

# Introduction

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Until 2004, I viewed myself as an open-minded, progressive person who refrained from stereotyping groups of people. I based any negative views of people on knowledge that I believed was rooted in *history*. That summer, however, I learned that discrimination had actually played a fundamental role throughout my life: I realized that I had been raised to view Poles as an enemy, not only by parents and grandparents, but also by rabbis and teachers. Postgraduate work in Jewish studies had not altered this prejudice, but only cemented it. That year, I stood on an intellectual precipice. Do I hold true to what I *know*, or do I risk questioning that knowledge and destabilizing parts of my identity?

Our current times underscore the need for the personal re-examination of one's knowledge of the Other. The global rise in ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism, COVID-19, and the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine force us to question why we maintain hostile views of the Other. Concerning Poles and Jews specifically, our current global crises have only solidified the need for Poles and Jews to reevaluate the knowledge each holds of Other and Self.

## **An American Jew**

A Jewish woman, I am third generation American-born. My ancestors hail from the Russian Empire. My mother's family arrived from Kyiv, now Ukraine's capital. My paternal great-grandparents traveled here from Poswol (Pasvalys), Lithuania. After landing on American shores, both sides maintained ties to the Old World through language, religious practice, family, and culture. Yet, concurrently, they each strove to become American. While they conversed in Yiddish at home, *most* learned enough English to speak it in public. They sent their children to public schools dressed in modern American clothes and considered religion a private matter.

I was raised primarily in the south suburbs of Chicago as a Conservative Jew. My identity meant that I felt superior around Reform Jews and insecure around Orthodox Jews. No doubt this singular internal response to the Other Jew mirrored the contentious antagonism felt across the American Jewish population in

general. American Jews argued over ritual, politics, and assimilation. Our one central unifying force was the Holocaust—the Jewish genocide orchestrated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

My Jewish identity was stamped by growing up in the seventies, that time when formal Jewish educators, parents, and grandparents finally struggled more openly with the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Together with so many Jews of my generation, I am a product of post-Holocaust angst. Many teachers presented “being Jewish” through the lens of that tragedy. The lessons they taught often differed, but the starting place usually remained the same. My Jewish identity transformed into knowing that had I been there, I too would have been forced to bear the weight of the yellow star. For me, to be Jewish was to identify with the Holocaust’s victims, to feel their suffering as my own.

Many in my generation grew to make decisions about religious and cultural affiliation based on this premise. Photographs of starving children on ghetto streets and mounds of corpses in camps urged us on a quest for Jewish survival. This knowledge and imagery united us as Jews and often informed our relationships. My future husband and I bonded over our shared desire to travel to Poland. Though we thought of it as desolate and cold, we longed to visit that place. We wanted to feel the past, to walk the streets of our ancestors, to imagine their heartache as they were torn from their homes, to envision their daily struggle for survival in the “Polish death camps.”<sup>2</sup> We craved a journey to Poland so that we could effectively mourn our people’s history. We both thought of this as the ultimate experience of our Jewish identity. We would journey into death to confirm that we were alive. We would raise up the past to ground the future.

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1 The American Jewish community and general American populace did not know how to speak about the Holocaust in the immediate postwar years. In 1961, Israel televised the trial of Adolf Eichmann and brought in Holocaust survivors to give testimony. This public forum encouraged survivors worldwide to discuss their own experiences and permitted people to wrestle with the Holocaust as a reality. See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 176.

2 I want to make it clear that the Nazi death camps were not “Polish camps.” Too often people refer to Nazi death camps as “Polish” due to their location within Poland’s geographical borders. As I will discuss later, this mistake has had grave ramifications.

## Camp Barney Medintz, 2004

Fast-forward twenty years: Jeff and I are married and have three children. Working to create a rich Jewish family life, we welcomed Jewish summer camp into our children's experience. In 2004, I accompanied Jeff to Camp Barney Medintz, located in northern Georgia, where he had volunteered as the physician for a week. One late afternoon, Jeff noticed three young women sitting at a picnic table, all wearing white aprons and bandanas covering their hair. Clearly, they were kitchen staff. Often isolated from the rest of camp culture, kitchen workers usually existed on the lowest rung of the camp's social ladder. Others in camp had a propensity to ignore them. I am most grateful that on this evening Jeff did not. Rather, hearing them speak in Polish, his curiosity compelled him to introduce himself.

Much to Jeff's surprise, he learned that these three young women were classical musicians on summer break from their respective universities in Poland. They were working at Camp Barney to earn tuition for the following semester. With an invitation to hear their music, that evening we began a journey into an impactful friendship. Deeply kind and respectful, they were at that incredible point of launching their lives, determining who they would become. After training in classical music for more than a decade, all three were pursuing other educational endeavors. Kaja was completing her fine arts degree, while Magda planned for law school. Kaja's sister, Julia, was studying performing arts in Denmark. Unlike most overseas staff who planned on traveling after camp ended, these young women hoped to find jobs and an affordable apartment in Atlanta. We offered them our guest room, refrigerator, and help in finding work.

Interestingly, until our last day at camp, both Jeff and I naively assumed that our new friends were Jewish. How odd it was, though, for us to believe that these women were Jewish given that we believed simultaneously (and erroneously) that no Jews currently lived in Poland, that "land of destruction." Apparently, we had preferred such cognitive dissonance rather than accepting that Christian Poles would be willing to work at a Jewish camp, let alone serve Jewish children. For according to everything we had heard in our own community, *all* Christian Poles were antisemites.

Once we realized our mistaken assumption, panic set in: How should we respond to their Polish Catholic origins? Do we close the door out of fear, and thereby relinquish a possible friendship? And what exactly did we fear? Certainly, they already knew of our Jewish identity. They were willing to trust us. Why could we not trust them? Emotion had jerked us into the past and

hurled menacing questions at us. How did their relatives treat Jews during the war? What might their grandparents have done to “ours?” Are the “sins of the fathers” passed down to their children? Thankfully, reason reemerged and steadied our course. It forced us to remember their music and our meaningful conversations, and to see these three Polish women as individuals. It allowed us to open our door and home to them. While we had successfully disassociated our new friends from the stereotypes we held of their people, the more profound challenge would be to wrestle precisely with that deeply rooted negative perception of Poles as a whole.

## Atlanta, Georgia

Nearly every evening after dinner, we four women—three emotionally charged by their twenties, one bracing for middle age—gathered around the table to delve into the personal: boyfriends, fiancé, husband, family, and the future. However, we cautiously evaded the taboo subject of Polish-Jewish relations. To protect our burgeoning friendship, we all avoided that area which threatened it most: perceptions of the past. And yet, resonating from beneath our guises was the sense that if we did not deal with these difficult matters sooner or later, then we would miss our unique opportunity to truly understand each other and ourselves.

In the third week of their stay, the subject of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II came up, and even then it was only in an isolated private conversation initiated courageously by Julia, then just eighteen. Standing in my narrow kitchen galley, both of us leaning against opposite counters for support, Julia bravely raised the topic of the stereotypes many Americans harbor about Polish people. She had been taught to regard Poles as fiercely brave, heroic in battle, and intensely patriotic; she saw her country as one filled with cultural and intellectual dynamism. Having to confront the American stereotype of the “ignorant, lazy, low-class Pole” shocked her. She had heard about this attitude; but experiencing it raised a visceral reaction. This anti-Polish bigotry was what I knew so well. In this moment of truth, I trembled from fear and embarrassment. I acknowledged our cruel generalizations about her people and the pain Poles feel from it. Haltingly, we then moved on to the belief among American Jews that most Poles were complicit in Hitler’s destruction of European Jewry. And me? Well, though I tried to hide it from her, I was one of those American Jews, riding the bandwagon of blame and learned hatred.

Although Julia alone engaged with me over some of this harsh terrain, I knew that a barrier had been broken for all of us. It did not take long before the five of us, including Jeff, were able to discuss their families' histories during the war, as well as their views on the status of Jews in contemporary Poland. In the evening's calm, I first learned of their great-aunt who had hidden a three-year-old Jewish girl during the war, of their uncle's Jewish roots, and of a nation's youth awakening to the richness Jews had once brought to Polish culture. They claimed that many young Poles hungered for a connection to a Jewish heritage, grabbing at any shred of evidence they might have Jewish ancestors. According to Kaja, to testify to one's Jewish roots had become quite fashionable in 2004 Warsaw.

Listening to my new friends, I could not stave off my inner cynicism: *This can't be—they must be making up these stories to retain our confidence and friendship.* I could take everything else at face value. But I simply could not accept on hearsay that Poles were saviors of Jews during the Holocaust and that young Poles longed for Jewish roots! While I shared how odd it was for me to hear this information, I kept my deeper disbelief guarded.

## Poland, 2005

It would not take long to discover the veracity of our new friends' stories. Thankful that we had welcomed their children into our home and taken care of them, Kaja and Julia's parents invited us to be their guests in Poland. Not only would we stay in their home, but their father, Przemek, insisted on being our tour guide for a full week. Having spoken of visiting Poland since we first dated, Jeff and I jumped at this opportunity. In March 2005, only seven months since our Polish friends' stay in Atlanta, we embarked on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to understand the Other. Would I be faced with a different reality in Poland than I had been taught? This trip would help me to ascertain whether these three women had acted as renegades by working at a Jewish summer camp or were typical young Poles.

Our friends took it upon themselves to arrange our itinerary. Neither Jeff nor I made many requests concerning our agenda, aside from visiting his grandfather's hometown of Gdańsk and the usual Holocaust tourist destinations, including the Warsaw Ghetto, Kazimierz, and Auschwitz. Kaja asked if we might be interested in attending Shabbat services. Yes, *if there really is a service to attend.* Would we want to have Shabbat dinner with the congregation? Yes, *if a congregation truly does exist.* Jews live in Poland today, they insisted. Well, I would see it with my own eyes.

Having arrived in Poland on a Friday afternoon, we readied for a Shabbat service. After twenty minutes of European road negotiations,<sup>3</sup> we found ourselves at the curb of Jewish alternative life in suburban Warsaw: Beit Warszawa. Formed officially in 1995 as a liberal alternative to the Orthodox Nożyk Synagogue, Beit Warszawa expanded in 1999 into a Jewish cultural association. In this new synagogue, more than seventy-five Jews had gathered for a lecture, Friday evening services, and Shabbat dinner! My jaw dropped. In Poland Jews were forming a new community—praying, learning, and celebrating Jewish life together. This revelation confounded me. My friends had been correct. What other truths of theirs were factual? How, I wondered, would this discovery affect my self-understanding?

Meeting Kaja's and Julia's father for the first time reinforced this sweltering conflict. Przemek presented a very different image of Poland than that with which I was raised. Given our short stay, I knew we did not have time to tiptoe around taboo subjects. If I wanted answers, I would have to be direct and ask the questions. Bracing myself, I asked him about relations between Poles and Jews. This then forty-nine-year-old university-educated Catholic Pole declared unequivocally that there had never been antisemitism in Poland!

Based on my own knowledge, such a position was unfathomable. It screamed of political revisionism. Holding my anger at bay, we continued our dialogue. Przemek did recognize that there had been tensions between Poles and Jews during the interwar period, 1918 to 1939. However, couching said conflict within an economic framework allowed him to dismiss antisemitism as the central factor dividing Poles and Jews.

I challenged his position that antisemitism did not exist in Poland, by raising what I recognized as an observable contradiction: "What about the 'Polish' death camps?" A kind and gentle man, Przemek's expression morphed into anger, frustration, and pain. He made it quite clear that Poles neither designed nor operated Auschwitz. He underscored that 250,000 Poles were killed in *that* Nazi death camp. (Current research puts the number of Poles killed in Auschwitz at roughly seventy-five thousand. But the point remains the same.)<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Nazis first imprisoned Polish intellectuals at Auschwitz. These were Nazi death camps in which Poles, too, suffered and died. Ashamed to admit it,

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3 Given that neither Kaja nor Magda owned a car, and that public transportation eats away at time, our friends involved their and their parents' friends in driving us.

4 Jonathan Webber, "Personal Reflections on Auschwitz Today," in *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, comp. and ed. Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 287.

before this day I had not been concerned with or aware of what happened to the Poles when the Nazis stormed across their borders. I had been consumed only with my own people's tragedy and torment. The phrase "Polish death camps" outraged my Polish friend because it signified my misunderstandings of World War II and the Holocaust. It equated Poles with Nazis in the oppression of Jews while simultaneously denying the Poles' own victimization.

I left Poland muddled by new perspectives. Przemek's viewpoint on Polish antisemitism deeply disturbed me in that it challenged my understanding of basic Jewish *knowledge*. I was stunned by his stated truth, so convincingly did he present it. I had already been proven wrong about Jewish life in contemporary Poland. Could I be wrong also about Jewish life in Poland's past? Wrenching questions tormented me: (1) Why is my truth so different from his? (2) Is there something in his truth I need to learn and incorporate into my own? (3) Could my truth be partially constructed out of falsehoods and misrepresentations? So began a steady questioning of the education I had received at home, at my Conservative Hebrew school, in college classes, and graduate school, as well as through books and films. What struck me is that while at Brandeis as a Near Eastern and Judaic studies major with a concentration in Holocaust studies and later at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I had not heard Przemek's understanding expressed. Was I listening to the wrong people? Was I reading the wrong books, or subconsciously willfully ignoring part of their messages? My internalized truth wrestled with that presented by my Polish friends. The question for me quickly became: "Who is right?"

## Poland, 2007 and 2019

To further grasp modern relations between Poles and Jews, I revisited Poland for two weeks in November 2007. Hosted by Kaja, Julia, Magda, Beata, and Przemek, I interviewed roughly forty individuals engaged in the rebirth of Poland's Jewish communities. There I met with government officials, Jewish religious leaders, and former priests. I spoke with well-known Jewish community representatives. I listened to Polish graduate students engaged with Jewish history, Polish and Jewish educators, Poles working on developing the new POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Jewish university student leaders, participants in Christian-Jewish dialogue, as well as Poles who had recently discovered their family's hidden Jewish roots. Among those I interviewed were Polish Christians working to support the Jewish community, which was then in self-discovery mode. This short, intense period further opened my eyes. I observed

Christian and Jewish Poles working together to foster greater understanding of both Judaism and the role Jews played in Polish history. I also witnessed their mutual support in reestablishing Jewish communities, especially in larger cities such as Warsaw and Kraków. This whole experience—from Camp Barney’s worn footpaths to Poland’s cobblestoned streets—informed my desire to write this book.

Over the course of time this book has changed. I began in 2007 with the narrow goal of raising American Jews’ broader understanding of Poland, its people, and its renewed positive relationship with the Jewish past and present. I sought to bring context to different historical situations that occurred prior to the twentieth century, that period through which American Jews typecast the Polish past. In so doing, I hoped to help American Jews discard the readily grasped anti-Polish stereotypes that linger at our lips. While that vision remains a grounding principle of this book, I realized the need to broaden my approach.

Poles are not a monolith. With time, a more traditional Polish perspective has asserted greater control in politics and popular thinking, outpacing the liberal Polish agenda I first encountered in 2005. As often happens when cultures experience dramatic change, a backlash ensued. Traditionalists have assaulted the liberal Polish awakening due to fears of losing cultural control and political power. Traditionalists have made a power grab by reasserting their view of Polish patriotism.

Traditionally, Poles have fashioned Polish patriotism into a belief that all Poles are good and heroic. Concurrently, Polish patriotism identifies with the pain of Poland’s particular past by embracing the role of most victimized nation. In its post-World War II communist incarnation, after roughly six million Jews were murdered, the Polish nationalist leadership maintained this most victimized image by ignoring the Jews’ specific tragedy.

This neat understanding of Self would fall into question when the post-1989 Third Polish Republic welcomed in an era of change—openness to liberal Western cultural, political, and educational influences. Now Poles not only had to deal with Western acknowledgment and commemoration of the Jewish genocide, but in 2000 Jan Gross would force them to question Polish participation in the Jews’ demise. In his book *Neighbors*, Gross details the Polish Christian murder of Jews in Jedwabne. As such, he damaged the Pole’s proud self-image of resistance to the Nazis. To the country’s credit, an open debate took place in Poland. It spawned numerous and consequential academic investigations into the Polish victimization of Jews during World War II. This ability of the Poles to look honestly at their past is an important part of the story that I present here.



The 2003 opening of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research (Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów) is an outgrowth of this open debate. The center's agenda is to "contribute to the fight against prejudice, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, and to aid in the creation of an open society."<sup>5</sup> To build an open society necessitates peering into the dark past to discover uncomfortable truths. The center has waded into the muddy terrain with a specific focus on Polish attitudes and behavior towards the Jews during the Holocaust. Delving into previously untapped Polish archives, its members have opened inquiries into neglected topics, such as Polish and Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, Polish blackmail of Jews, Polish denouncers of Poles who aided Jews, as well as the role of the Polish "Blue" Police in the murder of the Jews.

In particular, researchers at the center have examined the Polish response in the provinces to Jewish refugees during the last phase of the Holocaust, that period after the German's final liquidation of the ghettos. In these smaller towns, ghettos were porous, and Jews were able to escape them. One historian, Andrzej Żbikowski, estimates that roughly three hundred thousand Jews escaped into the countryside during the final liquidation period.<sup>6</sup> Though perhaps too high of a figure, the center's question remains: How did Poles receive these Jewish refugees? Their research has uncovered that less than fifty thousand of those Jews seeking shelter survived. This low survival rate was due to a conflagration of animus and fear. Prewar relations between Poles and Jews in parts of the provinces had not been close. This lack of connection infused with Polish localized nationalist politics carried over to the wartime era. Researchers discovered that local Poles participated in the Nazi's hunt for the Jews and many betrayed fellow Christian Poles who helped these runaway Jews. Additionally, the center has questioned the heroism of some units within the Polish Home Army, which it revealed had also murdered Jews escaping the Nazis. Their research sheds light on the dark past, light which the current nationalist government endeavors to block.

Through its research, publications, seminars, and its Warsaw Ghetto data base that has cataloged and translated previously unknown documents, the Polish Center for Holocaust Research has greatly impacted the debate over

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- 5 Polish Center for Holocaust Research, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.holocaustresearch.pl>.
  - 6 Author's email correspondence with Antony Polonsky, who suggests that the estimated number of three hundred thousand Jewish escapees is probably too high.

Polish identity. It underscores the contradiction between the accepted national narrative of Polish aid to the Jews with documentation of Poles' victimization of Jews. Its members have continued to ask who the Poles were vis-à-vis the Jews. The center's members have expanded the singular shock of Jedwabne by revealing its repetition throughout locales in the broader region, as well as by expounding on various iterations of Polish antisemitism. That the center has deepened the public debate and continuously challenges the easy image of the good heroic Pole angers those who believe, need, and cling to that positive cultural cliché.

## **Changing Times: The Ethno-Nationalist Backlash**

The fallout from Jedwabne and the center's later revelations left a large segment of Poles deflated. They were ripe to receive a glowing version of past Polish heroism and a renewed commemoration to Polish victimization. Conservative nationalist politicians latched onto this culture clash by nurturing the fear that once again Poles are under attack, this time through character defamation. Polish traditionalists reasserted their prideful self-image. They have elevated historians who offer apologetic perspectives to counter self-critical Polish historians regarding two central themes: the Poles' betrayal of and violence against Jews during World War II; and the number and motivation of those Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews. This battle for the memory of the Polish past has widened the initial Jedwabne polarization. Concurrently, with its renewed cultural and political power, right-wing Polish nationalists have resolved to stifle, stall, and silence other voices that portray Poles in a negative light, especially during World War II and the Holocaust. Thus, they passed the so-called "Holocaust Law" which the right-wing recently invoked to bring libel charges against two historians from the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski.

While Polish nationalism has fed off the fury and fear that traditionalists raised in response to the Jedwabne fall from grace, there is no doubt that it is part of the global resurgence of nationalism and populism that has gained ground by stoking people's anger and fear concerning economic downturns, security threats, and loss of sovereignty. In Britain, it birthed Brexit, the UK's break from the European Union. In North America, it placed Donald Trump in the White House and permitted his cult of personality to launch an insurrection after his 2021 election loss. In Israel, under Bibi Netanyahu, it sidelined peace talks with the Palestinians and championed the annexation

of settlements.<sup>7</sup> Poland's current nationalist iteration is part of this global phenomenon.

Due to this grand shift, a fundamental change in the conversation about majority-minority relations has occurred globally, with glowing affirmations describing the majority. American nationalists willfully ignore the government's former and current mistreatment of Black and Brown people. Polish ethno-nationalists willfully ignore or misrepresent current research in order to portray an exaggerated and distorted positive image of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. To unite their respective political bases, campaigns in both countries have emphasized fear of incursion by brown refugees, whether from South America or Syria. As in the US and other countries, Poland's population has become deeply polarized over its nationalist and populist direction.

## Changing Times: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin imposed a new world era when, without provocation, he ordered Russian troops to invade neighboring Ukraine. In that moment, he forced the world to confront the consequences of surging authoritarianism. In this stark and explosive struggle between Ukraine's developing democracy and Putin's entrenched despotism, Putin has waged an assault not only on that land and its people, but also by proxy on the West and its democratic values. Europe has not experienced this great a physical and political threat since World War II. Ukraine's young democracy had threatened Putin's plan to restore Russian influence on former Soviet bloc nations—Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries. Historian Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern has warned that,

Ukrainians today, of different origins and of different ethnicities, are defending your and my values. That is, they are defending the democratic world. That is something that we have to understand. The failure of Ukraine will be the failure of all of us. The failure of the European Union. The failure of the United Nations.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Steve Hendrix, "As Israel's Longest-Serving Leader, Netanyahu Transformed His Country—and Left It More Divided Than Ever," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/israel-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-legacy/2021/06/13/aa9b2d7e-c9e8-11eb-8708-64991f2acf28\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-legacy/2021/06/13/aa9b2d7e-c9e8-11eb-8708-64991f2acf28_story.html).

8 Nachi Weinstein, "With Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern Discussing Russia's War Against Ukraine: The Stakes for the Jews," *Seforimchatter*, season 3, episode 37, MP3 audio, 45:01, February 27, 2022, <https://seforimchatter.buzzsprout.com/1218638/10149479>.

Through his scorched earth tactics, Putin projects what he is willing to do to enlarge his sphere of influence while becoming Russia's twenty-first-century Peter the Great.

Putin has courted widespread condemnation due to his disregard for international law and his barbaric destruction of Ukrainian civilians, whether in homes, hospitals, or hideouts. In their response, NATO allies have been straddling a narrow fence. While they have rallied quickly around Ukraine, bringing broad sweeping sanctions against Russia<sup>9</sup> and sending military aid to Volodymyr Zelenskiy's volunteer-bolstered army, NATO remains reluctant to join in the actual battle to save non-NATO Ukraine. Ever wary of Russia's vast nuclear arsenal, NATO seeks to prevent a third world war, which some fear has already begun.

How does this tragedy affect our understanding of Polish-Jewish relations, this book's topic? Responding to the Russian war against Ukraine, Poles have revealed an aspect of the Polish people that many in the West have not seen, whether due to stereotyping or lack of investigation. Compassion. Kindness. Heroism. As of May 7, 2022, more than 5.7 million Ukrainians have fled Putin's brutality. Mostly women and children (as men between eighteen and sixty must remain to defend the country), more than three million have made their way into Poland. Poland's economic growth and its prewar (2022) Ukrainian population of some 16% (due to longstanding patterns of labor migration) attracted refugees to find safety in the neighboring country. Facing its biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, Poland has responded with a wonderfully genuine desire to help. As in Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and to an extent Hungary, ordinary people have stepped up to offer clothing, medical supplies, warm food, transportation, and even housing. But in Poland the situation is more intense, given the sheer numbers of refugees crossing its borders. After just five weeks into the war, in Warsaw alone the number of Ukrainian refugees exceeded 10% of the city's population of 1.8 million.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this humanitarian crisis has placed Poland on the frontline of a battle between good and evil, with Poles transforming into heroes before our eyes.

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9 Norman Eisen, Aaron Klein, Mario Picon, Robin J. Lewis, Lilly Blumenthal, Scott Johnston, and Charlie Loudon, Brookings Sanctions Tracker, March 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-brookings-sanctions-tracker/>.

10 Fernanda Pires, "Poland's welcome of Ukrainian refugees comes with challenges," University of Michigan News, MP3 audio, 3:10, March 14, 2022, <https://global.umich.edu/newsroom/polands-welcome-of-ukrainian-refugees-comes-with-challenges/>.

Most Polish civil institutions have taken up the task of caring for the refugees. This is striking given the anti-refugee rhetoric in 2014 and 2015 when, as an EU member state, Donald Tusk's center-right Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) agreed to take in several thousand refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. During the election cycle, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) greatly exaggerated the situation by spreading fear that the refugees would "flood" Poland with alien values and diseases. As a result, PiS ascended to power with 38% of the vote. There is no doubt that race and religion played a key role. There is no doubt that race and religion also played a key role when Poland recently closed its border with Belarus, lest brown Syrian Muslim refugees cross it.<sup>11</sup>

True, these Ukrainian refugees are different. They are mostly white. But this white population is multi-ethnic. Though the majority is Eastern Orthodox, between ninety-five and ninety-eight thousand of the refugees are Catholics, Georgians, Tatars, and Jews. Poles and Ukrainians have a long history. For centuries they inhabited the same land, which at times led to violence and resentment. In 1943 Ukrainian nationalists implemented ethnic cleansing policies, killing Polish inhabitants of Volhynia. They sought to create a "nationally pure space" in Western Ukraine by murdering between fifty thousand to sixty thousand Volhynian Poles. Throughout the duration of World War II, it is estimated that Ukrainian nationalists killed between seventy thousand and one hundred thousand Poles in Western Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> In the twenty-first century, Poles and Ukrainians have worked to restore good relations. Yet the Volhynian massacre "still carries potent political currency in relations between Poland and Ukraine."<sup>13</sup> Thus, that tens of thousands of Poles are working tirelessly to welcome Ukrainian refugees is meaningful. Not only are they demonstrating to the world the heroic side of Poland, which Poles hold dear and American Jews tend to ignore, but they have also demonstrated a desire to move beyond stereotyped generalizations in order to help a victim of a common enemy. For Poles know that Putin's goals do not end with Ukraine.

In response to the rise of authoritarianism in Poland, the global pandemic, and Russia's war on the West, my goals have necessarily transformed. I have augmented my initial focus on American Jews' misperceptions of the Polish past and Polish-Jewish relations with Poles' own misrepresentations of them.

11 Ibid.

12 Jared McBride, "Peasants into Perpetrators: The OUN-UPA and the Ethnic Cleansing of Volhynia, 1943–1944," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 639.

13 Ibid.: 632.

What I have found is that at times both sides have failed to understand the Other not only because of a lack of knowledge, but also due to a willingness to trample over the Other to elevate the Self. To support my analysis, I provide readers with a synthesis of current research on Polish-Jewish relations coupled with a variety of Polish Christian, Polish Jewish, and American Jewish perspectives gleaned through interviews I conducted in 2007 and 2019. Having finally emerged at the end of this project, I now have a better grasp of Przemek's intense belief in his truth and the missing pieces from my own version. What I posit is a new construction by which to understand this long and complex relationship.

## Reassessment and Reconstruction

The process of academic reassessment began in the 1980s when a few scholars stepped outside of their cultural boxes to encounter Polish-Jewish relations anew. Polish activists and intellectuals challenged their communist government's historiography, subjecting commonly held assumptions of the past to detached scholarly inquiry. In response, some Jewish Holocaust historians allowed themselves to open doors to a broader, more complex understanding of World War II. They began to challenge their own positions of contempt for Poland and its people.

Conferences on Polish-Jewish relations convened, with American, European, and Polish attendees. Creating meaningful dialogue, they built new relationships and developed deeper understanding. An early contributor to this process, the Polish scholar Jerzy Tomaszewski, underscored the importance of these meetings: although “[t]he beginnings were difficult . . . my impression was that at least there was a group of Jewish scholars in the USA who were not so different from me and some of my friends in Warsaw.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1984, Antony Polonsky organized the First International Conference on Polish-Jewish Studies, held in Oxford, England. Over the years, the conference facilitated the introduction of Jewish history and culture into the curricula of Polish universities. Of more immediate consequence was the formation of two societies created to pursue further research in this area: the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford and its sister organization The American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies. Every year since 1987, these two associations have published a collection of scholarly essays, entitled *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*.

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14 Jerzy Tomaszewski, email correspondence with the author.