

REVIEW

Unbequeme Wahrheiten. Polen und sein Verhältnis zu den Juden, hrsg. von Barbara Engelking und Helga Hirsch, Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2008, pp. 309

The volume *Troublesome Truths. Poland and its Relationship with the Jews*, edited by the Polish Holocaust researcher Barbara Engelking and the German journalist Helga Hirsch, former Poland correspondent of the weekly magazine *Zeit*, was published 40 years after the last expulsion of Jews from Poland in 1968, an event which put an end to the long common Polish-Jewish history. Today, in Poland live only approximately 12,000–15,000 persons who consider themselves as Jews and are now rediscovering their familiar, cultural or religious roots. But there are still conflicts and controversies which trouble the mutual relations between the Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of Poland.

After 1968, for many years, issues connected to Jews were scarcely audible within the Polish collective memory and society, there seemed to be no interest whatsoever and Jewish topics were not written about. Instead, myths and prejudices thrived and populated the minds. Poland, previously home to the biggest Jewish community in Europe, has long been regarded as a country devoid of Jews but still anti-Semitic. The self-image of Poles as innocent victims of history and patriotic Roman Catholics contrasted with their stereotype collective notion of Jews as traitors and communists (“Żydo-Komuna”), as articulated even by Andrzej Szczypiorski in his essay on “Poles and Jews” for the Parisian *Kultura* in 1979. The post-World War II coexistence between Jews and Poles was repeatedly disturbed by pogroms (such as in Kielce in 1946 and elsewhere), the anti-Semitic climate during the Stalin era, the anti-Jewish campaigns in 1956/1957 and 1968 and forced mass emigration of so-called Polish citizens “of Jewish origin.” The fact that Poles were not only saviors of the Jews and victims of the Nazis but also perpetrators who murdered Jews or denounced them to the German occupants was also taboo in Poland.

From time to time open conflicts and controversies with an international echo broke out between Jews and Poles, such as for instance on the issue of the Carmelite cloister and crosses in Oświęcim (Auschwitz) in 1998. The biggest shock to shake the country, though, too place after the historian Jan Tomasz Gross’s book revealed the history of the pogrom in the small Polish town of Jedwabne (1941) in 2000/2001. The furious debates over the issue were documented in the periodical *Transodra* in 2001, and the editors quote from it.

The book, documenting the intellectual climate in Poland, is divided into five thematic sections which are preceded by a short introduction: I. Question of Partial Responsibility; II. Incidents in the Ghetto of Warsaw; III. Auschwitz and the Consciousness of the Holocaust; IV. We from Jedwabne; V. Fear – Anti-Semitism after the War. The book includes German translations of 24 articles by Polish authors

also well known abroad, such as Cardinal Józef Glemp and the priest Stanisław Musiał, among them a number of the landmark essays which have appeared in Poland since 1987, such as Hanna Świda-Ziomba's "The Shame of Indifference" (from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 17, 1998) or Stanisław Krajewski's "Auschwitz as a Challenge" (from *Midrasz*, April 1997) and others, starting with Jan Błoński's famous article in the Catholic *Tygodnik Powszechny*, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," of January 11, 1987. Błoński followed here Czesław Miłosz' lyrical analysis of the Polish attitude towards the Jews as expressed as early as 1943 [sic!] in his poems "The Poor Christian sees the Ghetto" and "Campo dei fiori," and initiated a controversial debate in Poland which was echoed abroad and documented in *'My Brother's Keeper?' Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, edited by Anthony Polonsky in 1990. Engelking and Hirsch, by the way, do not list this book in their bibliography.

The book *Troublesome Truths* is an important directory and guide through the labyrinth of Polish-Jewish relations with their many ups and downs, ending with the controversy about the recently published second book by Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear*, telling of post-war Polish anti-Semitism. German readers can thus learn a lot about their Polish neighbors' problems with their history, reminding them at times of their own. This book, including a glossary and a bibliography, is an appeal to Poles "to stop considering anti-Semitism as folklore" and to the Catholic Church to stop tolerating an institution within its own walls, preaching hatred towards Jews, like the Polish Catholic Radio Maryja. The volume was published some months before the German Pope Benedict XVI rehabilitated the notorious anti-Semitic Pius Brotherhood. It is therefore highly relevant not only on the two sides of the Oder-Neisse border.

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