Holocaust as Jews were even Christians, including the Discalced Carmelite nun beatified in 1987, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, better known as the German philosopher and phenomenologist Edith Stein. She died in the same gas chamber as devout Hasidim, as well as non-believers who considered themselves Poles, Germans, or French – all of them ended up there because racist ideology deemed that “Jewish” blood flowed in their veins. As members of the so-called “Jewish race”, supposedly endangering German “Aryans”, they were condemned to death. Only by chance did individuals whose absence would be unimaginable for Polish culture and scholarship escape death in the Holocaust. Julian Tuwim (who stayed abroad; his mother was killed), Stefania Grodzieńska and Ludwik Hirsztfeld (both survived thanks to escaping the Warsaw ghetto), Aleksander Bardini and Stanisław Lem (both imprisoned in the Lwów ghetto and surviving in hiding), Tadeusz Różewicz (who survived as a Home Army partisan) – the list could go on endlessly.

It is also true that long before Nazi ideology emerged, many of those classified as Jews had already been treated as outsiders. Many had faced hostility and rejection from their Polish – that is, Christian – fellow citizens even before the war. At that time, too, they were seen as alien. This sense of otherness and exclusion had a much longer history than the German occupation or Nazi propaganda. The pre-war Polish state likewise did not consider some of its citizens full members of the national community. One example is the distrust shown by the Polish (Christian) military command toward its Jewish subordinates – rank-and-file soldiers and officers – during the Polish–Bolshevik War. Around five thousand were placed by the Polish authorities in an internment camp in Jabłonna near Warsaw in August 1920, during the Battle of Warsaw. Among those interned were even former Legionnaires.¹ The history of the interwar period also offers many cases of more “prosaic”, everyday discrimination. Jewish citizens were practically barred from higher positions in the state administration, police, and army. It is worth recalling the obstacles faced by members of the Jewish minority who sought higher education in the Second Polish Republic – in this case, universities, rather than the state, were the discriminating institutions. Municipal authorities also treated Jews and Christians unequally in matters such as access to health care or anti-unemployment programs – even in cities governed by socialists in the interwar years.² Antipathy and even hostility toward Jewish citizens of Poland fuelled the political life of the Second Polish Republic from its very beginning.³

Before the Second World War, Poland was a poor country marked by vast economic inequalities, where most citizens lived in extremely difficult conditions. At the same time, it was extraordinarily rich when viewed through the diversity of the people who lived there – their cultures, religions, and languages. Alongside Polish, one could hear Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and German on the streets of many cities. Jews were the only minority present throughout the entire country, though in uneven proportions. Poland had the second-largest Jewish population in the world (after the United States). Before 1939, Jews lived in every city and town. They constituted a significant part of the populations of Warsaw, Łódź, and Lwów (around one third), and Kraków and Vilnius (around one quarter). In many smaller localities their share was even greater⁴, reaching 70, 80, or even

¹ Ch. Henschel, *Jeder Bürger Soldat. Juden und das polnische Militär (1918-1939)*, Göttingen 2024, pp. 168-169.

² Ł. Krzyżanowski, *Dom, którego nie było. Powroty ucalałych do powojennego miasta*, Wołowiec 2018, p. 50.

³ P. Brykczyński, *Gotowi na przemoc. Mord, antysemityzm i demokracja w międzywojennej Polsce*, Warszawa 2017.

⁴ B. Porter-Szűcs, *Całkiem zwyczajny kraj. Historia Polski bez martyrologii*, Warszawa 2021 (electronic version).



90 percent (as in Izbica Lubelska). Regardless of the widespread antisemitic mood in Polish society at the time, it is impossible to deny that Jewish residents played a decisive role in shaping pre-war Poland. Contrary to nationalists who denied Jews the right to Polishness and often even to citizenship, Jewish citizens, together with Christian citizens (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants), made up the society of the Second Republic. As in any diverse society, coexistence did not occur without tensions, frictions, or violence. In daily life, Jewish and Christian residents were separated by religious, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Yet in every city of the Second Polish Republic, and in many villages as well, Polish Christians and Polish Jews encountered one another daily. Living side by side fostered economic, professional, school, and neighborhood interactions.

All residents of pre-war Poland – regardless of political views – lived in a society that was multicultural and multilingual. Bilingualism, or growing up with two or even three languages, was far more common in Poland before the war than it is today. At the same time, most Jewish children, who often spoke Yiddish at home, attended Polish-language schools where instruction was conducted exclusively in Polish and where Christian children also studied.⁵ Most schoolchildren in the Second Polish Republic therefore experienced daily contact with children who practiced a different religion and celebrated different holidays. This was an experience much more common in Poland ninety years ago than it is now.

The extraordinarily diverse society of the Second Polish Republic came to an end with the Second World War, the subsequent border changes and population transfers, and also – indeed perhaps above all – the Holocaust. It is estimated that more than 90 percent of Polish Jews did not survive the Nazi genocide. Apart from the unimaginable human tragedy, the Holocaust was a process that changed Poland and its society forever. Even if we assume that 10 percent of pre-war Polish citizens who were Jews survived (a figure that appears significantly inflated for most regions), this does not mean that one in ten Jewish residents returned to their pre-war homes. After the Holocaust, Jews did not return to many Polish towns and cities, especially in the provinces, and even where they did appear, it was usually only briefly. The immediate post-war period was extremely dangerous, particularly for returning Jews. According to the latest research, from mid-1944 to the end of 1947 approximately 1,100 Jews were murdered in the liberated territories of Poland.⁶ Many of these crimes were accompanied by robbery. There is no doubt, however, that this was violence directed specifically at Jews. It cannot be explained away as ordinary crime, post-war chaos, or the political struggle between Communists and the anti-Communist underground. Two decades of research into post-war anti-Jewish violence have allowed such interpretations to be ruled out beyond any doubt.⁷

The murder of more than three million Polish citizens of Jewish identity by the Nazis and their helpers, and the fact that most of the few survivors either did not return or left again in the 1940s (with further departures after 1956 and after March 1968), explains why Polish society today is far less diverse than it was before the war. Because of the extermination of Jewish residents nearly ninety years ago, we now live in a society in which cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity is not the norm. We live in a society in which ten percent of the pre-war citizenry who lived in what is now Poland have no continuation in today's generations. It is no exaggeration to say that we live in a completely different country – and this change cannot be attributed to modernization or other civilizational processes.

Of course, as a result of various migrations, and especially the arrival of refugees from Ukraine after 24 February 2022, other languages can once again be heard in Polish cities – primarily Ukrainian, but also Russian. Yet this is a relatively new phenomenon, and many of these people are staying only temporarily. The history of the Holocaust has left a mark even on the situation of today's refugees in Poland. They arrive in a country almost

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ J. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944-1947*, Warszawa 2021.

⁷ M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944-1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Kraków 2012; J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2018; J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Kocia muzyka. Historia chóralna pogromu krakowskiego*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2024; Ł. Krzyżanowski, *Dom, którego nie było...*

entirely devoid of minorities, in a society where difference (in language, culture, religion, even clothing) is not ordinary but instead attracts attention.

The Holocaust also left a tangible mark on many towns and cities, especially in what is now central and eastern Poland. Localities that before the war functioned as centers of economic and cultural life are now desolate. Of course, people leave the provinces for large cities in countries unaffected by genocide as well, but many places in Poland never recovered from the Holocaust. This is especially visible in smaller towns and medium-sized cities: a simple walk reveals pre-war urban houses. If one looks closely, traces of former prosperity become visible. Many of these buildings are deteriorating, losing cornices and balconies, or collapsing entirely. Before the war, many belonged to Polish citizens who were Jews. During the German occupation, all Jewish owners were stripped of their property – in Nazi-occupied Poland, Jews could not legally own real estate, and their property was confiscated. Most of the Jewish owners were murdered, and the few survivors or their heirs never regained control of their property. For decades, municipal administrations managed these buildings. Aware of their unclear ownership status, they hesitated to carry out major renovations. In this way, the Holocaust also helps explain the poor condition of many buildings still standing today, often in the centers of Polish towns and cities.

It is obvious that no single factor can explain everything, yet the Holocaust was a process that transformed Polish society so profoundly that its traces can be seen everywhere in today's Poland. We live in a society fundamentally reshaped in the twentieth century, and perhaps the greatest of these changes was the murder, between 1939 and 1945, of more than three million Polish citizens who were Jews and who before the war lived in every town and city in Poland. As a result of this slaughter, many Polish localities lost the diversity that had shaped their development for centuries. We live in a society literally reshaped by genocide, and thus its history is also part of the history of Poland. In this sense, remembering the extermination of Jewish fellow residents is a duty of everyone living in Poland today – regardless of whether their ancestors practiced Judaism or not. The contemporary Polish state likewise has an obligation to remember the extermination of its Jewish citizens – members of a community that for centuries co-created the country and its society – no less than it remembers the tragedies of its Christian citizens.