

July 8, 91

Dear David

Below I printed 3 quotations that you might find suitable. I'm also sending my article I written a long time ago in New York but published only recently in a British periodical "Common Ground". The allusion to the Freemasons comes from you. They made a mistake in footnote 1 and it makes an impression that my article was published in "Jug. Powsuchny" while I have J. Blouste's article in mind.

"David G. Roskies is one of the most outstanding American scholars in the field of Jewish literature and culture...

Roskies is so familiar with East European Jewry that it is hard to believe that he was not born in pre-war Tishevitz but in post-war Montreal..

Roskies' anthology is an excellent introduction to Jewish literature, to the writings of well-known, little-known and practically unknown writers who deserve more recognition... "

Love
Monty



45
5/6

2
3/5

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In Search of a Road to Reconciliation

Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska

Professor Monika Garbowska, of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, tells how as a Pole she has become fascinated by Jewish life and culture. She asks what contribution one individual can make to repairing the damage done by her ancestors and to promoting reconciliation. Professor Monika Garbowska has written extensively on Jewish culture and is now translating Singer's *Der Satan in Goray* from Yiddish into Polish.

Why are you interested in Jewish culture?

This question has accompanied me for nearly fifteen years, since the time when, struck and enchanted by Isaac Bashevis Singer's novels and stories, I dared as a Pole to enter the Jewish world.

Who are the people asking this question? They are not English, Dutch or Italian. For them research in Jewish culture is as normal as in any other culture in the world. The people asking the question are Poles and Jews. If I told them I was interested in Pygmies or Mongolians they would consider it an unusual interest, but would accept it more or less indifferently, and either would forget about it immediately or remember me as the one doing research on some African or Asiatic tribe. They would not of course, wonder whether I had any Pygmy or Mongolian ancestors. My interest in Jewish culture, on the other hand, evokes curiosity and deeper emotions.

"No," I reply, "I'm not".

"That's what I thought," they say. "You look quite Slavic".

And I am sure that if I said "Yes, I am



Monika Garbowska (left) with *Zofia Grzesiak*, a Jewish Polish writer from Lublin.

they would immediately find some evidence of Jewishness in my appearance. Sometimes I get the feeling that even when I say "no", a number of them suspect I am Jewish anyway. "Or maybe you just don't know that you come straight from the Frankists," one of my Jewish friends joked.

Nowadays, interest in Jewish culture causes much less surprise in Poland than it used to ten years ago. You may be even taken for a snob or someone following the current fashion, since within the recent ten years there has been a real explosion of interest in Poland's Jewish heritage. Earlier, however, surprise was the most frequent reaction. And if you happened to meet someone sharing the same interest, there was something mystical and spiritual in the encounter: you immediately became soulmates.

Responses from the Jewish side are more complex. When I say to Jews that I have a deep concern for their culture and the tragic past, I am always afraid

of the ensuing reaction. Most people are self-possessed enough to try not to look surprised and ask me questions in a very diplomatic way. I often help them by saying "I know that Poles have a reputation of being anti-Semites. I know that Polish-Jewish relations have been extremely painful and hard. I know that..." And it usually clears up the air.

Some people cannot stay calm. "Why do you care about Jews?" shouted an elderly Jewish gentleman. "Your parents and grandparents weren't murdered in Majdanek or Treblinka!" "You are Polish and interested in Jews" For what reasons?" said an old Jewish woman smiling bitterly. "Poland has always been a very anti-Semitic country." "I know, but I try to understand..." "There's nothing to understand. They just hated us."

Occasionally the reactions are even more heated. "I hate Poland," a middle-aged American Jew tells me. "When I see Walesa and Jaruzelski on television, I cannot see the difference. I

wish all of them went to hell! Of course, I have nothing against you, but..."

It seems that such statements are more often pronounced by younger people who have never been to Poland, children of immigrants and survivors. Older people, in spite of many bitter memories, hold some sentiments that one usually has towards the place of one's youth, regardless of hardships and persecutions. Their children can share with their parents only the profound sense of loss and betrayal.

Of course, after some time even those with the most negative attitude to everything Polish, calm down. My main advantage is my age. It is difficult to blame for pre-war anti-Semitism someone who was born eleven years after the war. The fact that I am a woman seems to help too. Women as a rule are not identified with the brutality of a hostile nation to the extent males are. But still I am the representative of this nation, so it is no wonder that the attitude towards me must be suspicious, even if only subconsciously, resembling to some extent that of Poles towards Germans, Poles wondering how this particular German, looking innocent and kind, would have behaved had he lived in the Nazi era, or wondering what his parents did at that time. Ironically, this complex regarding Germans is one of the few things that Poles and Jews share.

Isaac Bashevis Singer

My interest in Jewish culture came through Singer and like Singer's stories has something supernatural about it. One day in 1976 I received a letter from Deborah, an English girl of Jewish origin, to whom someone gave my address. To this day I do not know who it might have been, maybe one of the Singer's good spirits. She wanted to correspond with someone from Poland since her favourite Polish composer was Chopin, and favourite Polish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. Isaac Bashevis Singer? A Polish writer? I had never heard of him. I liked Chopin too, but how could I share my thoughts with her about someone I did not know at all.

Confused I ran to several of Lublin's libraries and searched in vain for any of his books. With very little hope I went to the Catholic University library and there found two of Singer's novels in English. *The Manor* and *Satan in Goray*. I opened the latter. The title sounded so puzzling.

I had passed Goray, a small town in the Lublin region a number of times. "In the year 1648, the wicked hitman Bogdan Chmelnicki and his followers besieged the city of Zamosc, but could not take it because it was strongly fortified..."

I knew at that moment that Singer would not be a passing interest in my life.

I have never met Deborah. When I visited England in 1979 we planned to meet, but it never worked out; one of the reasons why I suspect she was straight from Singer's fiction.

Through friends and acquaintances I managed to get more books by Singer.

After I had read the *Spinoza of Market Street* I was fully enchanted by him. Why was he unknown in Poland? I checked Polish bibliographies and found only one short piece by Singer in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Probably no one has discovered him yet. Then let me discover him for the Polish readers!

I translated several of his stories and started knocking at the doors of various publishing houses and journals. No one was interested in those stories. I was not surprised. I was a beginner, still a student. Nobody knew me. The translations must have been rough, they were done from the English and not from the Yiddish originals. I polished them again and again and did not give up. One of the editors finally said: "Why don't you bring something different. The stories are very good, the translations read well. But they are a bit tref, if you know what I mean." I did not, but soon found out that the demons of 1968 still haunted Polish censorship.

This made the whole thing even more intriguing, giving it a taste of forbidden fruit. I continued translating Singer's stories and gave them to my family and friends to read, infecting them with my enthusiasm. There came a time when it seemed I had to continue my interest whether I wanted to or not, because my family and friends would bring me all the bits of information about Jewish culture they happened upon.

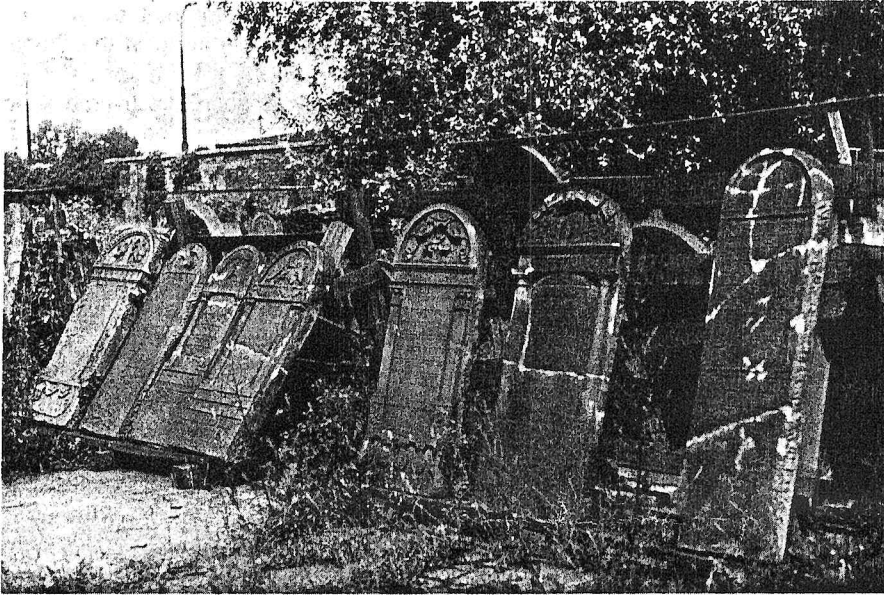
Singer's stories revealed a completely unknown world to me. At the beginning I read them in the way I used to read stories about the pharaohs in my childhood. But the people Singer described did not live in ancient Egypt although their heritage was almost as old. They had constituted a vivid part of Poland just several decades earlier. How

was it possible that for me they were as unknown as people living in the Stone Age?

Fortunately, I soon discovered that there were still traces of the Jewish past in Poland. In Lublin, where I live, and which before the war was an important Jewish cultural centre with its famous yeshiva, there still existed a small Jewish Religious Congregation and a Jewish Cultural Society. After having overcome some initial reserve on their part I became friendly with their members. There was practically no one my age attending their meetings. Most of the people could have been my grandparents, but I felt very comfortable in their company. I would also wander around the city's old quarter formerly inhabited mainly by Jews, trying to imagine what life looked like there before the war. I started reading whatever was available, but first of all I questioned my family, trying on the basis of their memories to recreate some of the Polish Jewish past and understand the reason for the ambiguous silence. I also searched my own memory collecting all traces of Jewish presence in my life.

A favourite dish in my family has been gefilte fish called by us fish Jewish style, prepared by my grandmother according to a recipe given her in her youth by a Jewish neighbour. The dish has accompanied us at all special occasions and has been a never missing element at the Christmas Eve dinner, a kind of an unconscious ecumenical touch. I vaguely remembered 1968 and my mother feeling sorry for the fate of a Jewish coworker, whom she greatly respected and who had to leave Poland as the result of the political purges. In elementary school I had a friend with a distinctly Jewish name and appearance, as I recall now. At that time I was never aware of her being different in any respect. All the children liked her because she was good-looking, nicely dressed and a good pupil. And we did not understand why she had left Poland in early 1969. My favourite authors were Julian Tuwim, Jan Brzechwa, Boleslaw Lesmian and Janusz Korczak but I was never conscious of their Jewish ancestry.

As the whole post-war generation I was inculcated with the image of Polish tolerance. At school, in the press, on television. I would often hear repeated



Warsaw Jewish Cemetery July 1990.

the cliches of the positive Polish attitude towards Protestants in the times of the Reformation. No witch trials, no sins of the Inquisition. Somehow the tolerance of the multinational Jagiellonian Commonwealth was attributed to all of Polish history. How great my confusion was when, due to my studying the English language, I started having greater contact with foreigners, both in Poland and abroad.

"Why did you let Hitler murder the Jews?" a Dutch lady asked me. "Why didn't Poles help Jews in the Warsaw ghetto?" inquired a young American student. "Is it true that Hitler built concentration camps in Poland, because he could rely on help from Poles?" asked a Swiss teacher.

At first the questions seemed to me absurd. I was angry and tried to defend my point by saying how little Westerners knew about the Nazi occupation in Poland. My foreign friends listened to me politely, nodded their heads, and asked "Have you read such and such a book?" "Have you seen such and such a film?" I had not at that time, but soon I got acquainted with them and I had to face the bitter truth and confront the self-assuring image of the tolerant Pole with the perception of the Pole as a rabid antisemite.

From time to time in the Polish press articles or news items would appear about a new film released in the West or a new book published which gave a

negative picture of Poland as an antisemitic nation. The commentators would always classify them as anti-Polish propaganda. "inspired by forces hostile to socialist Poland". But since by that time like most Poles, I had learnt not to trust the official media. I started relying on foreign and underground sources. And that is how I got trapped in the maze of the Polish-Jewish relations from which, I know, I shall never be freed.

A Typical Dialogue

A typical Polish-Jewish dialogue looks more or less like this:

From the Jewish side you might hear. "Although you did not instigate the Holocaust, you were indifferent to our plight. Some Poles were even happy that Hitler did a dirty job for them."

The Polish side would respond: "What about the people who lost their lives hiding Jews? Don't you know that there was a death penalty for any help offered to Jews?"

J. "Of course, there were some good Christians, but there were also those who betrayed Jews for money or just out of spite."

P. "In any society you find scum. Jews betrayed Jews, too. And Poles betrayed Poles. And if the situation were reversed, how many Jews would have helped Poles?"

J. "You cannot make such

speculations. But it is true that Jews generally did not like Poles because Poles treated them with contempt and hostility."

P. "They had to defend themselves from Jewish domination. Jews wanted to rule Poland. And a number of them were Communists willing to sell Poland to the Bolsheviks."

J. "They joined the Communist party because most of them were poor and persecuted, and saw the only hope in Communism."

P. "Yes, and after the war they persecuted Polish patriots."

J. "There were more Poles in UB (infamous security police) than Jews. And what about the pogrom in Kielce?"

P. "It was inspired by Government provocateurs."

J. "Maybe, but the people gladly went along with the provocation."

P. "It's because Poland was a poor and underdeveloped country. It's much easier to afford tolerance when you are well off. Poor and frustrated people easily find a scapegoat..."

This dialogue, or rather lack of it, can go on forever. Listening to it one cannot avoid the impression that Poles and Jews have much in common. Often suffering makes people self-centered, unable to accept the other side's point of view. At the beginning I did not understand why the Polish issue often evoked more emotions than the German one. After a while I had no doubts as to why. The Nazis were murderers, invaders, unambiguously evil. You condemn the murderer but you cannot do anything about it. But from your neighbour, with whom you shared the same land for hundreds of years, you expect if not help, at least compassion. When you see his indifference or even acceptance of your fate, you start hating him even more than the murderer. The feeling of rejection is one of the bitterest in human relationships.

A Change of Attitude

All these feelings were expressed in the path-breaking Jan Blonski article.¹ The article shook the world of Polish-Jewish relations to such an extent that some Jews half-jokingly refer to it as a kind of demarcation line: one can talk about 'before Blonski' and 'after Blonski' times.

Why did this voice come so late? I hope that it would have come much earlier if after the war Poland had become a truly independent country, a free democracy in Western style, with an unhampered exchange of views and real public opinion. Due to the post-war political situation history was shaped according to directives from above, and the Polish-Jewish question joined a number of other 'blank spots'. Another important factor contributing to the Polish self-centeredness was the fact that for many Poles the Second World War has not really ended yet (in a sense it is ending only now with all the political and economic changes in this part of Europe) and since the official propaganda for many years tried to erase a lot of the Polish past. Most Poles felt their primary duty was to cherish their national identity, often falling into a Messianic mode and focusing only on the glorious aspects of the Polish past.

The change of attitude came with the dissident movements in the late seventies, and then with the relaxed censorship during the Solidarity period many voices that had waited for decades to be heard could finally reveal their existence. Once the flow had been released, it could not be easily stopped. Jews have ceased to be a taboo subject in Poland (for example several of Singer's novels were published, Shoa was shown and widely discussed) and that eventually made Poles reflect on their ambivalent past. The greatest contribution to examining the most difficult aspects of Polish-Jewish relations has come from the semi-independent Catholic circles.

Yet in general, the young generation in Poland know very little about the former Jewish presence in their country. While discussing the problem of prejudice and national stereotypes I asked my students what they knew about Jews and whether there were any particular features they considered typically Jewish. One person said that Jews are extremely bright, enumerating some famous personalities like Einstein, Freud and Kafka. Another one said they were rich and shrewd. When I asked her whether she based her opinion on a first hand-experience, she said: "No, but once I met an old lady on the train and she said so." Most of the students, however, could not answer the question. It seems that on the whole the

negative stereotype has not been replaced by anything, which is at least hopeful in the sense that the present void can be filled with some knowledge and understanding.

Looking at the Polish-Jewish past from a modern Polish perspective I am ashamed for all that was bad. Reading often contradictory sources I am trying to learn the absolute truth which is certainly impossible to attain. I am also obsessed with the idea how I would have behaved had I lived during the war. Would I have dared to save a single life? My family did not. They either did not have an opportunity or did not look for it. Paralyzed by the Nazi terror they were glad that no one knocked at their door asking for help.

Which is not to say they did not know any Jews. I found out that one of my grandfathers had played with Jewish boys as a child and could even speak some Yiddish. The other grandfather who was a tailor had had some Jewish clients. My grandmothers would do most of their shopping in Jewish shops praising them for their variety and efficiency. Memories of a Jewish doctor stirred feelings of gratitude in one grandmother. But they did not have close Jewish friends. The border between the Jewish and the Gentile worlds was carefully kept. They knew Jews like white Americans today know the owners of New York Korean grocery stores, and like white British citizens know their Indian doctors. My mother recalls that as a child she was always warned not to go on her own to the Jewish quarter. It was a similar fear of the unknown which makes white Americans avoid Black or Hispanic neighbourhoods. Jewish quarters in pre-war Poland may not have had a drug problem and the accompanying violence, but they were inhabited by people of a different faith and strange customs enough to make them threatening.

Accustomed to the negative perception of Poles by Jews, I am touched when I hear some favourable comments. Talking to Jews who have visited Poland I shyly ask about their impressions and swallowing some criticism I am happy if they are willing to visit the country again.

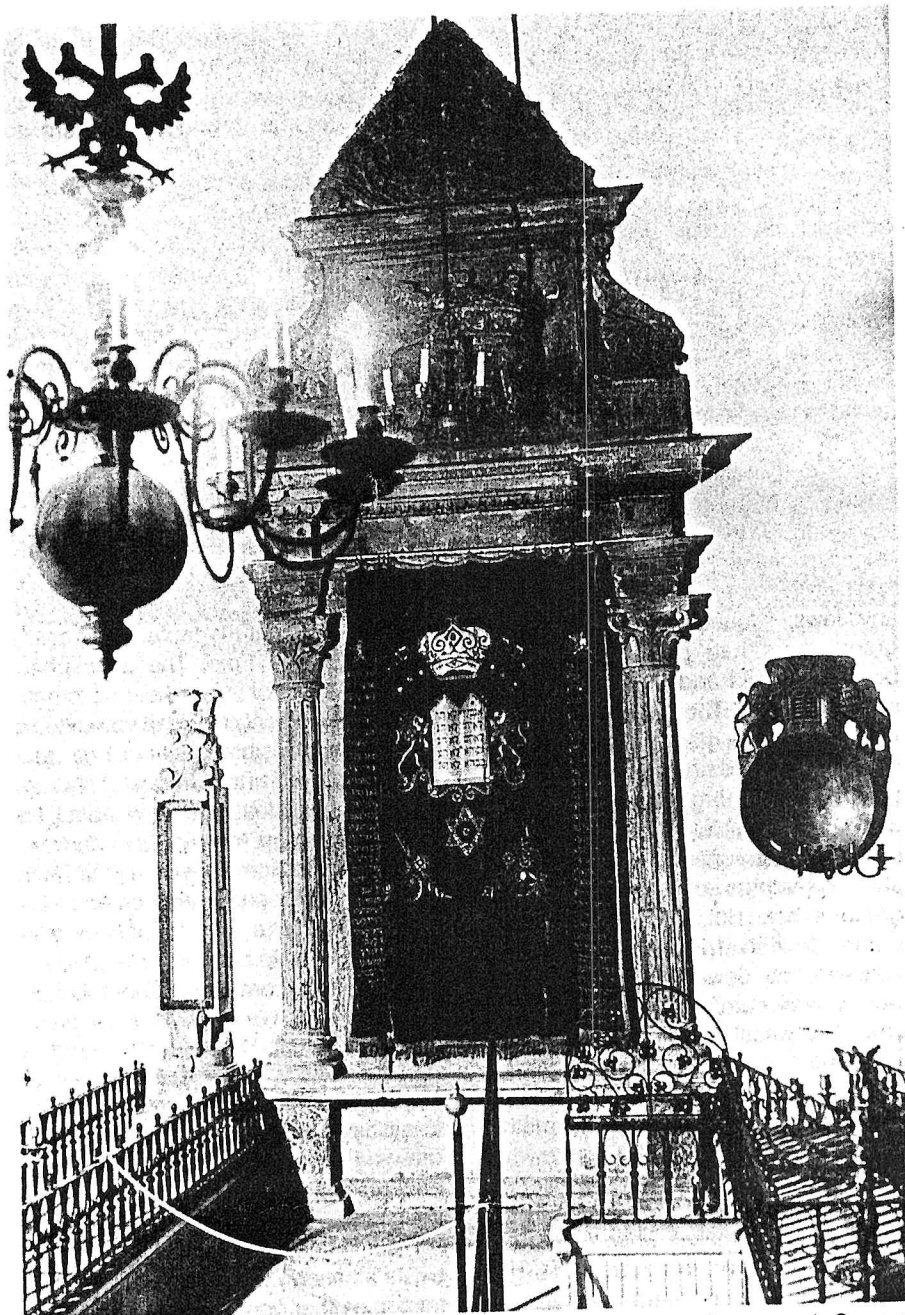
In Miami, a stay with an elderly couple of Jewish survivors was as if taken from

one of Singer's stories. The wife offered me a splendid lunch followed by enormous strawberries. When I praised their taste, she frowned: "They are not like they used to be in Poland. Even the Jewish bread baked in America does not taste the same."

Maybe she is right. Young American Jews whom I meet cannot imagine what life looked like in a Jewish shtetl. They have problems with understanding and enjoying Yiddish humour. They have become a part of Western prosperity. In Poles, on the other hand, there has remained some of the Jewish spirit in their ironic attitude towards hardships, in their irrational waiting for some miraculous changes, in the potato pancakes sold in the street.

In a prestigious Oxford college there are three of us at the table: an Israeli, a German and a Pole. The atmosphere resembles that of the highest diplomatic circles. The young German wants to be as kind as possible to both of us, as if trying to atone for the wrongs of Nazism. I, on my part, feel uncertain about the Israeli's feelings towards me and feel sorry for the German who is eager to repent for his ancestors' crimes. The Israeli, being a victim of our joint kindness, tries to comfort us expressing some critical comments about Israel's foreign policy. We are overly conscious of one another, feeling compelled to discuss history and the evil of human nature, and we find it a relief when an Englishman joins us at the table and draws the conversation to weather, cricket or some equally fascinating topic.

I sometimes wonder whether there exists a nation which does not bear guilt for some other people's sufferings. For a long time I had lived with the comfortable illusion that Poles have been victims only, seeing this as at least one positive side of the numerous misfortunes they have faced. They are not, I reasoned responsible for colonialism and slavery like some Western nations, neither for mass manslaughter like Germany or Russia. Having entered the field of Polish-Jewish relations, I have realized that there is much to repent for and not only in the Jewish question, but also in regard to Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Lithuanians, often so mistreated by Poles. I find it difficult not to agree with Singer's bitter statement that "even the



Aron Kodesh, closet serving as a repository for the scrolls of the Torah, Old Synagogue in Cracow

allegedly good people are evil. Yesterday's martyrs often become today's bullies." 2

I cannot change history and repair the moral and physical damages done by my ancestors. But by getting to know Jewish culture and understanding the Jewish point of view, maybe I can do a little towards mutual reconciliation. Yet I am aware that many years will have to pass before a German, a Pole, and a Jew sharing the same table will be able to chat naturally about the weather.

1. The article was first published in the

Polish Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* on January 11, 1987. The English translation was published in *Polin: A Journey of Polish-Jewish Studies* 2 (1987):321-32. For a detailed discussion of the article see, e.g. Anthony Polonsky, "Poland and the Jews," *Present Tense*, Jan/Feb 1989 or Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, "A New Generation of Voices in Polish Holocaust Literature," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, No. 3 1989.

2. I. B. Singer, *Love and Exile* (New York, Doubleday 1984). p.46. CG



Amcha exists to help victims of the Holocaust, who live in Israel.

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