

COMMENTS ON EDYTA GAWRON, “JEWISH STUDIES IN POSTWAR POLAND”

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Edyta Gawron’s essay offers a succinct and very useful synopsis of the state of Jewish studies in Poland after the Second World War. My comments on the essay are primarily questions, spurred by the interesting history she presents.

Gawron’s essay clearly shows how the war and the Holocaust produced a fundamental rupture in the long history of Jewish studies in Poland. A vibrant, multi-faceted world of Jewish scholarship was almost fully destroyed. The rupture with the past was deepened by the early postwar emigration, which brought to a halt the multifarious efforts at rebuilding Jewish institutions undertaken at the end of the war. Between 1949 and the late 1970s, Jewish studies almost completely disappeared.

Given this postwar history of rupture, the question of intellectual genealogy seems all the more pressing. Where did the intellectual impulses for the revival of Jewish studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s come from? It would be interesting to know more about how the new groups of scholars came to their topics, methodologies, and theoretical approaches, and how their choices were linked to more general trends in Polish scholarship, be it in history, philosophy, literature, or other fields. Broader social trends also seem relevant here, especially the changing attitude towards Jews within the Catholic Church, briefly alluded to in the quotation by Konstanty Gebert. Similarly, it would be interesting to know how much influence older and imported traditions had on the revival of Jewish studies in Poland. To what extent were long-forgotten “indigenous” traditions recovered and revived? To what extent did Polish scholars borrow from “foreign” models of Jewish studies scholarship? The links with scholars in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel seem especially relevant here.

The Jewish Historical Institute was the sole prewar Jewish academic institution to be successfully revived during the postwar period. This makes its postwar history especially interesting. It also begs a number of questions, including some of a political nature. Why was the ŻIH tolerated by successive postwar governments? In particular, how did it manage to survive after 1968, when Jewish topics were virtually banned? What did it have to do to win toleration? Presumably, its survival was linked to the avoidance of specific topics and/or kinds of scholarly activities, but one would like to know more. It would also be helpful to know more about its role in the revival of Jewish studies in Poland. To what extent did the Institute represent a point of continuity with the intellectual traditions of prewar Jewish studies, especially those represented by the Main Judaic Library and the Institute of Jewish Studies, and with the scholarly work carried out in the Warsaw ghetto? Did its tacit toleration by the Communist government influence how younger

generations of scholars viewed it and did this represent a limit on its influence after the 1970s?

During the interwar period, historical scholarship on Jewish topics in Poland was intimately linked to debates within the Polish Jewish community, especially debates about the relationship between Jewishness and Polishness. Since most scholars were themselves Jewish, the relationship between scholarship and life was close. The situation today is markedly different. The Holocaust destroyed Poland's large, vibrant, and contentious Jewish community. There are no contemporary equivalents to the great political and intellectual debates that rocked the Jewish community during the interwar years. Although Poles of Jewish background were central to the revival of Jewish studies in Poland—indeed, the desire to know more about one's own background was a key animating concern—most Jewish studies scholars working in Poland today are not themselves Jewish, be it in a religious, cultural, or familial sense. How do these factors—the identity of the scholars and the different cultural and political background against which they work—influence the kinds of scholarship produced in Poland today? Is Jewish studies today more “antiquarian” because of the loss of a vital connection to a large Jewish community? And how do contemporary social, political, and economic issues influence scholarship? Clearly, one cannot draw easy conclusions about the relationship between scholarship and life. Nonetheless, the questions are worth posing. We all write from the standpoint of “someplace,” and that someplace includes our familial and communal backgrounds. This might be especially the case in a country like Poland, with its difficult history of Polish-Jewish relations.

As Gawron's essay demonstrates, Jewish studies in Poland have undergone an incredible revival in the last twenty years and especially since 2000. The number of academic departments, institutes, and undergraduate and graduate programs suggests a promising future. I look forward to seeing what this future will bring.