

The Polish-Jewish emigration of 1968 and their view of Poland

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Between 1968 – 71, a group of about 13,000 Poles with a Jewish family background left Poland due to the state-sponsored “Anti-Zionist Campaign.” In this group portrait, I will show that they were basically two groups of people who became one group only after 1968 because of a shared fate of rejection and exile. I will write of their different ideas about themselves, their different explanations about what had happened to them in 1968 and how this changed over the course of the years. In order to provide a more lively idea of the events and fates I am writing about, I will illustrate this presentation with quotations, taken both from interviews I conducted myself last year in the New York area and from a number of written sources.

The Anti-Zionist Campaign

Between 1968 and 1971, most remaining Polish citizens of Jewish origin left the country. They were driven out by an “anti-Zionist” campaign initiated by the governing Workers’ Party of the Polish Peoples’ Republic.¹ The official reason for the campaign, which was carried out with the help of mass propaganda and such tools as “spontaneous demonstrations” by workers or Arab students, was the Arab-Israeli war of July 1967.

However, protesting Israel’s foreign policy was only a pretext. In reality, it was a hate campaign against the country’s remaining Jews who were accused of being “allies of the Zionists.” The campaign had severe consequences for the careers of the individuals concerned of whom many belonged to the country’s cultural, scientific, and political elite and who were ejected from this position in an atmosphere of state-sponsored hostility.

The motive for the campaign lay in the huge economic and political problems facing the Gomulka administration. To bolster public support, the party played on the Anti-Semitic elements in Poland’s popular culture by choosing Jews as a suitable scapegoat.

But this was only one of the reasons. The campaign was also thought to resolve a rivalry within the party. One leading group, the so-called *nationalists*, consisted of former underground fighters, while their rivals, the *moskowity*, lived out the German occupation in Moscow. Many Jewish communists were included in the latter group. A third reason however, was that the communists themselves were not free from Anti-Semitic beliefs. Earlier letters from First Secretary Władisław Gomulka document that he saw Jews as an alien, disloyal, and therefore potentially dangerous element in the Polish nation.²

The reaction of most remaining Jews was to emigrate. The Communist Party encouraged them in this decision. First Secretary Gomulka announced:

¹ Stola Dariusz (2000): Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967 – 1968. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk.

² Stola (2000), 208.

“It would be best if those who want to go away, announce their wish. We register them and, please, go!”³

Who were the emigrants?

Between 1968 and 1971, 12 927 stateless Poles of Jewish nationality (the emigration had automatically deprived them of their Polish citizenship) left the country. Their official destination was Israel. The state had allowed them to go only if they would choose Israel as their destination. Yet in fact only 28% went there. Larger groups were also taken by Sweden, Denmark and the US, smaller amounts of people went to Italy, France, Germany, and Great Britain.

12 927 might sound like an insignificant number, but the group and its destiny *are* significant, not only because it brought an end to the Polish- Jewish co-existence, but because most of the émigrés belonged to the country’s elite.

The group included more than 500 university professors and scientists, 200 journalists and editors, 60 employees of TV and radio stations and 100 musicians, actors, artists, and filmmakers. About 520 more were employees of the central state administration, including high-ranking experts from Poland’s national ministries.

Due to their relatively small number, the 1968 émigrés represent today a surprisingly well-connected transnational social network. Partly based on social networks from the time before 1968, and partly the result of a shared experience of rejection and the loss of their home, the 1968 emigrants kept close contacts. However, despite this interconnectedness it is vital to realize that the “1968 group” consisted mainly of two quite different groups. The differences between both groups are to this day visible in the émigré community.

The Jewish-Jewish group

The members of this group were the last remnants of pre-war Poland’s Jewry. Throughout the years between the end of the war and 1968, the total number of Jews had gradually declined because it had become obvious that the chances for a continuation of Jewish community life were very limited. However, while many sought immediately to emigrate, others tried at least initially to build a new Jewish life in Poland. In a number of Polish cities, there existed newfound schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction. Yet, with every exodus the number of less assimilated Jews decreased rapidly. For different reasons (lack of permit, uncertain fate of family members, professional and private obligations, but also leftist orientations) however, some stayed in Poland till 1968. Less closely connected than those belonging to the state’s elite and very often feeling like they belonged to a diminishing minority, for some of the Jews the campaign opened the possibility to finally leave for which they had been waiting for years. Nevertheless they were of course, also insulted by the campaign. Henryk Grynberg, one of the most famous representatives of this group recalls:

³ Stola (2000), 207. Quoted after an internal stenogram of a Party council meeting.

Alienation is a keyword. Most of us felt very alienated. I know that I did. Even if I decided to remain a Polish writer, and to continue to write every day, even more than in Poland, because I could write whatever I want, I felt so alienated that I never thought of going back to Poland, not even for a moment. Just forget about it. I just carried the Polish literature in me, as my luggage. And that was it. But I didn't feel that I have very much in common with Poland. I had a lot in common with my fellow emigrates, with some other Polish emigrates, and with emigrants from some other countries including Czechoslovakia.

The Assimilated Group

This group includes people from assimilated communist or at least left-leaning families often close to the apparatuses of state and Party, whose children grew up without any or with very little knowledge about their Jewish origin. Examples of well-known representatives of this group are the social scientist and historian Jan Tomasz Gross, his former wife Irena Grudzinska-Gross, the historian Marta Petrusiewicz, and the filmmaker Andrzej Krakowski, all of whom are more or less part of the same generation and were born shortly after the war.

Leftist Jews were more likely to survive the Nazi occupation because they usually came from the urban environment of the industrial cities and most importantly, spoke Polish properly. Many of them fled into the Soviet Union where some joined the Soviet Army. In most cases, they would find out after their return to Poland that none of their family members had survived the war. Other Jewish survivors increasingly left for Palestine and the US (especially after the pogrom in Kielce), while most of the communist Jews stayed.

These communist Jews were reluctant to identify as Jews and urged their children to become patriotic Polish socialists. Somewhat surprisingly, they nevertheless chose the proximity of a specific milieu in Warsaw, whose members were mostly, but not exclusively, leftist intellectuals of Jewish background, who had survived the war in Russia. Most of them lived in the city's center, some others in the districts of Zoliborz and Mokotow. In an interview with Daniel Cohn Bendit, Adam Michnik, the famous former dissident and founder of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, remembers how sheltered he and his group were from reality:

I thought that communist Poland was my Poland. Why should I be here if I am afraid of something? In normal Polish houses the children were told that this is a Soviet occupation and that any careless words will be heard by an informer. Children were afraid because they knew what to be afraid of. But I didn't know that I should be afraid of. So for example, I stood up in class and said: "Shouldn't we communists always say the truth? So why don't we talk about what happened in Katyn."⁴

⁴ Quotation taken from: Wiszniewicz, Joanna: Dzieci i młodzież pochodzenia żydowskiego w szkołach śródmiejskich Warszawy lat sześćdziesiątych [Children and youth with Jewish family background in schools of Central Warsaw in the 1960s]. In: Nowa Res Polita, styczeń 2004. URL: <http://respublica.onet.pl/1145735.artykul.html?>, Translation of quotation by author.

Being the children of deserved communists from the very first hour, Adam Michnik and his friends began first to discover, and then to criticise openly the contradictions between ideology and reality. They founded the “Klub Poszukiwaczy Sprzeczności”, the Clubs of the Seekers of Contradictions”. One of Adam Michnik’s friends remembers:

In the local slang it was known as Michnik’s Club, a name which many of us didn’t really like during that time. But I think that was just natural. It was indeed his creation. He was the one who had the idea, who organized and ran everything. It attracted a lot of people.⁵

Already since 1956, when the communists reintroduced religion in the public schools, the children from the communist-Jewish milieu in Warsaw attended almost exclusively six secondary schools, the so-called *tepedówki* (*TPD = Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Dzieci*), which remained after 1956 without religious education. One former student remembers:

We were all from about six schools, which was good because Adam Michnik was so often kicked out of school. It would have been complicated, if it would have been less than six schools.

When asked what role this Jewish background played for her while growing up, one of my interviewees answers:

I learned that I am Jewish at a certain point, but quite late. Well, my family was communist. My father was in the government and my mother was a doctor. He was not in an important position, an undersecretary in the forest ministry. But nevertheless, he was a communist, so I grew up in a privileged milieu, in which it was known who was Jewish but it was not really anything important, or, it was important, but it was not something that was positively manifested.

In a recent article on the children of this milieu, Joanna Wiszniewicz from the Warsaw Institute for Jewish History recalls the memories of one of her interviewees:

“To celebrate a Jewish holiday? No, you could not even think of something like this in our family, not in our family! At Christmas Eve, there were always twelve people sitting at our table. If I think about this today, for sure ten of them were Jewish.”⁶

The members of this milieu, and much more their children, who were typically born shortly after 1945, represent the second dominant stream of the 1968 emigration. Of course, there are people who combine features of both groups (e.g. communist, but with solid Jewish identity, etc.). Due to the communist Jews’ closeness to the party and

⁵Quotation taken from: Wiszniewicz (2004).

⁶ Wiszniewicz (2004).

their belief in the communist idea, for many of them the shock of rejection was enormous.

Especially in the second group, it was first of all the younger ones who left. Already disappointed by the real existing socialism and confronted with the danger of not being allowed to finish their studies, many decided to go, leaving in many cases their parents back home in Warsaw. The fact that many can be found today in the most prestigious cultural and scientific positions in the receiving societies shows on one side the huge loss for Poland, on the other side it also tells something about how extensive social networks (which in many cases also included Non-Jewish emigrants and Jews who had come earlier than 1968) facilitated the integration into a new society.

Changes in Self-Identity

For some of the Jews from the first group, who had been considering and sometimes even striving to leave for years, the emigration was, despite the depressing political circumstances, a less surprising and often welcome event. They saw the campaign as one new element in a chain of public hostility. Because of the communist state's always ambiguous and sometimes hostile position towards the remaining Jewish population, some had already long before ceased to consider Poland as their homeland.

However, for those who saw themselves as Polish patriots and who favoured the communist system, the emigration was an extremely painful process:

“The plane is landing. It is cloudy. So, of course, I take my sweater. Then, outside of the plane, I think I am walking in sort of a soup. You cannot breathe. That was my introduction. Then the ride from JFK to Brooklyn – now I don't even pay attention – but at that time I thought it to be the ugliest place in the world . . . I hated everything . . . I hated everything . . . but that was, because I did not want to come here...I hated everything.

I decided to go to the US and not to Israel, because I simply didn't want to get attached to any other country. I was too insulted and not ready for a country, which would again demand my loyalty. I thought, I will live like an external exile hating everything...a very negative attitude... very negative....”

In the words of one emigrant from the first group, the events in 1968 brought the members of the first group “back into reality.” However, how did they come to terms with a reality which was so extremely opposed to their way of seeing the world? Asked about her self-explanation about what had happened, one of my interviewees who spent time in prison because of her affiliation to the circles around Adam Michnik, answered:

It is very personal. I thought that it is my weakness because there was nothing new in the fact that this regime was horrible. I did not understand the Jewish thing and I did not take it seriously. I thought that it was used by the government to cheat people, which it was also. But I didn't see the historical importance of it at all.

With time this perspective changed. One reason was the acquaintance with people of the other emigrant group which made many interested in the past of their own family. In the case of the woman quoted above, it was a meeting with a famous Italian communist two years after she had gone which provoked her to reconsider the events in 1968:

He started to talk to me, and said what a horrible thing this emigration was, and I said to him: Yes, but what is really horrible is that the government is shooting workers now, because it was after December 1970. But he said, shooting workers is nothing that surprises me from a communist government, but I cannot believe that in Poland, out of all places, the government would be Anti-Semitic and expel Jews from there...I was incensed, I thought that this was the most absurd thing I ever heard. Because the people which I knew, the majority of the people I knew, were from communist families. So there was this kind of sense of guilt, thinking that we cannot really claim to be...you know, the Jewish emigration, that this was only a pretext to chase us away. I could not see it then as the last chapter of the Polish Jewry.

Aside of mutual help inside of the group, which remains for many to this day the most important social environment, many of the emigrants sought contacts to members of earlier emigration waves. Often, these were people from intellectual milieus who cared little, whether someone was Jewish or not. Yet for some of the emigrants it was also a shock to be confronted with the fierce Anti-Polish attitudes of family members who had come earlier, or inside of the Jewish-American communities.

The different backgrounds of both groups remain visible to this day. While some from the assimilated group, and especially their children born in the new country, began to acquire elements of a Jewish identity, others see this with deep scepticism:

During one of these meetings of our emigration group, I realised that some of those people who became very Jewish, American-Jewish, after their emigration, speak Polish with this very typical Jewish accent. I couldn't believe it. I asked this lady about it and she claimed that she has always spoken that way. I believe that she believes this. But I don't believe it. I think it is impossible that anyone from our generation spoke like that after the war.

The Role of the "1968 Emigration" in the Polish-Jewish Dialogue

In New York, I asked a historian at the YIVO institute, who himself belongs to the 1968 emigration, how he sees the role of the 1968 emigrants in the current Polish-Jewish debate:

I have to warn you: With a few exceptions, Gross, Grynberg, and some others in the 1968 group did not join the big debate.

However, other emigrants had another opinion on this. They stressed the fact that many of the emigrants kept in contact with people in Poland, supported dissidents, and that quite a number of them participated on a different level in the Polish-Jewish Dialogue.

The different socialisation and experiences do, of course, also influence the positions taken in the Polish-Jewish dialogue. The field is wide and ranges from Henryk Grynberg, who represents a “very Jewish” and in the same time fairly rightwing position on the one side, to the former members of Michnik’s Klub on the other side, who partly continue to be rather leftwing and rather “pro-Polish.” The fall of communism and the revival of interest in Jewish affairs in Poland in the 1980s however, led to dynamic changes in the relationship between the emigrants and their homeland:

The historian quoted in the beginning comments about this:

Grynberg’s attitudes are extreme: He has never changed; he wants to confront Poles with the Jewish issue. However, his relationship with Poles has changed fundamentally, from a refugee to a cultural hero.

Jan Tomasz Gross, once also a member of Adam Michnik’s dissident club, provides another example of a change. It was not the fact that he has a Jewish father, nor his belonging to the 1968 group, but first of all his professional interest in the fate of Poland during the Second World War, which made him interested in the events of Jedwabne. But observers from within the 1968 group declare that because of this, he has also begun to see his family history with different eyes.

For most of the émigrés it has never been a real option to return to Poland. Yet some, such as Aleksander Smolar (head of Stefan Batory Foundation) or Wanda Rapaczynska (head of Agora, the publishing house of Gazeta Wybcza) did, to play important roles in Poland’s transformation to capitalism and democracy. Aside of some well-known émigrés, who publish regularly in Poland, there are many others, who maintain private contacts to Poland. Despite of the experience of rejection, they represent the potential of a bridge in the difficult Polish-Jewish relationship – a relationship, which is difficult not only because of the complicated past, but also because of the resulting end of direct interaction.