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Living in
the Land of Ashes

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1983 I had the opportunity to meet with one of the first Israeli groups to visit Poland after the break of diplomatic relations in 1967. Some thirty young kibbutzniks came to Warsaw to attend the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and invited me to their hotel. They were deferential at first, treating me as if I were some sort of museum piece, but soon, as they relaxed, their attitude changed. They wanted to know why I was still in Poland. How dare I live in a graveyard!

I looked at them and told them that they stood out on a Warsaw street the way a group of Africans would stand out in downtown Tel Aviv. Not because they looked “Jewish” – they did not. Indeed, most of them had what is called in Poland “the good look” – during the war they could have passed for Aryan and would have had a chance of surviving. But on the drab gray streets of Warsaw they looked flashy, sexy – very Western rather than “Jewish.”

These young people, however, were accompanied by three elderly educators from the kibbutz, and they had the Jewish faces that I remembered from childhood and that I see in the synagogue now. “Don’t kid yourself into thinking this will last,” I told the young people. “As you grow old, you too will grow Jewish faces, and you will then need somebody here to tell you where they come from.”

It is so much easier to identify the dead. Abandoned buildings, names that no longer mean anything, and still vivid memories of horror abound in Poland’s physical and mental landscape. Fewer than 300,000 Polish Jews (just ten percent of the country’s pre-war Jewish population) survived the Shoah, most of them having fled to the

Soviet Union and returned after the war. Current population figures are not available; the numbers change depending on who is asked. The National Census of 2002 returned a ridiculous figure of 1,055 self-declared Jews in a nation of almost 40 million. This says more about the still-prevalent fear of revealing one's ethnic background than about current Jewish demography, but still, the combined national membership of the two main Jewish organizations – the religious one and the secular Socio-Cultural Association – does not exceed 6,000. At a parliamentary hearing in 1989, the then Minister of the Interior, General Czesław Kiszczak, said that there were 15,000 Jews in Poland. As a Warsaw Jew, I tend to trust him on that point – he had the files.

Just two years later, while standing in the cavernous hall of Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute on the eve of Hanukkah 1991, I wondered if the General's files were up to date. At least five hundred people were milling about, twice as many as had come to the city's only remaining synagogue for the High Holy Days. And they did not seem to be the same crowd. Most of the worshippers in the Nożyk Shul had been elderly, but here, at the Institute, many middle-aged and young people, and even children, were happily running about. Suddenly, a group of youngsters in athletic clothes rushed in, carrying a lighted torch to inaugurate what was a Maccabi Warsaw sports event. An elderly Jewish gentleman standing next to me in the crowd watched the young athletes and shook his head. "These kids were born in the 1970s or later," he told me. "They don't know a thing about this country. They don't know about the war, the post-war pogroms, the ever-present anti – Semitism, about the 1968 purges. They think that just because they're Jewish and like sports, they can have a Jewish sports club in Poland. In Poland!" He shook his head again and laughed.

Years later, Grażyna Pawlak, who founded and served as president of the Maccabi club, recalled how many people thought she was crazy for setting it up and, in effect, gambling on a Jewish future. "This was supposed to be a dying community, right? No children, no young people, no future; this is what everybody knew," she said. "But what I knew was that I have a daughter and she has friends. My friends also have children. It didn't seem to me that we were going to die out

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right away.” Pawlak is a sociologist of sports. In 1989, at the dawn of Poland’s new democracy, she traveled to Israel for the Maccabiad. The stories she told upon her return home impressed her children and their friends. They clamored for a Maccabiad of their own, so she helped them comply; and as she herself used to be a fencer, fencing became the first section of Maccabi Warsaw.

The Maccabi club has since ceased functioning, and Pawlak now runs Warsaw’s Moses Schorr Educational Center, a well equipped Jewish study and learning center for adults. But the club was one of the first in a series of Jewish initiatives that appeared in Poland over the past fifteen years or so, and it formed an early part of what is semi jokingly referred to as the “Jewish renaissance.” The joke seems to be obvious: there cannot be much of a renaissance in a community that is estimated at only ten to fifteen thousand, even if you double this number as the optimists do. Nonetheless, compared what we had in the post-World War Two era, the re-birth of Jewish intellectual, religious and organizational life we have seen in Poland since 1989 is somewhat impressive.

Of the fewer than 300,000 Jews who survived the war, about half fled the anti-Semitism and destruction of the early post-war years. Pogroms and massive emigration destroyed the dream of rebuilding the Polish Jewish community. The Stalinist period of 1948-56 put an end both to emigration and to organized Jewish life; both resumed after 1956, with emigration the stronger factor. By the late 1950s no more than 40,000 Jews remained in Poland. Most of them had made a conscious decision to remain in Poland and embrace a Polish identity; even so, they became the target of an anti-Semitic campaign launched in 1968 by Communist authorities under the banner of “anti-Zionism.” Thousands of people were purged from the Communist Party, fired from their jobs and expelled from their government-owned apartments. Eventually some 15,000-20,000 Polish Jews fled the country.

In that period, a Jewish-sounding name was enough to get one into trouble. The case of an obscure Warsaw engineer called Judenberg was typical. He was fired from his menial job only to be reinstated after producing a wartime Nazi document that confirmed his Aryan parentage. Public opinion was indifferent; the campaign was organized

and directed mainly by Party members. The intelligentsia, however, was horrified, both by the moral implication of the campaign and by the fact that many of its own prominent members of both Jewish and gentile extraction were affected. Party hacks regarded intellectuals with the same suspicion accorded to Jews, and this, coupled with the Polish intelligentsia's liberal tradition, led to the de-legitimization of anti-Semitism among Polish intellectuals.

A paradoxically positive impact of the "anti-Zionist" campaign was felt in other ways, too. Though most Poles felt no sympathy for the Communist or Jewish victims of the purges, the fact that the Communist Party used anti-Semitism as a weapon discredited it to some extent among the public. "Communists ruin everything, even anti-Semitism," an old right-winger once complained to me. After 1968, any use of anti-Semitism was somewhat suspect, and its proponents had first to cleanse themselves of any suspicion that they were Party provocateurs.

Anti-Semitism had thus switched sides, and Jews were again free to choose their political sympathies. Many of the activists of the student democracy movement, which was crushed during the first stage of the anti-Semitic campaign, were children of Jewish Communists. Over the next few years, they would reappear in the fledgling democratic opposition and later in the Solidarity movement – *Solidarność* – which was finally to triumph over the system that their parents had helped build.

A process of reevaluation was taking place on the other side as well. A new generation of young Poles appeared on the scene in the 1970s. Relatively free from their parent's biases and actively questioning the political system under which they had been raised, they engaged in a critical reappraisal of recent Polish history. One of the "blank spots" they stumbled upon was the Jewish issue. They examined it from as many sides as they could and began to ask questions about the people who, in a few short years, had been eliminated, mentally as well as physically, from Polish history.

In the late 1970s, independent discussion groups and clubs began to emerge in the country's intellectual centers. Alternatively repressed and tolerated by the authorities, these groups became hotbeds of the

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Soviet bloc's most successful democratic opposition. One such group, later to be called the Jewish Flying University, became a symbol of the new developments in Polish – Jewish relations. The group was created by chance and in rather peculiar circumstances. Poland, as always, was attuned to Western intellectual fashions and was experiencing a boom in humanistic psychology. When in the late Seventies the eminent American psychologist Carl Rogers visited the country, over one hundred people flocked to his workshop, which was organized in a small town near Warsaw which, incidentally, had been a Jewish shtetl before the war. After two days, Rogers suggested that the participants split up into special interest groups. Artists, divorced people, parents of small children and the like banded together, and someone suggested there should be a Jewish group, too. Though many participants were Jewish, this proposal was met with laughter. Even in the relaxed and trusting atmosphere of the workshop, where people told each other their most intimate secrets and underground literature circulated freely, it seemed absurd and threatening to discuss one's Jewishness in public. And yet the room set aside for the Jewish group was packed full of people for its first session. I still remember the emotion I felt at discovering that so many of my friends were Jewish. We had never discussed it; it was a guilty secret best kept private.

As was natural in such groups, we began by telling the stories of our lives. We all came from assimilated backgrounds, from mixed marriages or had parents who had concealed their Jewishness during the war or immediately afterwards, thus saving themselves. There was usually some form of involvement, more or less sincere, with the Communist regime. Our Jewishness had always been concealed or treated as taboo. We were brought up Polish, but our adopted Polish identities included neither the nationalist nor the religious dimension so central to our ethnically Polish peers.

We had not known that something was amiss until the 1968 campaign shattered our world, which is when most of us learned that we were Jewish and, just as important, learned that it mattered. Some of us had been expelled from universities or high schools, and all had friends who had abruptly emigrated. Since then, we had been laboring

at reconstructing our identities and had not had much success. Some people had, on their own, tried to re-appropriate the Jewish identity we had been denied. A young couple had spent years touring Poland to gather photographic documentation of what was left of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. Others had been studying the few but precious Jewish texts that were available in Polish, most of them published in Catholic magazines responding to the Church's new openness to things Jewish. But the majority of us had simply kept quiet and gone on living, though newly insecure and unhappy in our lives.

One girl in the group had been lucky: She'd been brought up by parents who were dedicated Communists but had kept in touch with the secular elements of their Jewish identity. She knew some Yiddish songs and some Hebrew and had even visited Israel as a child. She taught us a few simple Hebrew songs, and when the workshop was over we marched to the train station singing them out loud. I will never forget the reaction of the inhabitants of Łaskarzew. Young people simply waved at us – everybody likes to sing – but the elderly recognized the language and just stared, unbelieving. They were seeing ghosts.

We did not want to be just ghosts. The group continued to meet over the next two years. The therapeutic elements never really disappeared, but we complemented them with a more conceptual approach. We were still informal: anybody could speak at our fortnightly gatherings in private apartments. We called ourselves the Jewish Flying University by way of analogy to a more structured group that organized independent seminars at that time. We had about sixty participants, with an equal mix of Jewish and non-Jewish Poles. Poles and Jews. This mixed participation never created problems: we were united in trying to make sense of the bloody mess of our country's recent history. But I do remember a seminar on Polish anti-Semitism that ended with non-Jews speaking only to non – Jews and Jews speaking only to Jews. It was not intentional; it simply happened. Our differences were not so easily bridged.

The Communist regime's imposition of martial law in 1981 put an end to our group, as it did to many other important initiatives that had emerged in the wake of the stunning success of Solidarity. We were all part of that movement, of course, and almost all of us continued to

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be active when Solidarity went underground. But some of us were discouraged from playing too prominent a role in the movement: “Don’t give the Communists arguments to use against the movement,” we were warned. Some, like Adam Michnik and Bronisław Geremek, both leading Solidarity advisors, did not heed such warnings. But they, in fact, had never cultivated any special interest in things Jewish, although Geremek, a historian, has lectured on medieval Jewry. Michnik and Geremek had no qualms about their identity: they were “Poles of Jewish origin.” Though born to different – respectively assimilated and not – Jewish families a generation apart, they were, under different circumstances, brought up Polish, and Polish they chose to remain. Myself and others considered ourselves to be “Polish Jews” – though given the character of our upbringing, it might have been more accurate to call ourselves Poles of Jewish origin, as well.

Marek Edelman was one person who was not convinced by our attempts to reclaim our Jewish heritage. Edelman is the last surviving commander of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A dedicated activist of the Bund, a pre – war anti-Zionist Socialist Jewish party, he never wanted to emigrate but neither did

he believe that there was any future for Jews in Poland. He used to tell us that we had made ourselves up, that we were not real. Even now, so many years later, he does not seem to have changed his mind. “The Jewish people were murdered,” Edelman used to tell everyone. “This used to be their homeland, in the lands between the Vistula and the Dniepr, and this is where they met their death. There are no survivors, and those who claim to be Polish Jews today are simply Poles of Jewish origin.”

One seventeen-year-old girl from Silesia, whom I will call “Dorota,” would challenge this argument. The region she comes from was taken from Germany after the war and is home to possibly half of Poland’s current Jewish population. In the late 1940s Jewish survivors were settled in this region by the Polish government. This happened as part of a mass transfer of millions of Polish citizens from the eastern territories taken over by the Soviet Union, but it was also intended to avoid conflicts with the Poles. Jewish survivors who returned to their homes often found them inhabited by Poles, and so Silesia and other

formerly German territories provided new homes for many of them as well as for millions of other Polish homeless.

Dorota knew very little about her Jewish heritage until the early 1990s, when she went to a Jewish summer camp near Warsaw that was organized by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation – an American institution which in recent years has contributed large sums to Jewish activities in Poland and elsewhere in Central Europe. Like many other Jews, Dorota's grandparents survived the war under adopted Polish names and did not resume their Jewish identities after the war ended. Anti-Semitism did not end with the war, and whatever remained of Jewish life was deeply marked by the shadow of the Shoah. For Dorota's grandparents, like many others, moving to Silesia and maintaining their Polish identity was a way to make a clean break with the past and start anew. This strategy worked to a certain extent. But suspicions emerged and lingered since the family history was full of holes, they did not go to Church and they did not look like their gentile neighbors. Nor did they have the right reactions and reflexes; they seemed too soft on the Communists and too skeptical of the Church. Dorota's family was never ostracized, but neither did they become truly accepted in their community. Each political crisis threatened to blow their cover, to expose them as Jews, the familiar scapegoats. The few friends they had were just like them: marginalized, skeptical, insecure. Some were Jewish and some not, but all were outsiders. Dorota wanted to belong.

In the new climate of freedom that followed the fall of Communism, the family's Jewishness ceased to be a secret. Dorota began frequenting a Jewish club in a nearby town, run by the Jewish Socio-Cultural Association. But its members were mostly elderly and she did not feel at home there. When she learned of the summer camp organized in 1989 for Jewish teenagers she was overjoyed.

There were many such Dorotas, twice as many as the forty young people the organizers of the camp had hoped for. As they kept arriving (news of the camp spread by word-of-mouth) the camp ran out of cots, and armchairs became temporary beds. Still more came on *Shabbes*, and for most of them this was their first experience of Jewishness. To run the program, the Lauder Foundation had sent a

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young Conservative rabbi from New York City, Michael Schudrich, along with a group of American Jewish teenagers (Schudrich has since become Orthodox, and is now Chief Rabbi of Poland). They worked from morning until night, supervising everything from the kosher kitchen to Hebrew classes. For some of the participants, the camp's busy schedule was not enough, and they used every possible opportunity to bombard the Americans with questions about Judaism. Dorota was one of them. One night Schudrich couldn't take it any longer: "Look," he said, "it is after midnight and I have to sleep. We'll continue with the questions and answers later." "But you don't understand," Dorota cried out. "We are the new generation of Jewish mothers in this country. We must learn all there is to be learned."

Indeed, Dorota was right. She and her friends will be – must be – the new Jewish mothers and fathers in Poland or else there is no future for Polish Jewry. The old community, organized around the synagogue and the Socio-Cultural Association, is dying out. Then we lost a generation: the Jews who were young adults in March 1968 and who overwhelmingly opted for emigration. The generation that followed founded the Jewish Flying University, but by the time we discovered our Jewishness our adult lives were already under way. There were mixed marriages, children and jobs. We were too old to really change. Dorota's generation is the next.

Will Dorota and her friends persist? That, indeed, is the question. Once the enthusiasm of finally simply belonging is over, what can the Jewish community really offer them? Its institutions, some of which come dangerously close to being pathetic caricatures, will have to be revamped and remodeled to suit the needs of Dorota's generation; a process of change is, of course, under way, but in the end the task may prove too great. To be sure, one can always count on anti-Semitism to remind young people of their Jewish origin and of what their place is and is not. But this might scare them away as easily as bring them into the fold, and in any case a return to Jewishness because of external hostility is not a sound foundation for the reconstruction of a vibrant Jewish community.

Anti-Semitism, however, is part of the mental heritage of many Poles, and, given current circumstances, it is hardly surprising that

old demons have been aroused again. The country attained its independence less than 20 years ago, after more than half a century of war, foreign domination, economic ruin and lack of democracy, for much of that time crushed by the weight of Communist, and often anti-Semitic, indoctrination. Meanwhile, the generation that witnessed the Shoah and was aware of the moral urgency of the issue (though this awareness was dimmed by later tragic experiences) is already dying out – in the West, too, the disappearance of this generation has also coincided with a resurgence of anti-Semitism.

These factors have a real influence. But to understand does not mean to minimize or to forgive. The use of anti-Semitism by Lech Wałęsa in his 1990 presidential campaign, and by the extreme right in the 1991 parliamentary elections, strengthened tolerance of anti-Jewish prejudices at a crucial juncture of Poland's post-Communist experience. The Church has an important role to play here. The Polish attitude towards Jews derives far more from Catholic traditionalism than from right-wing politics (one must always keep in mind that the Left, that is, the Communist regime, was responsible for the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign) or reactions to political developments in the Middle East. A pastoral letter by the Polish Episcopate in 1991 addressed for the first time the issue of Polish Christian responsibility for anti-Semitism, but this letter was an isolated act. The years that have passed since then have not yet brought about a clean break by the Church with the anti-Semitism of its past, though, encouragingly, most of the changes which have occurred do point in that direction.

At the same time, other factors in Polish society may not only contribute to a diminution of anti-Semitism, but may in fact be creating a more hospitable environment for Jewish activities.

The interest in things Jewish among the intelligentsia and open-minded people in general has diminished somewhat, but it still remains a constant element of Polish intellectual life. Moreover, two important segments of the population have consistently denounced anti-Semitism. First is the intelligentsia, which is traditionally left-leaning and tolerant (at least in part). This attitude was strengthened by the experience of 1968: the anti-Semitic campaign was also a campaign against the intelligentsia, and this helped purge Poland's intellectuals of any

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residual anti-Semitism. Within this context, the Catholic intelligentsia too, plays its role and, having been involved in the reforms of Vatican II – which, unfortunately, most of the Church in Poland has yet to – it has also emerged as an important force against anti-Semitism.

The second factor is the broad Solidarity movement, though the reasons for its rejection of anti-Semitism are somewhat different. While the intelligentsia is mainly motivated by moral and religious considerations, the Solidarity response emerged from the movement's formative experiences in 1980–1981. Solidarity was more than just a union: with ten million members out of a total population of thirty-eight million, it represented the nation organized. It therefore also had its share of anti-Semites, and anti-Semitic innuendo appeared in some of the union's internal conflicts. The rank-and-file initially failed to protest this, but it soon became apparent that the same people who made use of anti-Semitism were also opposed to union democracy and tended to make risky and irresponsible decisions. Thus anti-Semitism appeared as part of a classical authoritarian syndrome, and was rejected as such. One must recognize, however, that in the mid – 1990s, Solidarity became more and more supportive of anti-Semitic attitudes. On the other hand, under both the presidency of the post-Communist Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and under the rule of successive governments of the left and the right, official Poland had, until 2005, clearly moved away from any lingering anti-Semitic tendencies.

The presidential and parliamentary elections of the fall of 2005 changed that trend. After months of parliamentary wrangling they brought to power a right-wing coalition that includes the League of Polish Families, a direct heir to the anti-Semitic pre-war National Democrats. While the leader of that party, Roman Giertych, has distanced himself somewhat from his political predecessors' anti-Semitism by stating that this political program might have been mistaken and in any case is no longer topical, since there are almost no more Jews in Poland, such language is hardly reassuring – especially as he is now minister of education. The League's youth wing, the All-Polish Youth, was set up under his direct command and is built around a core of skinheads who occasionally make headlines by yelling "Sieg Heil!" in public, raising their arms in the Nazi salute, or beating up

gay parades while chanting “We’ll do to you what Hitler [did] to the Jews.” This, clearly, is not something to be shrugged off as marginal or inconsequential.

Polish Jewry, some say, is once again at a crossroads. On the one hand, it faces a dramatic decline of its already depleted ranks as the older generation dies out. It is by no means certain that the enthusiasm of the new “young Jews” will suffice to create the critical mass needed for survival. This, however, is Polish Jewry’s only hope: if the next generations do not continue this effort then eventually Poland will be as *Judenrein* as Hitler had wanted. I fervently believe that this must not be permitted to happen. On the other hand, the broader social context of Polish Jewish life is also ambiguous. Anti-Semitism still exists, though it is countered, at least in part, by new trends within Polish society, including within the Church. Poland’s new membership in the European Union has extended over Poland’s minorities, including Jews, the protection of EU laws, but other, more pressing issues, remain unsolved. The Jewish community is still not self-supporting, and communal property restitution has brought in much less income than hoped for. At the same time, it has generated a lot of acrimony both among Jews themselves and in society at large about the use made of the properties regained. Still, it is reasonable to expect that if Poland remains a democracy, the future of Jews will be assured – if those Polish Jews who are left can meet the challenge.

This might not seem much of a prospect. Barely fifteen years ago, however, the all-but-unanimous opinion was that there was no Jewish future in Poland at all, nor could there ever be one. This prediction has been proven false. It does not mean that the opposite is necessarily true, but, for the first time since 1968, it makes sense to at least consider a future for Polish Jewry. Let me mention one example: when a Jewish kindergarten opened in Warsaw in 1988, the first of its kind in a quarter-century, it served only four youngsters. Now, almost twenty years later, the kindergarten has evolved into a comprehensive elementary and junior high school, with 240 students currently enrolled.

It is appropriate here to stress that none of this – not the school, the kindergarten or the various youth clubs and camps that also have been undertaken – would have been possible without the generous support

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of the Lauder Foundation. Unlike most other Jewish foundations active in Poland, it decided from the start to invest its money in the future rather than the past. The Foundation closed its offices in Poland in 2004, but it still operates some programs, and our community will long be deeply in its debt. Other American Jewish charities, including the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the San Francisco – based Taube Foundation for Jewish Culture and Renewal, are contributing immensely to the community’s rebirth.

The school and the kindergarten continue to grow – in more ways than one. The parents have grown along with their children and, indeed, have come to appreciate the new ideas their children bring home. I doubt if many of them will embrace a religious lifestyle, but – perhaps more importantly – the acceptance of Jewishness has become more “normal.” For many, the “new ideas” brought home by children are no longer quite so new, and the ease with which a mother now says to a gentile acquaintance “My child attends a Jewish school” marks a sea change in the way people – Jewish or not – now think. Today’s Jewish children in Poland, whatever else the future holds in store for them, will never grow up knowing, as their parents did, that to be Jewish means to be alone and vulnerable. Hopes have been successfully built on much more shaky foundations.

In the essays in this collection, I elaborate on the themes and issues that I have broached in this introduction. As a journalist, I report on events that I observed and try to put them into context. As a protagonist, I describe events from the point of view of a participant, as well as from that of a more detached outside observer. As a Jew, I reflect on my own experience and the experience of my friends and family in a process that is far from over.

In the pages that follow, I have deliberately dwelt on some themes – and sometimes recounted anecdotes or experiences – more than once, in an attempt to place them in a continuum that is complex and many-layered, where boundaries sometimes blur and where events and emotions tend to echo across time, space and memory.

Polish Jews in the post-war period had all been born into small, nuclear families. We had a mother and a father, as often as not both in a second marriage, as their first spouses had gone up in the smoke

of Auschwitz and Treblinka. There was often a sister or brother – though not necessarily, since, to our parents, the burden and risk of having one child may already have seemed too great. (An unasked, but ever-present question haunted their consciousness: What shall we do with him/her, if...?). Always hovering around us, with a desperate yearning in their eyes, were an odd few “sewed-on” aunts: each of them a sole survivor, desperate to hook into somebody’s else family and to become part of this pathetically un-extended network of human warmth. “Do you know what’s more than one?” they’d say, or think. “I’ll tell you. Anything. Anything at all.”

We were aware that families were supposed to be more than just that. The novels we read were replete with second cousins and distant relatives, even people who, although they could claim blood kinship, were not really considered part of the clan. “He’s not really family, you know, just a distant cousin,” a character in Balzac would say and leave us puzzled. Why on earth would one have a family member and not immediately suck him in? How could one squander such a precious resource?

All this seemed part of the magic world of fiction, populated not only by nieces and cousins twice removed, but also by knights in shining armor, kings and dragons. It was only when we went to school that we discovered that such families really existed. Our classmates actually did have second cousins and would spend the Christmas season with their uncle in a provincial town. My own family, all four of us, would spend the season around a very visible Christmas tree – in case the neighbors would pop in unexpectedly and ask questions – vaguely wondering what the whole fuss was all about. And though my sister and my friends I did not suspect the happy proprietors of really extended families to also encounter knights errant and princesses, our belief in the sharp dividing line between fact and fiction was severely shaken. We also learned, of course, that we were different from almost everybody else we encountered.

We had no cousins. We had no Christmas, only a tree. And some of us knew, some of us suspected, and some denied strenuously that we were... Jewish. What that term actually meant, nobody seemed to know for sure. But it did seem to imply that we were somehow inferior,

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somehow lacking in elementary attributes everybody else possessed. So much was patently evident: all we had to do was compare our own families with the families of “others.”

We spent much of our adolescence trying to figure it all out. But it was not until the anti-Zionist campaign hit us in 1968 that we really knew for sure. To be Jewish no longer meant simply having truncated families. To be Jewish meant also having families emerge suddenly out of nowhere, out of the gray limbo that extended beyond our country’s borders. It now appeared that many of us actually did have family: distant cousins, twice removed relatives, and, yes, even uncles and nieces. Letters started coming, invitations, affidavits, from the United States, France, Germany – and even Israel. These distant people were something more than family, said some of our parents, with timidity, apprehension and pride. They were *mishpoche*. *Mishpoche* would get us out of this mess.

And so those who could, left: fifteen to twenty thousand of us. My own family apparently had no *mishpoche*, nor were my parents willing to be kicked out of what they firmly believed was their country. We stayed behind – and soon enough we were pretty much alone. Warsaw’s Gdansk Station, where the State-approved exodus route – the Chopin express to Vienna – began, bled me dry of friends. Their departure, however, left me a great gift: the books they had not been able to carry with them. In second-hand bookstores, volumes of Judaica were a dime a dozen. Lonely, confused and bruised to my core, I plunged into the world of Yiddish literature. Talk about escapist fiction! There I discovered that the family-less Jew simply does not exist. Ah, the endless kvetching of *bubes* over a two-year-old *ilui*! The agony of having *tante* Sara visit and poke her nose in what is not her business! The elation when cousin Itzik – you remember, the second son of Tzippi, who had married that innkeeper way out in the provinces... yes, Tzippi, the niece of reb Shloime, the *gabai* of the shul on Muranowska street, who is your sainted Zeyde’s own brother – well, cousin Itzik made it to the university in Kroke! He will be a doctor, no less!

Weird. Weird, and weirdly familiar. If not for the footnotes, I would not have known that Kroke refers to the town of Kraków, let alone what a *gabai* was. This was an alien culture, replete with strange objects,

customs and institutions. But the people – yes, the people – were immediately familiar. I had no problem understanding what made them tick. I knew who, in the next chapter, would end up offended and why, or that the best way to punish your mother is to refuse to eat – no, not to refuse to eat at all, but just not to eat enough, not to eat everything, not to take second helpings. *Ess, mein kind, ess!* But my mother spoke no Yiddish, so where did that come from?

Truly, *mishpoche* saved the Jews. While my friends abroad were falling into the loving arms of long-separated relations, some to be smothered by all that love, others to make themselves an endless burden, but most to prosper and flourish – I immersed myself in book after book. Even the Bible started making sense. It is, after all, essentially a story about *mishpoche*, with all the concomitant triumphs and horrors. So, when it came to having children of my own, I vaguely knew what I wanted them to know.

I could not create *mishpoche* for them out of the thin air. But in fact, there were quite a few of us, the “shipwrecked Jews,” we would quip, left behind, the creepers out from the woodwork, the denizens of closets. Enough to set up an alternative *mishpoche* network. Enough to make sure that our kids got at least the basic kind of Jewish education we had been denied. Enough to set up that first Jewish kindergarten in 1988.

As I noted earlier, when the kindergarten opened, there were only four children in attendance. Parents, in fact, were still afraid to send their children there. On the one hand, they were concerned that it might become a target for anti-Semites – a legitimate fear, though, with *ezrat ha-Shem* (yes, yes, I have become religious; seemed silly not to, when so much of the *mishpoche* were) this never actually happened. Even more than fears of anti-Semitism, however, those outside our immediate circle feared what impact sending their child to a Jewish kindergarten would have on their own assimilated Polish identities. This fear, too, was legitimate, for we structured the kindergarten to be an instrument of Jewish subversion. After all, if your child returns home on Friday afternoon with a *challah* she has baked with her own sweet hands, you will not eat pork chops with it – especially when she tells you, instead, what you are supposed to do. The kindergarten

Introduction

kids became a conduit of Jewishness into hitherto deprived homes. It worked so well that we soon pronounced our own ironic *halacha Varsha*: you are Jewish if your children are.

To be sure, there is something paradoxical in the transmission of tradition from one generation to the previous one. But if it were not for that transmission – and, again, for the Lauder Foundation, which generously provided funds – I doubt we would have our Jewish school. I never was very optimistic about its prospects: a kindergarten is one thing, but a school certificate stays with you for a long time, and it takes Jewish dedication to want your child's certificate to say: Jewish school. And yet, after the first kindergarten graduates had spent a year or two in the general school system, their parents started coming back to us, demanding that they continue a Jewish education instead.

Anti-Semitism in the public school system, though sometimes present, was not a major factor in their decision, nor were their kids actually clamoring for the right to study Jewish history instead of going out to play football. Rather, the parents felt that something was now lacking; they felt a need which had previously not been there. They simply were no longer comfortable not raising their children Jewish.

And so the cycle closes. The great-grandparents, back in the inter-war period, happily raising their children Polish; these children, after the war, horrified at the very idea of their own kids being anything but Polish – and the great-grandchildren brought up Jewish again. Differently Jewish, to be sure. Determinedly Jewish, to be certain. And once again, after a terrible period of loneliness and doubt, with uncles and aunts and cousins. With *mishpoche*.

CHAPTER 2

OUR IDENTITIES – NEW, OLD, IMAGINED

How many Jews are there in Poland? This seems a simple and reasonable question, but the answer depends to a great degree on who is asking whom, when, and why. This should not be surprising: in Poland's tortuous post-war history, the so-called Jewish question has been amply used as an instrument of political struggle, usually with total disregard for the attitudes and aspirations of the Jews themselves. The simple statement "I am a Jew" (or "I am not a Jew") became heavily loaded; the person making it not only declared his or her personal identity, but also by implication took a stance on a number of crucial political issues. The acceptance or rejection of a Jewish identity was thus part of a wider package.

To understand the complexity of the issue, one must appreciate that, before World War II, Jews in Poland were perceived as a national minority, not a religious denomination or ethnic group. Most often they perceived themselves that way too. Given that they numbered about 3.5 million, or over ten per cent of the then population of the country, and that they had a distinct culture, language, and religion that set them apart from others, this is hardly surprising. The intensity and character of this national identity varied with its bearer's political affiliation within the Jewish community, but it was national all the same. This implied an incompatibility in being both Polish *and* Jewish.

The spectacular failure of the pre-war assimilationists only stressed this point. Even when they converted – even when they became priests, as in the famous case of Father Tadeusz Puder, a converted Jew who became a priest and in 1938 was slapped in the face at the altar by a nationalist Pole – they were still considered nationally alien by most

Polish Catholics, and therefore rejected. And this notwithstanding the fact that much of pre-war twentieth-century Polish culture was produced by assimilated Jews.

The war might have been expected to change all that. The Jewish people had largely been murdered, and one could imagine that whatever the 280,000 survivors did would not be of importance to the Poles. This, however, was not the case.

Those among the survivors who upheld their Jewish identity were a constant provocation to many of their Gentile neighbors. On the one hand, they reminded them of horrors barely past, and of skeletons in cupboards. On the other, they became convenient targets of hatred, as the Communist regime that was imposed on the country had a visible percentage of people of Jewish origin among its leaders and functionaries. Assuming one's Jewish identity meant, therefore, exposing oneself to hostility and rejection from much of society at large. Due to this, many Jews deemed it necessary to seek the goodwill of the new authorities – not an easy task, given the Communists' opposition to “natural separatism” and “clericalism.”

But the other solution was hardly more promising. Renouncing one's Jewishness to become “a Pole” did not make one any more accepted by the Gentile majority than it had before the war. Furthermore, as the regime pressed its functionaries of Jewish origin to Polonize their names and identities, assimilationists were sometimes accused of being Communist agents trying to infiltrate Polish national society. Finally, the very statement that one can become Polish by choice, that citizenship overrides ethnicity, ran counter to what most of the anti-Communist nationalists believed.

A minority can develop and thrive either within a caste system guaranteeing its autonomy, or within a liberal society. The former existed in Poland almost within living memory, the latter was an as yet unattained goal, already subverted and corrupted by Communist rhetoric. The Jews were caught in between.

Most emigrated, especially those who clung to their Jewishness, and in particular after the Kielce pogrom in July 1946, when, during a day of violence sparked by rumors of ritual murder, a Polish mob killed 42 returning Shoah survivors. Of those who clung to their Jewishness

and yet remained in Poland, most tried to adapt to circumstances. Basing themselves, to an extent, on the pre-war culture of the Bund, they produced a secular, anti-Zionist Yiddish culture, true to the Stalinist formula of being “Socialist in content and national in form.” A small minority within the minority tried to maintain a religious presence. Most Jews, however, chose assimilation, out of conviction or convenience, concealing their Jewishness to an extent that almost warranted the use of the term “new Marranos.”

Neither strategy was successful. In 1956, and even more forcefully in 1968, anti-Semitism, instrumentally used in interparty struggles, wrecked the hope that there was a place for Jews – any Jews – in a Communist Poland. In 1968, party hardliners resorted to the mass use of anti-Semitism in a bid to seize power. The nationwide purge of Jews that ensued, both within the party and outside it, eventually forced the emigration of some 20,000 Polish Jews over two years. By the early 1970s, only some ten to twelve thousand Jews were thought still to remain in Poland. At the beginning of this century, the total membership of the two Jewish organizations – the religious congregation, and the ex-Communist Socio-Cultural Association – was assessed at six to seven thousand nationwide.

This number gives a first possible answer to the question raised earlier. These people are Poland’s “old” Jews, not only in the sense that the median age of the group approximates 70, but because they are the last living bond between the country’s thriving pre-war Jewish community and the Poland of today. Most of them are assimilationists who failed to assimilate – and recognized that failure during the 1968 purges at the latest, though some have heroically maintained a religious lifestyle and conscious Jewish identity over the years. After all they have gone through, the divisions between them are now unimportant and they just want to be left alone.

The Jews who stayed in Poland despite 1968 did so because to emigrate was to acknowledge defeat, to recognize that entire lives had been based on illusions. Moreover, the option of a “return to Jewishness” for them did not exist, for their Polish identities had not been adopted under duress but out of free choice, and often, indeed, had already been those of their parents. To “become a Jew” now would

mean not only adopting an alien identity, but confirming the accusation hurled against them by the anti-Semites, namely, that they were not “really” Polish. They could not do it.

This left their children out on a limb. For them too, 1968 became a watershed year. Confronted as students, their identity still not mature, with the fact of their Jewish origins being “unmasked,” they had no option but to internalize both the Polishness they got from their homes and the Jewishness thrust upon them by the outside world. What is more, the latter was often perceived through the categories and values of the former. Hardly surprising that the response of many was a sense of shame, or even self-hatred, a burden they were to live with for years.

However, in the relatively liberal second part of the 1970s, the generation of which they were part – my own generation, the first generation born and raised under Communism – increasingly started to question official truths and attack hitherto unmentionable taboos. The “Jewish question” was one such taboo; as our peers started expressing more and more interest in the subject, the Jewish generation that came of age in 1968 could for the first time discuss our problems in the freedom of unofficial debating groups. Jewish Culture Weeks organized by dissident Catholic intellectuals, books and articles on Jewish topics, and initiatives such as the Warsaw Jewish Flying University (of which more below) all helped young “Poles of Jewish origin,” as one of their spokesmen labeled them, to make sense of their – our – heritage.

The Jewish Flying University was a case in point. Set up by a group of Warsaw intellectuals including myself and attended by Jews and their Gentile friends alike, it became a hot-bed of debate on individual Jewish identities in contemporary Poland. In striking contrast to what had been previously a main trait of Jewish life in Poland, participants did not attempt to elaborate a collective Jewish identity, let alone collective Jewish action. This was not due to hyper-individualism, for most of them – most of us! – were soon to join the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement. Rather, it resulted from a realistic (or so it seemed) appreciation that demography, more than politics, precluded any future for organized Jewish life in Poland. What remained pos-

sible, we felt, were individual futures for individual Jews, and these would be as diverse as the individuals involved.

We were Poland's "new Jews" – several score, possibly several hundred of us in Warsaw, conceivably several thousand nationwide, although initiatives similar to that of the Flying University did not appear quickly elsewhere. But the Warsaw initiative may be approached as a representative sample of the different identities of that generation.

At first glance, the similarities among us seem more striking than the differences. For all of those involved, Jewishness was first and foremost a psychological problem: a stigma of "alienness" and lesser worth, imposed on us through no act of our own and against our will. Second, our homes had typically given us no Jewish background at all, and sometimes had even concealed the truth about our ethnic origin. Thirdly, having lived with our Jewishness for years, we had in a way made our peace with the fact that it had become part of us. What we wanted was to be able to make sense of that experience, to be prepared to cope with the dangers it entailed, and possibly to transform it into something more positive.

The Jewish Flying University satisfied these demands to a surprising degree. It was active, on a regular fortnightly basis, for more than two years and was discontinued only after the imposition of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981. The military regime that seized power outlawed all unauthorized meetings, and most of the sixty-odd Jewish Flying University participants ended up joining the underground movement. Most participants had not changed their identities dramatically: they remained "Poles of Jewish origin," albeit with much more knowledge of the Jewish component of their identity and a strikingly more positive attitude towards it. Others started experimenting with various forms of non-religious Jewish identity, expressed for example by organizing activities to document and conserve Poland's Jewish monuments, by learning Yiddish, or by lecturing on Jewish topics to Gentile audiences. A few developed a more nationalist form of Jewishness and started preparing for aliyah, but for the most part they have still not left Poland. A few

others – including some of the most active organizers, myself among them – became religious.

The relationship between the “old” Jews and us, the “new” Jews, was strained. Those of us who started going to the synagogue or attending Jewish cultural manifestations, felt – and were sometimes made to feel – that we did not belong. Lacking Hebrew or Yiddish, unfamiliar with religious services and having no local role-models, we learned our Jewishness from books – mainly American books. The contrast between the religious lifestyle portrayed in the American books and the reality of run-down buildings and tired, defeated people here in Poland was difficult to accept.

For many of the “old” Jews, on the other hand, we were first a nuisance, then a fraud, and finally a mystery. It was obvious that the influx of young people would elicit heightened interest from the all-controlling state authorities, which was the last thing the established Jewish community wanted. This was the 1980s: had the old-timers known that many of us were involved in the Solidarity underground, they would have almost certainly considered us an unacceptable risk – all the more so as they feared the Catholic and nationalistic aspects of that movement.

Furthermore, our Jewishness, self-made and often contradictory, did not strike them as authentic. Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, expressed it succinctly when he branded us, as I mentioned in the introduction, as frauds, a literary fiction. The Jewish people was dead, he told me, and we had simply thought ourselves up, looking for originality and exoticism. “You are not for real,” he said. There was some truth in this, although less and less with the passage of time.

But what puzzled the “old” Jews most was “Why?” For what conceivable reason would young people who could easily pass as Poles (give or take an unpleasant situation or two) adopt of their own volition and actively pursue a fate that they themselves had spent their lives trying to avoid? This cognitive dissonance had some long-term effects. In retrospect, I believe we helped to infuse the old-timers’ community with some pride and assertiveness, though this was a two-way

street: we also learned from the “old” Jews and finally gained their acceptance and a sense of belonging.

All this was much easier for those of us who tried to integrate into the religious congregations, the secularist community being overtly hostile to the “clericalist obscurantism” which, even among the non-religious “young” Jews, constituted an important element of their identity. As late as the end of 1980s, a “new” Jew from Wrocław who asked at a meeting of the local chapter of the Jewish Socio-Cultural Association why Jewish traditions were not being upheld was told that he was mistaken: the anniversary of the October Revolution *had* been properly celebrated. And some of us consider it a minor triumph that the Association’s summer rest-house has recently stopped serving ham on Friday. Still, some of us were, indeed, “imaginary” Jews, in the sense that our connection with Jewishness was based on nothing more than a vague biographical accident and a social climate among intellectual milieus that supported attempts at root-searching, the almost archaeological excavation of an identity. Under other circumstances, our “Jewishness” would probably have soon evaporated, nor did most of us do much to sustain it as it was. This is not necessarily negative – in a free society everyone is free to mold an identity as he or she sees fit. Given, however, the “Jewish fashion” that was the rage of the Warsaw intelligentsia at that time, the motivations of some “root-searchers” seemed somewhat recognition-oriented.

Soon, however, many more, and different, imaginary Jews began to appear on the scene. After the breakthrough of 1989 and the downfall of Communism, *Solidarność* split under the burden of its own victory. In the ensuing struggle for power, anti-Semitism was again used to besmirch political rivals, and in some circles Jewishness became once again an accusation. The reappearance of open anti-Semitism was not entirely a surprise, since it had been present on the margins of the *Solidarność* movement from the very beginning, but the scope of the phenomenon did catch us unawares. In fact, the term “Jew” was used as a coded label to designate liberals, for in a country which had just won a victory against oppression, it was unthinkable to attack liberalism head-on. Liberal Catholic politicians of purely Polish stock like democratic Poland’s first prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, were

attacked alongside their political allies – Poles of Jewish origin such as Bronisław Geremek or Adam Michnik.

The issue of “Who is a Jew?” resurfaced once again, not only in political mud-slinging, but on a deeper level – for us. Accepting the New York Central Synagogue’s “Jew of the Year” award in 1991, Adam Michnik stressed that he is a Pole, though his bonds with Jewishness are twofold. One is the bond with his Jewish ancestors, with their ashes at Auschwitz and Treblinka; the other is solidarity with Jewish suffering. Yet in his own words, he feels no solidarity with the Jewish religion, tradition, culture, history, nation, or state.

Michnik was a leader of the student movement of 1968, a long-time political prisoner who was repeatedly denounced as a Jew by the Communist media. Without in any way belittling either his personal freedom to choose his identity, or his motives in choosing the Polish one, it is permissible to wonder whether the fact that his accepting Jewishness could be construed as a validation that those denunciations did play a role in his final decision.

For me and others like me, solidarity against anti-Semitism is hardly a basis for a Jewish identity: It is sufficient to be a democrat of any ethnic origin to feel that. Nor do I believe that there is a particular reason to feel a special solidarity with Jewish suffering, if there is no accompanying solidarity with anything else Jewish. At such a level of abstraction, this solidarity is simply a case of solidarity with victims of any oppression, commendable in its own right.

Whatever the pattern of the Jewish identity of the “new” Jews, however, it *is* built around a solidarity with religion, tradition, culture, history, nation, and state. This also involves an element of pain: to quote Michnik again, “one is of the nation one can feel shame for.” Our Jewish identities matured at the time of the massacres committed by Israel’s Maronite allies at the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, when Israel occupied the Lebanese capital in 1982. The element of shame at the Israeli army looking the other way while it could have stopped the carnage was real, yet more than counterbalanced by our pride in the achievements of our people, in the state of Israel and outside it. Obviously, being Jewish need not necessarily

entail being a Zionist, or even supporting the state of Israel, let alone any of its government's policies. And yet, just as obviously, these policies are carried out not only in the name of their supporters, or even in the name of Israeli citizens alone. Each Israeli government claims to implement them in the name of the Jewish people. We in the Diaspora are not asked our opinion – nor should we be; still, happily or unhappily, we have to recognize a certain legitimacy of those claims, to the extent that we view Israel as a national institution, transcending its legal political constituency.

We – the “new Jews” of the late Eighties – are already middle-aged. We may have resolved some of our identity problems, but we have hardly produced the basis for a revived Jewish communal life. This is why some continue to say that we are Poland's last Jews.

Those who say so, however, are wrong – and not only because they ignore the future of our children. The breakthrough of 1989 not only liberated anti-Semitism but also created the conditions for the return to Jewishness of the next generation of descendants of Communist Poland's “Marranos.” Hundreds of teenagers now flock to the varied Jewish activities organized by the traditional Jewish institutions, as well as by relative newcomers to the Polish scene, such as the Lauder Foundation, which, though it recently cut back activities, still sponsors Jewish education in Poland – from kindergarten to adult education. For these young people, 1989, not 1968, was the watershed year. They turn to their roots because they can, not because they must. And while they share many of our problems, the scope of solutions offered them is much, much larger. They organize clubs, publish newsletters, and establish close ties with Israel. They are much more community-oriented and nationally inclined than we were or are, though less interested in religion. This notwithstanding, an important minority has again found its spiritual home in the synagogue, be it Orthodox as the established community is, or Reform as is the more recent Beit Warszawa group. It is as yet unclear how long their enthusiasm will last, or what its outcome will be. They do, however, have both the drive and the numbers – estimated at some ten thousand – to make things happen.

And yet the past refuses to go away.

My own generation, and even my children, have had years to deal with our Jewishness, to learn, to consolidate and, in some cases, to let go. Nonetheless, other Jews are still emerging, even today, from tightly closed closets. This time, though, Poland is a democratic country, a member of the European Union with firm and friendly relations with Israel. Jewish institutions and other resources of all sorts are available to help the newest new Jews take their first, unsure steps on uncharted territory.

This is a novel, and important reality. So much so that, while “coming out” as a Jew is still a difficult process for many, I feel it is important to look back from today’s vantage point and provide some perspective on how traumatic – and how intimately complex – it all could be, even just fifteen or twenty years ago.

Forget today’s Jewish schools and rabbis and students’ clubs and publications and Internet sites and all the rest. Back then, all some emerging Jews could rely on was a hastily scribbled down private telephone number – often my own. The caller usually sounded quite embarrassed. “You do not know me,” he or she would stutter, “but I got your phone number from so-and-so who said you could help me. You see,” again an embarrassed silence, “I am of Jewish origin and don’t know whom I can turn to...”

Despite the Jewish Flying University and despite the openings made thanks to the Solidarity movement, being Jewish in Poland in the Eighties was, to put it mildly, something of a problem. The people who called me with their Jewish problems usually would not have dreamed of turning to the official Jewish bodies. One, the Jewish Socio-Cultural Association, was tainted by its unwavering loyalty to the Communist party line at a time when the entire country was in revolt. The other, the Orthodox *kehilla*, seemed too remote to people who had been brought up in assimilated families, who often were children of mixed marriages or had made such marriages themselves. All they knew of their *yiddishkeit* was the guilty knowledge that they were “of Jewish origin” and, try as hard as they could, they could not make it go away. My Jewish friends and I – who at that point were often only

marginally more secure in our Jewish identities – called them “shipwrecked Jews,” adrift much the same way that we ourselves had been only a decade or so before.

Anti-Semitism usually was the decisive factor in making them interested in exploring their roots. True, some of the “shipwrecked” had managed to conceal their identities from most of their acquaintances; others were accepted by their milieus, their Jewish origins notwithstanding. Still, offensive – if not necessarily ill-intentioned – comments and jokes, occasional articles in the press or comments in Church sermons made them forever cautious and wary. They always had to be prepared, to know how to react, to continuously strike a balance between self-preservation and self-esteem.

Others, living in happier circumstances, were nonetheless intrigued and tantalized by references to a heritage they knew was somehow theirs, but a heritage they knew next to nothing about. The more they read – sometimes a hodgepodge that could include both Shalom Asch and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – the more intrigued and disoriented they felt.

Others still simply wanted to know what the whole fuss was all about.

Just as we had.

My own group of shipwrecked Jews coalesced in Warsaw almost by accident in the late 1970s, a side-result of a workshop led by the great American humanist psychologist Carl Rogers. After the workshop, bonded by that common experience, a group of participants, including myself, decided to continue exploring our identities. One of the first shocks was the discovery that we all, in fact, were Jewish. I had scarcely realized that many of my friends were Jewish – and they scarcely knew this about me. Being Jewish was not something you would be willing to talk about overtly in those days – the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 was ever-present in our minds. Though our own families had been among the relatively few that had not been forced to flee the country, the 1968 purge had been both a threat and a formative experience. Our awareness of our Jewishness – or at least of its relevance – dated from that point.

In Poland, the second half of the Seventies was a period of intense intellectual ferment. A democratic opposition movement was budding, and many of us were associated with it. As Polish society was critically reexamining the official truths it was supposed to believe, a new climate of intellectual and moral openness developed. This in turn led, at least among large parts of the intelligentsia, to a reckoning with the darker pages of Poland's past, a condemnation of anti-Semitism and, indeed, an appreciation of things Jewish. Our own group flourished in that period of critical openness. As I noted above, we called it the "Jewish Flying University," borrowing a name used by the self-education movement organized by the anti-Communist opposition. Our group was unofficial but not really underground, since we did not conceal its activities, and as such it was characteristic of the new atmosphere of the late Seventies.

Together with the rest of the country we then shared the elation of the heady days of the *Solidarność* revolution and, again together with the rest of the country, we were crushed by the military coup of December 1981. Among other things, as I noted, the imposition of martial law forced the Flying Jewish University to close down.

But though we all still remained a part of the nation-wide democratic movement, and some of us joined the *Solidarność* underground, we also had an agenda of our own. The two precious years we had spent exploring our Jewishness had not been wasted. Developing along different paths – religious, Zionist, cultural – we had matured our identities. No longer was our Jewishness just a reaction to external taunt or threat. Moreover, we also knew that none of us could have achieved this realization on his or her own. The process of maturation had been a collective one, in which experiences were shared, insights developed together, knowledge passed around. Indeed, the fact that none of us had to face things all alone anymore was more important than anything else.

Our names and phone numbers had been passed around ever since the Flying University had been set up. Total strangers would occasionally call to find out about activities, show up, join the club. Dial-a – Jew, we joked. Many callers used the convenient alibi of intellectual curiosity to justify their interest. "I am not Jewish but I heard about

your group and I'm just curious..." Some of these people actually were just that, but others felt safer behind the veil. Others still made no bones about their personal reasons for contacting us. I vividly remember a young man from a small provincial town weeping the first time he showed up for one of our meetings. Looking at our group – usually some twenty to thirty people came to each meeting – he said he had never in his life seen so many Jews together.

The phone calls stopped, however, in the early Eighties. Martial law was not conducive to strangers meeting to discuss intimate secrets, Jewish or not. And then, half-way through the decade, our phones started ringing again. This time there was no Jewish Flying University to justify the calls: the authorities took a dim view of any "unofficial" organizations. No veil was available. The callers – embarrassed, fearful, or just curious – had to come clean from the get-go.

I always wondered, while talking to them, whether – had I been in their situation – I would have had the courage to call a total stranger and, just on the strength of the assurance that somebody had given, reveal my identity and ask for help. My friends and I had been privileged to have had around us a group we could trust. We made sense of our identities together; we helped each other mature, and knew it was worth it.

How do these callers know it is worth it, I wondered, when they are still at the very beginning of what, at best, will be a long and tortuous journey back home? What drives them to take that risk, to deny, in fact, what they have been up till now and try to reach out for a heritage they barely know?

I remember how, in the bleak years after 1968, when it seemed that all the Jews had left, I had turned to books to try to make heads or tails of this bewildering new identity that the anti – Semitic campaign had thrust on me – and how it was there, in these Jewish books left behind by those 20,000 Jews forced into exile that I "found my *mish-poche*." Oh, I had always known that I was "of Jewish origin," but that had been irrelevant, as Poland was supposed to be an internationalist Socialistic society, in which nation, religion and race did not matter any more. 1968 had changed all that. I hardly knew anybody else facing the same predicament. But, as I devoured book after second-hand

book – Singer, Peretz, Shalom Asch... – I remember first marveling at the quaint exoticism of it all (those rabbis, those peculiar culinary habits, those customs that made no sense) and then, suddenly, discovering that I was completely at ease inside the world of these novels. At that point, I still often did not know what the characters were talking about, but I understood perfectly well what made them tick. I knew the emotions, understood the jokes, felt the pain. I trusted these people. I was home.

Had I ever helped my anonymous “dial-a Jew” callers the way Israel Joshua Singer’s novel *Yossele Kalb* had helped me? I will never know, of course. Some just talked – from the noise of the background I could tell they were calling from phone booths, so that whoever was monitoring my calls could not track them down – and then hung up without even giving me their names. Others would make appointments, show up or not, disappear again. Some remained in touch and eventually honored me with their friendship.

My callers would ask how many Jews there were in Poland – and laugh with me as I answered with my stock reply: that the answer depended on who was asking whom, where, when and why. They would inquire about the oddities of *kashrut*, state categorically that they never heard anything so silly as that – and inquire again. They would ask why is it that we are hated so much. They would ask why I stayed in Poland. They would ask why others had left.

These conversations were the deepest test of the Jewish identity I assumed I had matured in the Flying University years. What was tested was not knowledge – indeed, as often as not I had to confess to my ignorance – but meaning. Commitment. Bond.

Has it been worth it for you? – they seemed to be asking. And have you been worth it? Is it possible to reclaim the heritage? Is there a heritage? What about the price tag? What about the cost of not trying?

I felt naked and vulnerable answering these unasked but ever-present queries. Never in my life had I volunteered for this kind of responsibility. I neither had the knowledge nor the maturity it takes. Why can’t they ask a rabbi?

There were no rabbis then.

Our identities – new, old, imagined

It has been quite a few years since I had the last one of these phone calls. As Poland, after the break-through of the fall of Communism in 1989, proceeded to build a democracy, free of all fetters but those she would now impose on herself, Jewish life started to recover and reorganize. We again have rabbis. And also communities, youth camps, vicious conflicts over policy, power struggles – the works. We are in the process of becoming, numbers allowing, just another, small, boring Jewish community.

Sometimes in synagogue – or “anywhere but!” – I meet people whose voices seem familiar. Or someone tells me: You know, I called you once, way back when.

At times, I dare to ask if our conversation had an impact. I don’t always get an answer. And sometimes I do not like what I hear.

But those answers – like everything else Jews say or do not say, do or do not do – help modify and complement my Jewishness, sometimes changing it, always deepening it. This is when I realize that, whatever my own impact on the identity of other Jews may be, my own identity is also perpetually shaped by these others. That the questions I heard unasked in anonymous telephone voices are those that I myself will never stop asking. And that inquisition is the opposite of doubt. You question only that which exists. To my callers, I will remain forever grateful.