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Culture section

Fashion for judaica

Schmonces on the Roof

Until now there have never been so many events on the subject of Jews organised in Poland. The problem is that Jewish culture often comes down to several stereotypes. And often, unfortunately, kitschy.

by Dorota Szwarcman

The results of the second round of research on anti-Semitism, led by prof. Ireneusz Krzemiński (the first round was conducted in 1992), have just been announced. It turns out that the number of anti-Semites in Poland substantially increased over the last 10 years, which can be connected with the disclosure of facts about the Jedwabne massacre. At the same time, however, anti-Semitic behaviour was much more frequent.

This polarization is already visible. Anti-Jewish statements and publications are a permanent element of Polish social life, but at the same time an abundance of events related to Jewish culture was hosted in the past few years. Not only do we now have the distinguished Cracow Festival (14 editions until now) and the Jewish Book Days in Warsaw organised by the "Midrasz" monthly, but also "Singer's Warsaw", which is a new festival of Jewish Culture, as well as *simcha* in Wrocław, *kvitlech* in Leżajsk and Jewish Culture Days in Będzin, Toruń, Słupsk, Rzeszów, Tarnów, Gdańsk and Sopot. Not to mention the Łódź Festival of Dialogue of Four Cultures (Jewish, German, Russian and Polish) or the Włodawa Festival of Three Cultures (this time in terms of religion: Orthodox, Jewish and Catholic). This year Łódź also celebrated the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Ghetto Litzmannstadt with great pomp and ceremony, similar to the celebrations of the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. Just like in previous years, thousands of people attended the "Shalom on Szeroka Street" concert this year. But also thousands of Łódź citizens accompanied the participants of the Ghetto Survivors March from the Jewish Cemetery to Radegast Station, where the last transport of Lodzer Jews left 60 years ago.

Apart from mass events, also smaller, yet long-term ventures have been launched in order to make many Polish communities aware of their towns' partly Jewish past – e.g. in Lublin (establishing the "Grodzka Gate" centre) or Sejny (the Borderland Foundation), as

well as in Łódź (the “Tygiel Kultury” periodical) or Olsztyn (the “Borussia” periodical). There has also been more extensive literature on the subject.

Filling the emptiness

It was inevitable. For many years the disappearance of an entire nation from areas where it once constituted a substantial proportion of population was a barely healed wound. Those who died in the war have been forgotten too easily. Yet those who survived either migrated or decided to conceal their identities, as if the occupation had never ended (and so it was, in a sense). The majority of these survivors were forced to leave the country as a result of the Polish political crisis in March 1968, when the communist authorities blamed student riots on "Zionists" and used this affair as a pretext to launch a larger anti-Semitic campaign. Jews became a taboo subject.

After the shift of power in 1989, when the society emerged from the “hibernation” of the communist regime, all spectres of the interwar period reappeared naturally. Post-war resentments and fears that “they will return and buy us out” also gained their momentum. But at the same time many people, in search of their own roots, started to gather information about their former neighbours. Because they knew practically nothing about them.

“Not until I read “The Merchant of Lodz” by Adolf Rudnicki in the late 1960s did I realise that I had been living on an enormous cemetery of the Łódź Jewish community”, admits Joanna Szczęsna, born and brought up in the district of Bałuty in Łódź, in her essay on the Ghetto Litzmannstadt (“Gazeta Świąteczna” daily, 28.08.2004). For over 25 years Anna Ordyczyńska, who comes from the same town as the famous *tzadik* Elimelech Weisblum of Litzhensk (Polish: Leżajsk) had no idea that Jews played such an important role in Leżajsk, where out of approximately 5000 citizens before the war 3000 were Jewish, 1500 Polish and 500 Ukrainian. On her website which is devoted to the Jews from Leżajsk she points out that her mother-in-law, who grew up with Jewish children, became a great source of information for her: “She and her brother Marian were the only ones in town who were able to speak Yiddish”.

The situation was similar in larger towns. According to Marcin Skrzypek from the “Grodzka Gate” centre in Lublin: “Half of Lublin’s inhabitants in the mid-19th century were Jews. Polish and Jewish parts of Lublin lived separate lives and never met. Nothing endured. The chaos and emptiness on the city map say it all. One way of handling this emptiness is talking about the past”.

Recalling Łódź from the pre-war period, where the Jewish, German and Polish communities also lived side by side, yet separately, Arnold Mostowicz adds: “The most

vibrant intercultural relations were among the city's elite and between children". Children and youth, devoid of prejudice, as well as the elite, devoid of complexes – these groups now show interest in Jewish culture. And maybe now that Jews are no longer present on Polish land, Poles will learn about them more than ever before.



Everyone wants to make money

Under the Internet announcement for discussion on a provocatively expressed subject: "What do Poles need Jewish culture for?", which took place during the Lublin Science Festival in September, someone added an unfriendly, but sober comment: "I say, for nothing ... But everyone wants to make money." Even those, then, who are not interested in culture, are perfectly aware that it is not hard to cash in on it.

The subject matter is so catchy that festivals have started competing among each other. In 2000 Mirosław Chojecki offered to the then director of the Cinematography Committee, Tadeusz Ścibor-Rylski, to organise in Warsaw a Jewish film festival. He was told: "In Cracow we've got the Jewish Culture Festival and that's enough." Only when a new minister came, the Cinematography Committee was disbanded and Jacek Fuksiewicz became the director of the Film Department, was Mr Chojecki given the go-ahead. However, something else happened to him: "Someone recommended to me Daniel Strehlau for co-operation, who was supposed to have great connections. So I met him and told him about my concept. After some time I learned that he'd started organising his own festival."

The 1st Warsaw Jewish Film Festival took place in November last year. The 1st International Warsaw Jewish Motifs Film Festival — in April. Chojecki reassures: "There are six months between our festivals, people come to both, so there's no problem. Moreover, films from my festival are screened in different cities and on different days: in the Jewish Culture Centre in Cracow, in Wrocław, in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot, in Toruń, in Oświęcim. My festival includes productions from the last two years (269 films were entered!); in Strehlau's festival there are also older films.

In the flyer before the second edition of his festival (18th-21st of November) Strehlau writes cockily: "Our festival is an original idea, registered in the Patent Office (...). As we do not imitate anyone, as well as thanks to our generation, we are aware how unique our venture is (...)." Chojecki does not worry and is planning his festival in April.

A similar problem could have concerned the "Singer's Warsaw" festival. When the festival's originator Gołda Tencer, who is also the General Director of the Shalom Foundation, announced her initiative, Janusz Makuch (director of the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow) felt irritated: "I would like to point out that naming this excellent event the

‘Jewish Culture Festival – Singer’s World’ would be associated with the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow, which exists 16 years already.” Golda Tencer replied: “I am deeply surprised that you treat the notion ‘Jewish culture festival’ as something reserved exclusively for Cracow. (...) Although our Foundation bears the name ‘Shalom’, we had nothing against this word being used in the name ‘Shalom Gallery’, when a gallery from Cracow asked us for permission. We already had a gallery with the same name in the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw and saw no conflict of business interests because we do not feel that we hold a patent for this name. For the same reason we have nothing against using the word ‘Shalom’ in the name of the concert ending each Cracow Festival”. Makuch restrained himself with the following words: “No, I do not feel that the notion ‘Jewish culture festival’ belongs solely to Cracow. Your letter dispels my doubts. Thank you very much indeed. The more Jewish festivals there are in Poland, the better”.

Too many flying goats

The problem with Jewish culture is that it comes down to several stereotypes too easily. Unfortunately, this subject matter attracts more kitsch than any other; it is difficult to tell why, maybe because of the pathos of fate of a nation that has always been secluded and plagued by history. Ever since Marc Chagall painted his first flying goat and ever since the musical and later film “Fiddler on the Roof” turned out to be successful, every amateur painter creating a new pseudo-judaicum felt obliged to refer to this motif, or alternatively to paint a Chassidic Jew in a grotesque pose, which is supposed to illustrate the so called “żydłaczenie”, which is the Polish word for talking like a Jew. If we add some props, a few schmonces from cabarets in pre-war Poland mixed with anti-Semite jokes, referred to as “Jewish jokes” (these days hardly anyone can tell the difference between these 2 terms) then we’re dealing with Jewish culture in the spirit of filo-Semitism (as one which is the opposite of anti-Semitism). Unfortunately, hardly any of the festivals mentioned is “kitsch-free”.

Let’s take look at the precious initiative of the “Singer’s Warsaw” festival. On the 100th anniversary of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s birthday (his brother Israel Joshua is said to have been a better writer, but does anyone know him?), this Nobel prizewinner certainly deserved to be paid homage to in his hometown. The citizens of Warsaw also needed to be introduced to Warsaw’s Jewish past: a meeting with Jan Jagielski from the Jewish Historical Institute, who conducted a tour “in Singer’s foot prints”, almost resembled a demonstration (according to the “Gazeta Stołeczna” daily approx. 350 people showed up). There were also crowds at Próźna Street – once an important commercial spot, now destroyed. Mock stands and workshops have been set up, there was an organ grinder from Warsaw’s Old Town and

several sculptors. On each side of the small street there was a stage, one drowning out the other: a dance lesson attempt on one and Jewish karaoke on the other one. All this had little to do with re-enacting the street's former atmosphere; it was rather an amateur theatre (after all the Jewish Theatre was one of the festival's organisers). The grand finale did not resemble the Szeroka Street concerts (even though it had the chance to), but a rather kitschy musical evening from Channel 2 of Polish Television, which in turn – as a matter of fact – filmed the concert.

We may say that it is what masses like and that it was the organisers' aim to introduce Jewish culture also to the masses. After all the festival was rightly named after Singer, who himself used to play to the gallery as the author of short stories in literary newspapers, thanks to which he became the precursor of short story writing – which was aptly recounted by Ryszard Marek Groński in an interesting reading. But mass culture does not entail low quality.

On the other hand, even if it is very good it may become tiresome in excess. Cracow festivals now tend to receive critical acclaim more and more often: maybe we've had too many *klezmers*, because although they may be brilliant one may prefer to see something new. And Kazimierz (a district in Cracow, once home to a Jewish community), which became well-known thanks to the festival, now became commercialised.

However, the problem is not only that Jewish culture has much more to offer than just *klezmers* and a fiddler on the roof, but also the history of what happened to it on this particular land: the incomparable experience of the Holocaust.

Today this topic is abstract for more and more young generations. How can we talk about the mass murders of Jews to those to whom even the events of the past 20 years sound like a fairy tale? Robert Szuchta and Piotr Trojański, in co-operation with members of the "Children of the Holocaust" association, created Poland's first learning program on this issue. However, can this experience be conveyed? Those who survived claim not, but one has to try. What we therefore now observe is a deluge of "reminiscence literature", which is still in demand. The most popular discussions at the Jewish Book Days in Warsaw relate to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. As long as the memories of the war remain alive, the Jewish issue will be in the centre of Polish attention – either in a positive or a negative sense.

No subtexts

What strikes most in prof. Krzemiński's research, which has been mentioned before, is the fact that Polish anti-Semitism has a direct link to national identity: Polish anti-Semites perceive themselves as an opposition to Jews. While promoting her book "We from

Jedwabne” during the 7th edition of the Jewish Book Days, Anna Bikont explained that the most shocking fact for her was that those who murdered their own neighbours were members of the Polish Home Army; that Polish patriotism was streaked with anti-Semitism to such an extent.

What is more shocking is that even today the greatest enemy for Poles is an imaginary one. The research also illustrates that in Poland anti-Semitism is perceived only as an aggressive behaviour towards Jews and not as an anti-Jewish outlook on life. In this context, it is not surprising that even the greatest anti-Semites claim that anti-Semitism in Poland does not exist. Zbigniew Gluza, chief editor of the “Karta” monthly, must therefore be right when he says: “We are unable to handle this, we do not recognise what happened in the Polish-Jewish relations over the course of the 20th century. We do not have the courage. The discussion on Jedwabne came to an end but the problem remained”.

After all both the darkest (Jedwabne) and the brightest (Żegota – Council to Aid Jews) pages in the Polish-Jewish mutual history have been closed for good. And phobias in Poland, which is now open to the world, are doomed to extinction. The time when Poles will start perceiving Jewish culture as simply one out of many which may be interesting or not, without any additional connotations or subtexts, is approaching inexorably.