



Between hatred and nostalgia

Creating a new vision of Polish Jewry
in the Third Polish Republic (1995–2005)

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ABSTRACT • This article discusses the revival of Polish national thought from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I demonstrate how the so-called Jewish question influenced the debate and the vision of Jewry in Poland after 1989 and how it was used to create a new national identity. I outline why the so-called Jewish question was so crucial in Polish national debates. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the Polish Jewish past was portrayed and commemorated in the Third Polish Republic. This research focuses upon the period of Aleksander Kwasniewski's presidency (1995–2005), during which the famous debate about the pogrom in Jedwabne took place.

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National identity in post-Communist Poland

Following the end of socialism, the need to recreate national identity was crucial within Polish society. Nationalism had been officially condemned throughout decades of socialist rule. As a result, nationalist traditions experienced a revival in the 1990s. Debates about national ideas and feelings were frequent, with questions such as: *What is truly Polish and what does Polishness (polskość) mean?* Moreover, people were asking: *How can one define Polish citizenship in a new political system after homo sovieticus has vanished? Will the idea of citizen-neté or a cultural-ethnic approach be the model?*

Ethnic questions had always played an important role in Polish national thought since the former Polish Republic (*Rzeczpospolita Polska*) had so many minorities to integrate

or assimilate. In the nineteenth century, while Poles were fighting to regain an independent state, many Polish intellectuals reflected on the question of how to cope with ethnic diversity in their country. After the Second World War, Poland had become a country with a homogeneous ethnic population: a radical change in comparison to its former ethnic pluralism and multi-cultural past. Nevertheless, the tradition of Polish nationalism from the time before the Second World War played an important role in post-socialist Polish society. The so-called Jewish question came into focus in this context.

Following the end of Communism, nobody in Poland was indifferent to questions about Jews and Jewish Polish history.¹ The topic was

1 Many books and articles were published immediately after the end of socialism: for

virulent. There were several reasons for this: Poland had been the cradle of European Jewry before the Holocaust; Jewish people and their culture, which had flourished in Poland for centuries, were eradicated in only a few short years; moreover, the topic of the Holocaust was taboo during socialism and was not openly discussed; Polish Jewish history was barely mentioned – and diplomatic relations were severed in the 1960s between Poland and Israel (where some of the Polish Holocaust survivors lived).²

Only after the end of the socialist dictatorship and isolation did topics related to the Jewish Polish theme find a wider audience. This might be surprising to an outside observer; anyone walking the streets of Kazimierz, the former Jewish quarter in Cracow, which holds the largest Ashkenazi monument in Europe, can see the devastating consequences of this genocide. If one visits former *shtetls* in south-eastern Poland with their traces of Jewish monuments, one feels the same: one can see the former house of a *tzaddik*;³ however, the people who belonged there are gone. There is a black hole in this country: the most important minority of the former Polish Republic, which had been part of the country and deeply influenced Polish culture, life and society, could never be replaced.

The phenomenon, described as ‘antisemitism without Jews’, seemed completely obsolete in the Third Polish Republic. However, in the late 1990s, antisemites, especially in Poland, claimed that Jews were ruling their fatherland

example Tych 1999; Volovici 1990; Cooper 2000; Braham 1994; Mushkat 1992; Polonsky *et al.* 1992; Zimmerman 2003. The lack of Polish–Jewish dialogue in the decades of socialism is discussed in various publications, e.g. Weiss 2008.

2 The silence concerning Jewish Polish history was addressed by Michlic 2002: 3.

3 A *tzaddik* is a Hasidic spiritual leader or guide.

and gaining influence, and that far too many of them were still there or were returning.⁴ Jews were perceived as a threat to the Polish nation. Antisemites insinuated that Jews would infiltrate Polish society in order to destroy it. They were blamed for continuing what they had allegedly been doing for centuries: depriving honest Poles of their property. Jews were characterised as greedy, reckless, dishonest, selfish, and especially as being radical enemies of *polskość* (Polishness) and of Poles, the ‘honest Catholics’. This kind of anti-Jewish propaganda was spread by the likes of Radio Marya: a radio station that was even supported by some of the clergy in Poland. It aimed to recreate a Polish national identity; enemies of Polish society had to be sought out. Jews became a target for traditional nationalistic Catholic circles in Poland.⁵ Radio Marya spread nationalistic-Catholic propaganda and intensified antisemitic resentments.

People feared Jews would come back and claim their property: the famous saying from former times, ‘Nasze ulicy, wasze kamienicy’ (‘Our streets, your houses’), could be heard again. While these are examples of rather marginal radical right-wing figures, connected to Rydzik⁶ and his Radio Marya, antisemites

4 Leszek Bubel edited antisemitic newspapers such as *Tylko Polska* [‘Only Poland’]. The priest Henryk Jankowski’s sermons were characterised as antisemitic. See antisemitic publications such as *Szcześniak* 2001, Nowak 1998, 1999, or *Pająk* 1996. They found a wider public.

5 The clergy were deeply involved in radical Catholic Nationalistic propaganda, especially in the short period of independence between the world wars: e.g. *Kruszyński* 1923. The Catholic magazine *Rycerz Niepokalanej* (‘Knight of the Immaculate’), founded by Maksymilian Kolbe in 1922, was both nationalist and antisemitic. In the 1990s the right-wing clergy related to these traditions.

6 Tadeusz Rydzik is a Catholic Priest and Redemptorist, the founder and director of

could be found in other Polish political parties or circles as well, such as the well-established party of Janusz Korwin-Mikke (Unia Polityki Realnej).⁷

Surveys found that, when asked about Jews, approximately a third of Poles expressed discomfort. Antisemitic slogans appeared on many houses and, occasionally, antisemitic riots even occurred.⁸ Anti-Jewish literature was also being sold to a wider public. One of the constant sources of antisemitic thought during these years was the Polish Catholic Church.⁹ Although the Pope himself and some other important figures in the church pleaded for a Jewish–Catholic dialogue in Poland, many Polish priests still spread antisemitic stereotypes. Typical nationalistic-Catholic statements such as ‘Catholic Poles are morally superior to Jews’ could be heard. As nationalism played an important role in Polish society, the discourse over national paradigms was crucial even among many Polish intellectual circles. National questions were omnipresent in daily Polish life.

Even liberals were overwhelmed by these questions. We witnessed a revival of nationalist

the nationalistic *Radio Marya* station. He also established the Catholic newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* (Our Daily). Its viewpoint is far right wing and antisemitic.

- 7 Statements of the party leader Janusz Korwin-Mikke and his deputy Stanisław Michalkiewicz focused mainly on the economic threat Jews could create for a new Polish post-socialist state. This is a stereotype which was already common in Polish nationalism of the nineteenth century.
- 8 See Szurczak 2009: 76. She describes the antisemitic riot during the celebrations for the Esperanto creator Ludwik Zamenhof, who was born in Białystok (see also Cała 2013).
- 9 Kardinal Józef Glemp made disparaging comments about Jews in his speech in Jasna Góra in 1989. Glemp’s role in the Jedwabne debate was also problematic as he refused to apologise for the crime. Instead, he proposed praying for forgiveness for the sins of Jews and Catholics. See Grynberg 2018: 31.

ideas from the nineteenth century during the 1990s and early 2000s that were long taboo under socialism. The difference was striking: during the nineteenth century, Jews lived in Polish territories (which after the partitions of Poland belonged to Russia, Austria and Prussia) whereas after the Shoah and the expulsion of Jews at the end of the 1960s only a few were left in the country. Nevertheless, the writing style and content of publications after socialism were similar to those of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ This can be seen as a reaction to socialism and its taboos. Furthermore, this was also connected to Poles’ aspiration to find a new national identity. Nationalists needed points of reference, and these were found in the traditions of nineteenth-century national thought or the short period of independence between the two world wars. Polish ethnocentrism had already been a strong current of thought at the end of the nineteenth century, and could easily act as a point of reference (Cała 1989).

Ideas in the tradition of one of the most important nationalist and also antisemitic Polish thinkers, Roman Dmowski, were revived at this time.¹¹ The so-called Jewish question had been crucial when Polish national identity was formed in the nineteenth century; this

10 For example in the right-wing Polish newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* 1999 ff. See also Datner-Śpiwak 1995: 113 ff. and Cała 2013.

11 One of Roman Dmowski’s most important works, in which he outlined his ideas and thoughts, was re-edited during these years: Dmowski 2000 [1903]. He is seen as the father of modern nationalism in Poland. He took up a position against the assimilation of Jews, whom he saw as a threat to the Polish society and nation. Works from Józef Kruszyński, one of the most radical antisemites, who lived between 1877 and 1953, were re-edited after the end of socialism. Most of his antisemitic works had been published for the first time in the 1920s.

was also the case at the end of the twentieth century.¹² Nationalist ideas were strongly present during the socialist era as well, although they were articulated differently. Nationalist thought in Communist Poland involved an especially deformed memory of the past; many issues could not be openly discussed. Jewish history and the Shoah, in particular, became an almost forbidden topic: especially when the few Jews who had survived the Holocaust left or had to leave Poland in the 1960s.

Older people who had lived in Poland before the war and remembered the country as it was during multi-ethnic times often transmitted familiar stereotypes to succeeding generations. Clichés about Jews can also be found in nineteenth-century Polish literature.¹³ Since that world had vanished, these could no longer be verified or corrected by reality. The notions of a once-sizeable Polish Jewish community were replaced by myths about Jews. Under such circumstances, even people who were basically philosemitic could unwittingly contribute to mythologising the Jewish past in Poland. Stereotypes replaced a former reality and they were mostly antisemitic and rarely philosemitic (Leder 2014: 51). Regardless of whether the vision of Jews in Poland was dominated by hatred or nostalgia it was unbalanced and not based on empirical facts. I would like to provide examples to illustrate this problem.

The so-called competition of the victims

The period of Nazi occupation was often discussed in connection with national identity.

- 12 The so-called Jewish question in the nineteenth century was about the status and role of Jews in society once the idea of a modern citizen was born during the Enlightenment.
- 13 Antisemitic thought can be found in the one of the best-known novels of the nineteenth century, *Lalka* ('The Dolly'), by Bolesław Prus (2017 [1890]), especially in the second part of the novel.

Nationalist ideologists believed the comparison to other nations during the Second World War would show that Poland had been outstanding in its resistance against the Nazis. The competition of victims played an important role in national thought as well. The crucial question in this conflict was as absurd as it was grotesque: who had suffered most during the Nazi occupation – Polish Jews or Polish gentiles?

Nobody would contest that Polish gentiles endured persecution and inhumane barbarism during the Nazi occupation. Around three million of them lost their lives fighting against the Nazis; they were killed in concentration camps or in shootings. Many Polish gentiles were heroes who resisted the Germans; many of them risked their lives to help Jews. Daily life in Nazi-occupied Poland was a terrible experience for them as well. For these reasons, Polish gentiles have rightfully emphasised their losses during the Second World War. Emphasising the Polish suffering during the Second World War, however, was also a manifestation of nationalism in the Third Polish Republic. The moral superiority of Poles was, it was claimed, one of the explicit characteristics and manifestations of Polishness.¹⁴ In this context, the nineteenth-century romantic idea of *naród męczennik* (Polish national martyrdom) was revitalised and became part of the Polish national ideology following the end of socialism. The idea of the Poles as the chosen people (which was patently a comparison with the Jewish people) had been widespread in Polish romantic national thought of the nineteenth century (Mickiewicz 1996 [1832], Walicki 1982, Dopart 1999) and was now used in the context of the Holocaust. The emphasis on the Polish people's loss led to a constant

- 14 See Jaroszyński 2001 and Koczwarą 2003. A critical approach to the term 'Polishness' is to be found in the work of Porębski 2002.

comparison with Jewish victims. This was an absurd yet frequent phenomenon at the time. The national ideologists drew a simple line: the suffering of the Polish nation had started when it lost its statehood in 1772. The country was then continually oppressed by foreign powers and finally endured even worse suffering during the Second World War and under the Soviet regime. Hence, Poles were the main victims: their country had been destroyed, whereas Jews had only been ‘guests’ in Poland and were strangers who had no right to call Poland their home. The fact that Polish Jews had lost their entire world during the Shoah was omitted in this context. Furthermore, this was connected with the Catholic idea that the Jews were guilty and deserved punishment because they had allegedly harmed the Poles over centuries, whereas the Catholic Poles were innocent victims.¹⁵

Another example of the ‘competition of the victims’ phenomenon was evident at an event I attended, where the hairdresser of Rudolf Höss (a commandant of Auschwitz) was present. He was a Polish non-Jewish former inmate of the camp. This man told the public about his experiences in the concentration camp and about Höss. This was a very interesting encounter; he did not focus on the Jewish question and had nothing negative to say about Jews, but the following discussion took a different turn. People from the audience tried to prove that Auschwitz was only a Polish camp. With strange arguments, they emphasised how the suffering of the non-Jewish Polish population had been far worse than that of the Jews. Implicit in their argument was that Jews were to blame for terrible experiences the Poles had gone through and deserved punishment. Consequently, Jews had

15 These comments could be heard in public statements or read, for example in Nowak 2001.

no right to claim Auschwitz as their own. A heated discussion about absurd numbers was also part of this dispute. The numbers they mentioned were wrong; they claimed that more gentiles than Jews had died in this camp. The truth is that approximately 1.1 million Jews were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau, while around 140,000 Polish gentiles perished there (Piper 1992). Not everyone in the audience agreed with the strange assertions, and it was not the only public discussion of this kind in the 1990s and early 2000s; these opinions could be encountered in the public discourse about the Shoah in general.¹⁶

One of the sad highlights of this dispute took place in Auschwitz itself, which clearly worsened the complicated relationship between Jews and Polish Catholics.¹⁷ In 1998, Catholic activists erected hundreds of crosses on the gravel area near barrack no. 11 in Auschwitz. They wanted to show the world that this camp is ‘our Polish camp’ and not ‘a Jewish camp’, and they aimed to make it a Catholic sacred place of remembrance. They wanted to make it clear that Auschwitz is the place where Poles were the first to suffer. Indeed, this camp did have only Polish inmates initially; however, this changed rapidly. Regardless of how absurd these claims are to an observer, this was a typical manifestation of Polish antisemitism, as we have known it since the end of the nineteenth century.

Another point, however, is also comparable to nineteenth-century thought: there were others who did not share these opinions and

16 Some publicists also criticised how nobody ever talked about the fate of the Roma or other groups of victims and that all discussions were only about Jews. This was assumed to be racist. See Strzembosz 1994.

17 For example, Waldemar Chrosztowski, who was involved in Jewish–Polish dialogue and then opted out because of the cross controversy. He did not want the Pope’s cross to be removed.

were not willing to support either these arguments or the idea of the competition of victims. They considered this idea to be an expression of ridiculous nationalist thought. There were many liberals, among them prominent Catholics, who spoke out against retaining these crosses. They made their voices heard; however, the majority of Poles that were questioned said it would be better to leave at least one cross: that of the Pope.¹⁸ This stoked massive resentment between Jews and Poles.¹⁹ The Polish priest Stanislaw Musial – one of the initiators of the Polish–Jewish dialogue – played a very important role in resolving this conflict. Jerzy Buzek, who was the prime minister of Poland at the time, made the decision to remove the crosses following intense pressure from the international community. The Pope’s cross was later taken to another place, something that displeased Catholic Poland. All of this could not be forgotten, especially because radical cross advocates wanted to keep Jews out of Auschwitz. This controversy clearly showed how many of these conflicts had been taboo under socialist reign. At least all of the parties could now openly articulate their opinions and carry out their conflicts. Since this had not been possible in the preceding decades it was, indeed, a painful experience.

This controversy had a particular feature: the Polish and international press covered it and found a wide public audience (Kolb 1998, Zoltowska 1998). So many people were involved in the Jedwabne dispute, with feelings running high, and a lot of antisemitic stereotypes were expressed. Slogans such as ‘Our streets, your houses’ could be found in the context of the crosses in the Auschwitz controversy. This was

transformed into the saying ‘Our Auschwitz, your Maydanek’.²⁰

I would like to emphasise once again: Jews could interact with their Polish neighbours or other ethnic groups while they were living side by side. Over three million people in Poland were Jewish before the Second World War; this amounts to at least 10 per cent of the population. The country’s middle class were predominantly Jewish. There were increasing conflicts among ethnic Poles and Jews in the nineteenth century. One reason for this was their different roles in society: Poles were mostly peasants and Jews were in the (retail) trade and handicrafts. This erstwhile social reality no longer existed in the 1990s, yet the past triggered antisemitic attitudes anyway. There was no general awareness of the social consequences and the impact the Shoah had upon Polish society, yet there was a lot of resentment against Jews in Polish society. In the opinion of the Polish Philosopher Andrzej Leder, this is one reason why Poland is unable to become a modern open society (Leder 2014: 90–5). Consequently, there is no chance of a modern and more moderate approach to nationalism either.

Strong antisemitism in Poland has had many other reasons; it was prevalent in society at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the spread of aggressive nationalist thought across Europe. In the case of Poland, the politics of the three powers that divided the country reinforced the growth of antisemitism.²¹ For example, the politics of ‘divide and rule’ towards ethnic Poles and Jews in the Prussian part of former Poland instigated conflicts and hatred among them, especially in the second part of the nineteenth century. In the Second

18 This cross was put up when the Polish Pope came to celebrate a mass in Auschwitz for the first time in 1979.

19 The whole controversy is well portrayed by Zubrzycki 2006.

20 Maydanek, the camp in Lublin, had only Jewish inmates.

21 The three partitions of Poland took place in 1772, 1793 and 1795 by Russia, Prussia and Austria. They incorporated different parts of the former Polish Republic.

Polish Republic (1918–45), particularly in the 1930s, Jews were perceived as a threat to the formation of the Polish state, and antisemitism was growing constantly among the Polish elite and ethnic Poles in general. Finally, Nazi propaganda and the war intensified antisemitism in Poland whilst the population was brutalised. This also explains why Holocaust survivors had to suffer from persecution after the war. During the war, Polish Jews also became victims of Poles who collaborated with the Germans. One of the largest pogroms had taken place in a small town called Jedwabne.

The Jedwabne debate

The Jedwabne debate furnishes a further example of how crucial the Jewish question was within Polish nationalist thought in the Third Polish Republic. While discussions about Polish martyrdom were frequent in the 1990s, the debate about Polish collaboration with German occupiers came as a real bombshell when the Polish-born American historian Jan Tomasz Gross published his book about the July 1941 pogrom in Jedwabne (*Sąsiedzi* [Neighbours], appearing in Poland in 2000); the volume focuses upon the episode of the murder of the Jedwabne Jews by their Polish neighbours (Gross 2000, Michlic 2006). This book prompted a unique debate in Poland, including the issue of antisemitism, which was a painful experience for many involved. Many wanted to show that these facts are a contradiction of Polishness and could not be true. The problem of having been not merely a nation of victims and fighters against the Nazis, but also one that produced perpetrators, was central to the Jedwabne debate. Although Gross pointed out that the Nazis had influenced the town's inhabitants, it is clear from his description of events that the main responsibility for the pogrom rested with local Poles. Every detail of the Jedwabne pogrom has been very consciously covered in the print

and electronic media; the two most important Polish newspapers, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, did their best to remain as objective as possible. They also tried to fight radical positions, especially far-right antisemitic opinion. Articles whose authors expressed remorse for the Jedwabne pogrom were not absent either (Mac and Janiecki 2001). The Jedwabne debate displayed, once again, the nationalist approach to the Jewish question at this period; publications and speeches on the topic were full of nationalist terms and ideas.

The Jedwabne pogrom, and Gross's description of it, might, however, be regarded as a turning point for the way in which the Holocaust was perceived in post-Communist Poland, although the role that Poles played in the Shoah remained controversial. Some spoke of an outright 'collaboration'; others saw it as a Polish reaction to the role that Jews allegedly played in supporting Communism. Still others believed the Nazis and the inhabitants of the town committed the crime together. This debate revealed how difficult and sad the relationship was between (Polish) Jews and Polish gentiles.

Although these debates were brand new, the perception and discussion of the so-called Jewish question was also strongly connected to nineteenth-century nationalist thought. The impact of Polish national myths dating back to the nineteenth century was recognisable in all the debates that Gross's book triggered. The question of national honour and pride in having been a courageous nation that had defended itself against enemies since 1772 was especially important. Open antisemitic statements and negative stereotypes about Jews were not absent either (for example Pająk 2001). Opponents of this approach, however, rallied against it. The debate was extremely emotional and revealed, once again, that the country could not recover from the loss that the Shoah had caused.

Commemoration of Jewish culture in Poland

I would like to emphasise: the Third Polish Republic was not dominated solely by nationalism and antisemitic thought. A new approach to the Polish Jewish questions was offered in books and articles, and at public lectures about Jewish history. Encounters between survivors and Polish citizens were organised.

There was a commitment in the 1990s to the commemoration of Jewish life in Poland. Some Polish people were aware of the fact that the Holocaust had left a black hole in their country. They had nostalgic feelings for the former multi-ethnic Poland and regretted the disappearance of the Jewish world. Consequently, they tried to reanimate Poland's Jewish past; for example, a centre for Jewish culture in Cracow was established in 1993 in a former synagogue. The director, Joachim Russek, committed himself to the improvement of Polish-Jewish relations. The centre was busy during the 1990s and in the years that followed. An event took place almost every evening: prominent international scholars gave lectures; there were cultural events such as concerts or exhibitions, meetings with survivors, and so on. This centre also had an archive; Jews came from all over the world and were sometimes able to find the last documents or photos of their lost relatives. These were the most touching moments. Cracow also had an annual Jewish festival. These were the only days of the year in which Kazimierz had a large Jewish population again. The events were popular and the festival served as a meeting point for Polish Jews who had to leave in 1968 when they were expelled from the country.²² Museums about Jewish

22 During the Polish 1968 political crisis students and other intellectuals protested against the Communist regime. As a consequence, the dissident movement and the student strikes were suppressed by the security forces. At

history and culture were established in the former Jewish quarter. Holocaust merchandise, which started in the early 2000s, proved to be the more unpleasant result of this reanimation of Kazimierz. Posters advertising 'Auschwitz Tours' or the like could be seen.

The growing interest in Jewish culture was also obvious. Several new books and articles about Jewish topics were published during this period: for example, a memoir by Poles of Jewish decent or scientific articles or guides to former Jewish places in Poland (Dylewski 2002). Isaac Bashevis Singer's novels, in which he described the Jewish Polish world before the war, were finally published in Polish and found a wide public audience (Szurczak 2009, 74). The publication of various memoirs from survivors showed people the suffering of the Polish Jews. These facts were obviously new to many people and the interest in Jewish Polish history increased. The resumption of diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel in 1990 fostered an exchange between young Poles and Jews. Places of remembrance were created all over the country, which Polish gentiles who were interested in Jewish culture appreciated. Many scholars began publishing widely about Jewish Polish history. Thanks to their work, the significance of Jews in Polish history and culture, as well as their intellectual contribution to the country's legacy, will not be forgotten.²³

Jewish organisations also stood to gain after the political change. They could finally become organised in Poland. They also made efforts to revive religious Jewish life in Poland; the Ronald S. Lauder foundation played the

the same time, Moczar, the minister of internal affairs, started an antisemitic campaign (branded anti-Zionist) which was followed by forced mass emigration of Jews or people of Jewish descent.

23 See examples on the Polish Jewish remembrance website: <<http://www.zchor.org/hitachdut.htm>>

most important part in this difficult project. The Jewish community in Warsaw was reactivated at the end of the 1990s. Michael Schudrich became Rabbi of Łódź and Warsaw in 2000 and was appointed chief rabbi of Poland in 2004. His contribution to Jewish life in Poland was immense, and he became one of the most important figures in the rebuilding of Jewish religious life following the Shoah. A reform synagogue was also established in the 1990s. The Jewish communities, however, still counted only very few members and played only a marginal role in Polish society. There were also some liberal clerics who tried to improve the relations between Poles and Jews.²⁴ Furthermore, there was a nostalgic group of Polish gentiles who were aware of the loss resulting from the Shoah. Polish celebrities were part of this nostalgic group. For example, the poet and Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz came from Vilnius (a former Polish city) with a huge Jewish population, which was one of the most important centres of Jewish culture in the 1920s. Miłosz regretted the disappearance of the former multi-ethnic Polish state. He also wrote about the Jewish world he had known during his youth. His goal was to avoid oblivion. His book (*An Excursion through the Twenties and Thirties*) was published in 1999 and had a nostalgic touch. The Polish saying from the 1920s about their Jewish neighbours, ‘Z nimi trudno, bez nich trudno’ (‘Difficult with them, difficult without them’), became simply ‘bez nich trudno’ (‘difficult without them’). He was not the only one who believed that Poland would never recover from this loss.

24 Stanisław Musiał was one of the pioneers of Catholic–Jewish dialogue. He also stood up against antisemitism in Poland. Another prominent example is the former Jesuit Stanisław Obirek, whose involvement in Jewish–Polish relations and reconciliation is of great importance.

Furthermore, national-liberal traditions persisted as well, based upon the idea of *citoyenneté*, which had been a strong influence in nineteenth-century Polish thought. This latter stream of contemplation strove to break with aggressive national myths to find alternative perspectives for the Polish nation. There was an even more important perspective that could be found in the Third Republic. Triggered by the Jedwabne debates, it considered the proposition of a radical transformation of the Polish discourse about the nation’s past. Some intellectuals argued that Poles should learn from that debate and turn their collective back on archaic national stereotypes. They hoped Poland might then have the chance to become a modern ‘European country’: one no longer dominated by its nationalist legacy. They thought there was no need to create an enemy to develop a new national identity.

The Jewish topic was on the mind of everyone: from liberal to the far-right. Philosemites and antisemites could not avoid these questions when they discussed national identity. Yet they still could not resolve the issues of their national identity, regardless of how dynamic the dispute was about the Polish Jewish past of Poland.

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