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## **EAST EUROPEAN JEWS – PREJUDICE OR PRIDE?**

### **Abstract**

Jews from Central-Eastern Europe play a significant role in the formation of individual and social self-awareness in the Jewish world. It seems that in the Jewish world there exists a polarised approach to the Jews from this part of the world. On the one hand, there is pride, on the other, prejudice verging on shame. Some Jews have identified themselves with the group, others did the opposite, denied having anything to do with them. The most important question of our analyses is: what is the role of Eastern European Jews in building Jewish collective identity? Byron Sherwin, an American Jew, is an example of a great fascination with the Yiddish civilisation. Not only does he recognize and appreciate the spiritual legacy of Jews in Poland for other Jews around the world, but also accords this legacy a pre-eminent status in the collective Jewish identity. At the same time, he is conscious of the fact that not all Jews, if only in the United States, share his view. It is an upshot of the deep prejudice towards the life in the European Diaspora, which has been in evidence for some time. The same applies to the Jews in Israel. The new generations see the spiritual and cultural achievements of the Eastern European Jews as a legacy that should be learned and developed. This engenders hope that the legacy of the Jews of Eastern Europe will be preserved and will become a foundation of identity for future generations.

### **Key words**

Jews, Central-Eastern Europe, Poland, identity

Being a Jew has many faces, the Jewish identity is not homogenous, the Jewish self-awareness constantly fluctuates, while Judaism itself, understood as a religion, is not a criterion of what is Jewish anymore. After the destruction of the Second Temple,

the Jewish nation became dispersed across the world, adopted dozens of faces, skin and hair colours, shapes of noses and outlines of the eyes, learned various languages, signed themselves under Polish, German, Spanish or Serbian names, and became partial to the most curious tastes of dishes. That was how the diaspora came to be<sup>1</sup>.

The Jewish Diaspora which emerged in Central and Eastern Europe assumed specific forms filled with specific contents, which exerted influence on the Jewish identity. In the preface to Sherwin's book, which contains texts from his lectures and conferences, Archbishop Henryk Muszyński perceived that the author is aware of the fact that

it is precisely Poland that constitutes an important element of identity of the contemporary American Jews. One may venture the supposition that it also applies to Jews living in other parts of the world<sup>2</sup>.

This is not an isolated view nor an unfounded one. When contemplating Jewish identity, it should therefore be assumed that Jews from Central-Eastern Europe play a significant role in the formation of individual and social self-awareness in the Jewish world<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, one should remember that other elements also have an impact on the identity of the contemporary Jew. On the eve of the war, there were some half a million Jews in Palestine, the majority of whom originated from Central and Eastern Europe.

In their time, many of them rebelled against the *home of the father* – as they would call the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe – and abandoned it, dooming themselves to non-existence in the spiritual and ideological sense<sup>4</sup>.

Hence arises the question about the essence of Jewish identity in the situation of profound diversification, about the role and place of the Jews from Central and Eastern Europe in the process of building Jewish unity.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Smoleński, *Izrael już nie frunie*, Wołowiec 2011, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> B.L. Sherwin, *Duchowe dziedzictwo Żydów polskich*, Warszawa 1995, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Individual identity may be defined as a set of inherent features and qualities that an individual develops throughout their lives independently of the surroundings. In turn, social identity means the self-awareness that an individual develops in connection with a specific community and under its influence. See: R. Szwed, *Tożsamość a obcość kulturowa*, Lublin 2003, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> T. Segev, *Siódmy milion*, Warszawa 2012, p. 76.

After all, what does a Jewish goat shepherd from Yemen have in common with a Jewish office clerk from Poland? How can a Moroccan stallholder communicate with a Ukrainian innkeeper? What could an illiterate Jew from Ethiopia talk about with a German Jew, well-versed in the European philosophers. Nothing. Because they have nothing in common but plenty of differences. Even the colour of the skin. The dissimilarities are more profound, they sit at the root of the soul; the differences are so tremendous that no one can tell which of those souls is more Jewish. The ones from Poland went to Israel to build a new country. The Jews from the Arabic countries returned to the land promised by God. Those from Europe came with the grand concept of a lay, democratic state imprinted in their minds, a concept developed during decades of political arguments in debates, discussed on the pages of the Warsaw and Vienna newspapers and in the passionate Zionist manifestos printed in Frankfurt. The refugees from Yemen or Morocco listened only to the words of the rabbi, who said that the Jewish state would come when the anticipated Messiah arrives. Those from Europe were educated and enlightened, although sometimes freely chose to till the fields. Those from Maghreb, Asia and Africa did not even know letters. The Ashkenazim created the Israeli elite, became prime ministers, directors and generals. The Sephardim were called blacks, not only because of their complexion. The elite held the power and would not relinquish it during the first decades of independence. The blacks cleaned the offices of the Ashkenazic Jews, their women helped the European ladies, serving at the European tables. Such was the past. Today, the Sephardic Jews hold the majority in the parliament. And what of it, if a white Ashkenazi is still the symbol of the elite (...). On top of that, there came the Russian aliyah. A million of fresh immigrants: the magnificent musicians, directors and actors, but also drunkards and drug abusers, post-Soviet officials, thugs and mafia bosses. They populated entire towns, inscribing tens of signboards in the streets with their Cyrillic. Some do several jobs at once, some scavenge money wherever possible<sup>5</sup>.

Most certainly every Jew, just as any other person, has some identity, some awareness of themselves. Frequently Jews differ from one another diametrically. Confronted with such a situation, is Jewish collective awareness attainable? What should be its fundament and a necessary requirement?

Everyone claims that they are a genuine Jew, while accusing others of being untrue<sup>6</sup>.

The most important question of our analyses is: what is the role of Eastern European Jews in the building of the Jewish collective identity?

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<sup>5</sup> P. Smoleński, *Izrael już nie frunie*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

This group of Jews possesses its own specificity and differs markedly from other Jews in a variety of ways, not only through their language. The primary, and sometimes exclusive connotation of the word “Yiddish” is a unique language. Meanwhile, Yiddish is a term referring to a specific group of people and the entirety of their culture. At times, in order to capture the phenomenon as a whole the notion of “Yiddish civilisation” is employed<sup>7</sup>. This group of people was not merely a religious or linguistic minority, but an entity which rendered shape to the individual nations of Europe. Their contribution to the economic, social and intellectual development of Central Eastern Europe was disproportional to the numbers. Yiddish civilisation was a building block of Europe.

Yiddish civilisation was born and reached its fullness in the Slavic countries: Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Poland. It was also to be found in Austria, Bavaria, Saxony and Brandenburg. One should not fail to mention Lithuania, Romania, and Hungary, whence many Jews emigrated to the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The civilisation was both a combination as well as confrontation of the Slavic Christianity (not to say Catholicism) with their own way of life. It comprised both Jewish as well as Catholic Slavic culture (the phenomenon developed in the Orthodox surroundings only later). In this sense, it was a creation of the Jews and the Catholic Slavs. The inspiration was Jewish, the environment Catholic and Slavic. It may sound like a heresy, but the Catholics in the Slavic countries may consider themselves co-originators of the Jewish world (even if this was not deliberate and expected).

It should nevertheless be noted that the Jewish world of Yiddish did not constitute a part of the Christian world. Those specific Jews were a group apart. Their life differed from the Christian life in the East and the Jewish life in the West. Many things were exclusively their own: the language, the religiousness, culture, customs, the hierarchy of values; even their attire was distinct. The Yiddish artefacts include books, scrolls of the Bible, religious paraphernalia and objects of everyday life, houses, shops, banks, synagogues and cemeteries.

That the Yiddish world should be different from the Christian one is obvious. Still, it should be emphasized yet again that it differs from the world of other Jews. While all Jews have the same religious fundamentals, the language and the culture of the Yiddish Jews are dissimilar. This entails the conviction

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<sup>7</sup> See: P.I. Kriwaczek, *Yiddish Civilisation*, New York 2005.

that different people, may they live in the same location, will perceive reality in a different way.

Religious Jews in general, and the Chasidim in particular<sup>8</sup>, are continually accompanied by a polarity which does not translate into contradiction but complementarity, (in the sense of conjunction rather than alternative). The awareness of otherness and the difference between a Jew and a Gentile, ever more often ignored and negated by other Jews, has always been an inseparable element of the Yiddish civilisation. Jewish religion is characterised by a polarity: the sacred and the profane, the kosher and the nonkosher, the Haggadah and the Halakha. The world of Yiddish is a religious one. Therefore everything is imbued with a religious nature. Every thing and every action had their religious rationale and significance. The religious duties were not undertaken because they had been ordained by God, but because such was the nature of the world that God had made.

It seems that in the Jewish world there exists a polarised approach to the Jews from this part of the world. On the one hand, there is pride, on the other, prejudice verging on shame. Some Jews have identified themselves with the group, others did the opposite, denied having anything to do with them. Pride is a

feeling of contentment resulting from one's own achievements or the achievements of those close to us, as well as satisfaction from having something that the other do not possess<sup>9</sup>.

In turn, prejudice

towards persons, things or affairs is a reluctant, frequently unjustified attitude with regard to those, which stems from superstition or negative past experience<sup>10</sup>.

Byron Sherwin, an American Jew, is an example of a great fascination with the Yiddish civilisation. Thus he explains his point of view:

Why have I spent so many years, studying the history and the legacy of Polish Jews? Why have my grandmother's tales about the ancestors impressed me so much? Why, for some curious reason, do I feel at home in Poland, even though I do not speak Polish and Poland is essentially different from America? Why have I prepared myself to take part in the inter-

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<sup>8</sup> Chasidism – a movement of religious revival based on the teachings of Baal Shem Tov, appeared in Poland in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, originating with Rabbi Dov Ber of Międzyrzecz.

<sup>9</sup> Duma, [in:] M. Bańko (ed.), *Słownik języka polskiego*, 1, p. 410.

<sup>10</sup> Uprzedzenie, [in:] M. Bańko (ed.), *Słownik języka polskiego*, 5, p. 481.

faith dialogue? Why am I so profoundly concerned about the Polish-Jewish dialogue? It is as if what I have learned about the remote past of my family helped me explain many issues I am dealing with now. In finding the keys to the history of my fathers in Poland, I have found an explanation to much of my own life in America<sup>11</sup>.

Sherwin is convinced that his identity is related to that geographical location and that very tradition. His own words prove it:

Although I do not know the language, I feel at home in Poland; many things seem familiar. This is where my ancestors celebrated Sabbath every week (...). This is where my grandfather mastered Hebrew alphabet, learned to sing the ancient prayers of our liturgy and was introduced into the complexities of Talmudic dialectic. This is where his fathers pondered the mysteries of Kabbalism. Here, my ancestors celebrated the births and the weddings, and here was where they buried and mourned the departed (...). This is where my grandmother played as a child, before she joined the Polish-Jewish Diaspora in America. The first lullabies I heard as a child where those she had learned in this country. Here is where the great rabbis had strived for centuries to divine the meanings contained in our holy Jewish texts. In this country, they transformed the ancient Talmudic texts into literature which pertained to every aspect of daily life. Here, the inspired Kabbalists and Chasidim yearned for God and sought his presence in the towns and forests which embellish the Polish landscape. Here, the God's Presence we call Shekhinah lived with her people awaiting the ultimate redemption which was to come<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore Sherwin, as a descendant of Polish Jews recalls the sites associated with the Chasidic phenomenon with sentiment and nostalgia.

The Góra Kalwaria – a point on the map of Poland. A small, sleepy town, situated not far away from the bustling metropolis of Warsaw. This very town was once a capital of the Chasidic life, a centre of Jewish piety in Poland. The adherents of the prince of Polish Chasidism, Rabbi Icchak Meir, would travel from Warsaw to Góra Kalwaria by a special train. The Christian Góra Kalwaria is the Jewish Ger – meaning a *place of habitation*, a residence of the Chasidic dynasty from Ger, a place where God abides<sup>13</sup>.

Sherwin not only recognizes and appreciates the spiritual legacy of the Jews in Poland for other Jews around the world, but also accords this legacy a prime status in the collective Jewish identity. For him Poland not only was,

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<sup>11</sup> B.L. Sherwin, *Duchowe dziedzictwo*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

but still is an indispensable condition of shaping that which is Jewish. He makes the following, very compelling statement:

Here, in Poland, under our feet, where the Rabbis, Kabbalists and the Chasidim once stood, a treasure lies hidden, a trove of Jewish memory, experiences and spiritual achievement. Now, when Jews do not live in Poland anymore, Poland still lives in Jews. For many of us, Israel is the physical homeland, but Poland is a spiritual one. Our memories are the memories of Jewish life in this country. The physical presence had ceased, but the melody, the *niggun* of what had been created – endures<sup>14</sup>.

The American rabbi emphasized that the Jewish tradition in Poland plays an exceptional role in Jewish history, since

The Jewish-Polish Diaspora set out from Poland into the world, to enrich the new Jewish communities and renew the old ones<sup>15</sup>.

It should be noted that Sherwin finds that Jewish identity cannot be sustained and made more profound without the Polish legacy.

For most Jews today [the doctrine of transmigration] means this – who we were, when we lived in Poland. For so many of us Poland hides the keys to our history, our identity, to the discovery of deposits and experiences hoarded in the deepest layers of our souls<sup>16</sup>.

It would be difficult to find a more unequivocal and decisive stand on the positive and significant influence on Jewish identity from the one expressed by Sherwin. His conviction is so unshakeable and strong that he appeals to Poles for understanding and support in discovering and preserving that spiritual Jewish legacy.

We ask for help in recovering the keys to Jewish spirituality which are to be found in this country. We ask you for help in discovering our past, so that we may build the future. We ask you to protect us from oblivion. The faith of Jews is founded on memory, while the Jewish future is rooted in the Jewish past. For us, the loss of memory is a deadly disease. Poland is a country of Jewish mementoes, a country of Jewish cemeteries and permanent testimonies of the fact that the human spirit is capable of overcoming despair, surmounting absurdities and cherishing hopes. Here, in the country called the Christ of Europe, the followers of Judaism and Christianity, Poles all, were joined in the solidarity of suffering and in the achievements of the spirit<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 55.

Sherwin's category of "oblivion" refers to those Jews who completely ignore the many centuries of achievements of Eastern European Jews when forging their identity, forgetting, consciously or unconsciously, that it leads to false self-awareness<sup>18</sup>. Not only the future, but also true identity cannot be built without the past. The identity should be rooted in, or founded on something. Hence Sherwin's reflection:

In order to comprehend who one is, one needs to understand who one was and whence one came. Therefore the contemporary Jews should understand the history of the Polish Jews<sup>19</sup>.

In Sherwin's opinion, the prerequisite to the discovery and comprehension is contact with Poland and Poles.

Thanks to contacts with Poles and Poland Jews may understand anew who they are as Jews, and thus learn about their religion, history and culture and understand it better<sup>20</sup>.

For Poles and Jews alike, the best way to face that challenge is the Polish-Jewish and Christian-Judaist dialogue. As we read:

The future of the Polish-Jewish relationships is not the only thing at stake in the Polish-Jewish dialogue. The nature of Jewish identity after Holocaust and the nature of Polish identity in the post-communist era are also heavily involved<sup>21</sup>.

Sherwin shares his personal experience, which corroborates his assumption:

The visits to Poland have awoken my desire to seek my family roots. As a result, not only have I got to know Poland and Poles better, but also understood who I am to a much greater extent than before<sup>22</sup>.

Given the above analyses, one may definitely state that Sherwin is exceedingly proud of the Jewish legacy in Poland, appreciates it and finds it a necessary condition in the building of individual identity and the Jewish collective identity. At the same time, he is conscious of the fact that not all Jews, if only in the United States, share his view. It is an upshot of the deep prejudice towards the life in the European Diaspora, which has been in evi-

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<sup>18</sup> In this context, Sherwin quotes the words of Nathan Hanover, dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century: "Among the many places where Jews are dispersed, nowhere will you find such great erudition as in the Kingdom of Poland". *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 342.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 345.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 350.

dence for some time. The same applies to the Jews in Israel. Sherwin quotes the words that David Ben Gurion, himself a Jew from Poland, said in 1944 on breaking off with the former identity and the Jewish past:

Our path is not determined by our beginnings or our past, but our mission and our future<sup>23</sup>.

Until the Six-Day War (1967), the Israelis sought psychological distance from the Holocaust and the fates of European Jews. People would dissociate themselves from the survivors of the Nazi death camps who arrived in Israel after the war.

In Israeli slang, they were called *sabon* – *soap*. Such an approach was a classical manifestation of Zionist ideology, which deemed the Diaspora Jews to be physically and mentally weak, devoid of backbone and deserving condemnation<sup>24</sup>.

Eastern European Jews were neither wanted nor appreciated in Israel.

The Zionist dream envisioned an *new man* in a new society, who would come to the Land of Israel in search of personal and national salvation. Yet those who came, as they had no other choice, did not fit the image; they would be despised and patronised<sup>25</sup>.

This is attested to in the following passage:

Negation of the exile assumed the form of deep contempt, or even disgust with the life in the Diaspora, especially in Eastern Europe, which was regarded as degenerate, humiliating and mortifying for Jews, a morally decayed one. The Diaspora Jews experiencing tragedy seemed even more repulsive<sup>26</sup>.

The Zionist leaders claimed:

We cannot be blind to the fact that the handful who remained in Europe do not necessarily represent the best in Judaism<sup>27</sup>.

Simultaneously, the Yishuv demonstrated explicitly that the

survivors do not constitute ideal *human material*. An envoy warned that five thousand of the Jews he had met in Europe would suffice to turn Palestine into *one great madhouse*. Some were of the opinion that the survi-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup> T. Segev, *Siódmy milion*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 105.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.

vors may *poison* Zionism, democracy and progress, and erase the socialist, agricultural fundaments of the country<sup>28</sup>.

Ben Gurion referred to Jewish communists in Eastern Europe as “the scum of Judaism”<sup>29</sup>. Chaim Azriel Weizman, a two times president of the World Zionist Organization and the first president of Israel chose to call the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe “human debris”<sup>30</sup>. It would be difficult to detect even a trace of pride in the legacy of Eastern European Jewry in the above statements. One has rather the impression that they were treated as “necessary evil”.

Sherwin observes that the genuine identity of Jews in America is upset, lost, or abandoned under the influence exerted by the so-called “civic religion”<sup>31</sup>.

Actually, civic religion is a combination of lay and religious element (...). Following that religion allows American Jews to validate their Jewish identity bypassing Jewish theology or religious practices (...). In the pluralist community of American Jews civic religion is the power that binds together individual Jews belonging to various religious, social and cultural groups. From now on, it is not the Synagogue but the lay movement associated with the Jewish Community Federation which dominates the life of Jewish communities in the United States. The discussed concepts of Jewish survival in a world perceived as a threat to that survival, as well as the significance of the state of Israel for the Jewish survival are the two cardinal dogmas of the civic religion of American Jews (...). For the Americans, America is a new country, a *promised land*. America is a *new world*. Europe is an old world, the one that was left behind. The Americans see themselves as a new breed of humanity in a new world. The American Jews consider themselves to be a new kind of Jews, who left Europe behind, and with it, the memory of persecution, poverty, pogroms and oppression<sup>32</sup>.

Consequently, many Jews in America do not see Central and Eastern Europe as a place where one’s roots may be found; the Yiddish civilisation does not engender pride and the ancestors are not remembered as valuable and happy

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 268.

<sup>31</sup> According to Sherwin, „civic religion” includes such elements as: belief in the individual, pluralism, self-awareness of American as the nation chosen by God to serve as a guarantor of domestic and international peace, rituals associated with the state holidays. See B.L. Sherwin, *Duchowe dziedzictwo*, p. 228.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, pp. 228-230.

people. On the contrary, one nurtures only the memory of the Shoah which took place there, with all its consequences, usually the negative ones.

For the American Jews their American lives mean a severance with the life in Europe. America is a new world, a new life for the Jews. As a result, in the eyes of American Jews Europe in general – in particular Eastern Europe, whence most American Jews originate – is a region ripe with anti-Semitism, inhospitable to Jews by definition<sup>33</sup>.

The biased approach is not exclusive to Jews in the United States.

Likewise, the Israeli Jew considers himself to be a new kind of Jew, which in a way resembles the American Jew: free, independent and relying on himself<sup>34</sup>.

Sherwin draws attention to the fact that despite numerous differences Jews in both countries have a similar attitude to the tradition of Central European Jews, which comprehends itself in the words “prejudice”, “oblivion” and “contempt”.

The American Jew has the American tale of Alamo, while the Israeli Jew has Flavius Josephus’ account of Masada. Instead of identifying themselves with Akiva, the most famous rabbi of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century martyred by the Romans, they prefer to identify with the heroes of Masada, who died fighting the Romans. The will of survival combined with the reliance on oneself became the essential quality and an existential imperative after the Holocaust<sup>35</sup>.

American Jews, if they come to Poland, do not do so in order to discover their roots but to reinforce their prejudice. The purpose of the Israeli visits is to be confirmed in the conviction that their country is the best alternative to the Jewish life in Poland. Sherwin puts it explicitly:

American Jews who visit Poland come here with the sole purpose of seeing death camps, and then go directly to Israel to be confirmed in the belief that Israel is the appropriate response to what they have seen. The Israelis come to Poland for the reassurance that Jewish life cannot function in the Diaspora and that Israel is the only place where a Jew can live<sup>36</sup>.

Therefore neither America nor Israel cares about sustaining, revival or reconstruction of the legacy of Eastern European Jews, which they feel is old and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 271.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 231.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 232.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 239.

bad, but strive to create a new Jew and new Jewish identity that would be better and desirable. With such a perspective in mind, Eastern Europe connotes only the Shoah, which provides a looking glass through which to see Jewish reality and a starting point for the forging of contemporary Jewish identity. Sherwin argues that

drawing Jewish attention again to the spiritual treasures and the monuments of the Jewish community in Poland, of which most contemporary Jewish scholars have no idea, would shift the centre of gravity from obsessive preoccupation with the Jewish survival to increased awareness of the need for continuity and renewal of Jewish spirituality. In their views concerning Poland and Poles, and during their trips to Poland, Jews would cease to think about death, and pay greater attention to Polish contribution to Judaism and Jewish existence. This would make them realise that although Jews are not a component part of Poland anymore, Poland remains a component part of Jews<sup>37</sup>.

The American rabbi has made a crucial observation:

Prior to the Holocaust, the highest Jewish value was to safeguard and make Judaism eternal. Since Holocaust, the Jewish community gives priority to the survival of the Jewish nation as a fundamental value (...). In my opinion, this change in the Jewish hierarchy of values is understandable, but ultimately proves wrong. Judaism is a *raison d'être* of the Jewish existence. The survival of Jews without Jewish identity is pointless<sup>38</sup>.

The aftermath of the Holocaust is tragic not only in the sense of physical extermination, but also in the sense of spiritual annihilation of the traditional Jewish identity. Insofar as the responsibility for the first tragedy lies with non-Jews, Jews are chiefly to blame for the second. No other nation has roots that go so deep and a history that long. And yet, one often has the impression as if the Jews themselves did the uprooting, as if the tragedy of the Shoah was the beginning of their history. This is probably where the sense of being lost and the instability of the Jewish identity stems from, breeding question such as: Who is a Jew? What is Jewishness? Bearing in mind the actual situation, Sherwin suggests:

When discussing the implications of the Holocaust for the Jews, apart from talking about its shattering impact on the Jewish faith and theology, one should also address its influence on how Jews understand themselves. Since the general Jewish self-comprehension is fused with the self-compre-

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<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

hension on the theological and social plane, therefore in order to know how Jews understand themselves one should take religious and national aspect into account<sup>39</sup>.

Would that make Sherwin a pessimist with respect to the Jewish past? It does not appear so. He notices that in the recent years there has been some change in how the young generation of Jews approaches tradition. Hence his observation:

Now, with the Cold War over, when the Eastern Europe opens itself to the West, that curiosity and readiness for contact will increase (...). The new generations see the spiritual and cultural achievements of the Eastern European Jews as a legacy that should be learned and developed<sup>40</sup>.

This engenders hope that the legacy of the Jews of Eastern Europe will be preserved and will become a foundation of identity for future generations. Then perhaps, Jews, also those in America and Israel, will abandon their prejudices and feel proud of their ancestors in Europe, recognising the abundance of their efforts and labours to be a true Jew. The Zionist irony of fate consists in the fact that

barely a generation after the founding of the state, Israel sends their children to meet the Jewish past, which the founding fathers had abandoned in the hope of creating a *new man*, liberated from the ghetto past. Young people were to seek what the lay Israeli society failed to provide: the roots.

It seems that Jews are increasingly convinced that future cannot be made without the past. However, the point is to show that past in its fullness, without prior assumptions and manipulation<sup>41</sup>.

### **Waldemar Szczerbiński** **ŻYDZI WSCHODNIOEUROPEJSCY – UPRZEDZENIE CZY DUMA?**

#### **Streszczenie**

Na terenach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej powstała żydowska diaspora, która przybrała konkretne formy wypełnione specyficzną treścią, co miało wpływ na toż-

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 264-265.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 276-277.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the educational programme of visits of young Israelis in Poland see: N. Davidovitch, D. Soen, W. Szczerbiński, The Future of Remembrance and of Holocaust Commemoration Enterprises, [in:] W. Szczerbiński, B. Lampkowski (eds.), *Żydowski obraz Polski. Polski obraz Żyda*, Poznań-Gniezno 2012, pp. 97-122.

samość żydowską. W refleksji nad tożsamością żydowską należy więc założyć, że Żydzi z Europy Środkowo-wschodniej odgrywają ważną rolę w kształtowaniu się samoświadomości jednostkowej i społecznej w świecie żydowskim. Z pewnością każdy Żyd, tak jak każdy człowiek, ma jakąś tożsamość, jakąś samoświadomość siebie. Często Żydzi różnią się między sobą diametralnie. Czy wobec takiej sytuacji można zbudować żydowską świadomość zbiorową? Co ma być jej podstawą i koniecznym wymogiem? Każdy twierdzi, że jest prawdziwym Żydem, zarzucając innym, że są nieprawdziwi. Wydaje się, że w świecie żydowskim istnieje biegunowe podejście do Żydów z tej części Europy – z jednej strony, duma, z drugiej uprzedzenie graniczące nawet ze wstydem. Jedni Żydzi identyfikowali się z tą grupą, inni przeciwnie, odcinali się od jakichkolwiek z nią związków. W przedstawionych analizach najważniejsze pytanie brzmi: jaką rolę w budowaniu żydowskiej tożsamości zbiorowej odgrywają Żydzi wschodnioeuropejscy?

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