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**Antisemitism and Attitudes
Towards the Holocaust.
Empirical Studies from Poland**

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Jewish Museum Berlin

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Most of the Polish youths surveyed in 2008¹ (hereinafter referred to as the 2008 study) claim that there is a problem of antisemitism in Poland (almost 79% of the total random sample and 84% of the experimental sample), whereas about 40% in both groups are of the opinion that it is a “serious problem”, with 38% claiming that it is a “marginal” one. The research includes a national survey on a representative sample of 1,000 17- to 18-year-old high school students carried out 10 years after a previous survey in 1998. In addition, students of extracurricular programmes were studied (experimental group: 1,110 students). One of the aspects addressed in the experimental group of students, those taking part in extracurricular activities as opposed to the control group of students attending regular classes, was the intention to overcome negative stereotypes and prejudices and to fight antisemitism by replacing half-truths and products of the imagination with facts and knowledge. Furthermore, the hope was expressed that teaching about the Holocaust (and taking part in such projects) would raise awareness of the Jewish history of many Polish towns and villages enough to ensure that the Holocaust would not be forgotten. Only 2% of the total sample thinks that there is no problem of antisemitism in Poland at all. By contrast 14% of adult Poles surveyed in the TNS OBOP study in 2010 agreed with such an opinion.²

For Poles, as in other European societies, the Jew was historically the symbol of the Stranger. The historical perception of Jews as Others produced a distance over the years which excluded Jews from the space of moral responsibility during WWII.³ The Jewish fate during the Holocaust was not perceived and experienced, except by rescuers, as a fate of their own people, the citizens of Poland.⁴ Rather, it was the fate of the Stranger.⁵ The rescuers often remained anonymous and were afraid of their own neighbours long after the war had ended. And for many Poles Jews have remained mythological Strangers until the present day.

¹ Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Researching attitudes toward Jews and the Holocaust among Polish Youth*, typescript of a research project initiated in 2008 at the Center for Holocaust Studies, Jagiellonian University (CBH UJ), co-financed by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF) (currently International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA) and the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah. Both the 1998 and 2008 national surveys were carried out by the CEM Market & Public Opinion Research Institute, Kraków.

² The report *Antysemityzm w Polsce A.D. 2010 2010-04-19, K. 021/10* <http://www.tns-global.pl/archive-report/id/7838>

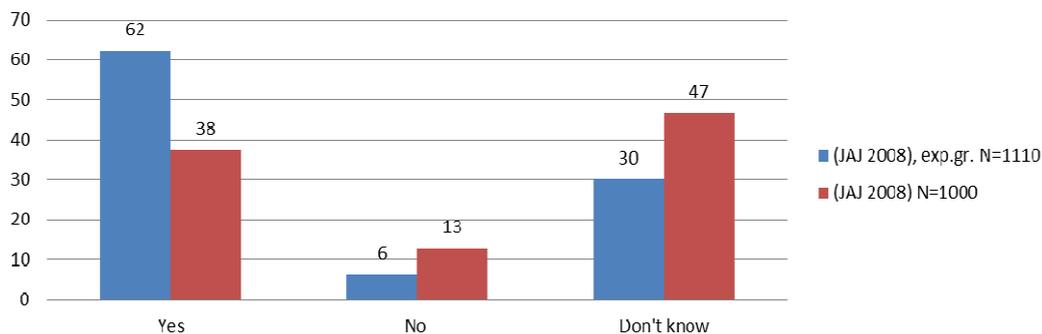
³ Bauman Zygmunt (1989), *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers; Hoffman Eva (2000), *Complex Histories, Contested Memories. Some Reflections on Remembering Difficult Pasts*, Occasional Papers, Townsend Center for the Humanities, UC Berkeley Occasional Paper No. 23 Una's Lectures 2000, 18, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/25p7c0v4#page-2> [downloaded on 20 September 2011].

⁴ According to Teresa Prekerowa about 240,000 Poles risked their life to help Jews. See Prekerowa Teresa (1982), *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom w Warszawie 1942-1945*, Warszawa.

⁵ Marcin Kula emphasised that a huge social and cultural distance existed between the Polish and Jewish communities in Poland before WWII. See Kula Marcin, *Uparta sprawa*, Kraków 2004, 97, 133.

Surveys demonstrate that the majority of Poles feel proud when faced with World War II, and few see any cause for shame.⁶ The relationship between the level of antisemitism and attitudes toward the Holocaust in the 2008 study was weak. One of the possible explanations is that the Polish youths generally know very little about the Holocaust. Significant differences were found, however, between attitudes toward the memory of the Holocaust in the national random sample and in an experimental sample of Polish high school students (Table 1 below).

Table 1. Responses to the question: Is the memory of the Holocaust important to you? (%)



The violent past relations towards Jews in Poland, the violent history of regions, towns and villages was forgotten because it did not fit the national narrative and national identity of pious Poles, heroes or martyrs, victims but never oppressors. In some cases a reluctance to face a violent past results in the phenomenon of secondary antisemitism. Zick et al. revealed that in all states in Europe traditional antisemitism is probably being replaced by secondary antisemitism.⁷ In the above study done in Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe, many of those surveyed agreed that “Jews try to take advantage of having been victims during the Nazi era” (in Poland 30% strongly agreed and 42% somewhat agreed with the statement; in Hungary the figures were 39% and 29%, respectively; in Germany 23% and 26%, respectively; in Italy 9% and 31%, respectively).

One of the components of secondary antisemitism is that it is a latent phenomenon that, together with denying one’s own antisemitic attitudes and accusing Jews of exploiting feelings of guilt among other nations, blames them for their own fate. This was initially a West German resentment and anxiety, but dating back to a Theodor Adorno article “Guilt and Defense” (1955) it is rooted in defensive reaction against one’s own guilt. Adorno’s respondents in his study expressed various defence mechanisms: rationalisation, projection and displacement. Thus, this anxiety is not attributed exclusively to right-wing extremists. A secondary antisemitism is nowadays often connected with the issues of restitution claims and

⁶ Barbara Szacka, *Czas przeszły - pamięć - mit*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2006-2007, 8-26.

⁷ Zick Andreas, Kuepper Beate, Hoevermann Andreas, *Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination: A European Report*, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 2011, 162.

is depicted in the form of denying one's own antisemitism and/or denying the historical importance of the Holocaust or refusing to acknowledge the crimes of the Holocaust. This form of subtle antisemitism is close to the phenomenon of "Holocaust fatigue". One of the components of contemporary secondary antisemitism could be an expectation that one should stop dealing with the Holocaust and simply close the chapter on the Nazi past.⁸

Denying that the Holocaust is significant is not widespread view among Polish youths. In total 53% of the students surveyed (73% of the experimental programme students, 65% of the lyceum students, and 29% of the vocational school students) do not agree with the opinion that the Holocaust is not important because it took place 60 years ago, although every third student does not have a specific opinion about it ("neither agree nor disagree"). In total about 10% of students are willing to agree with such a claim (8% of experimental programme students, 7% of academic high school students, and 16% of vocational school students).

The 2008 study of Polish youths does not confirm the presence of a component of the virulent secondary antisemitism expressed as a belief in there being too much discussion about the Holocaust. In total 23.5% of the students surveyed (strongly or rather) agree with the above opinion, while 35% (strongly or rather) disagree. In total 40.7% are undecided (avoiding an answer). Significant differences are visible between the students of academic high schools and vocational schools.

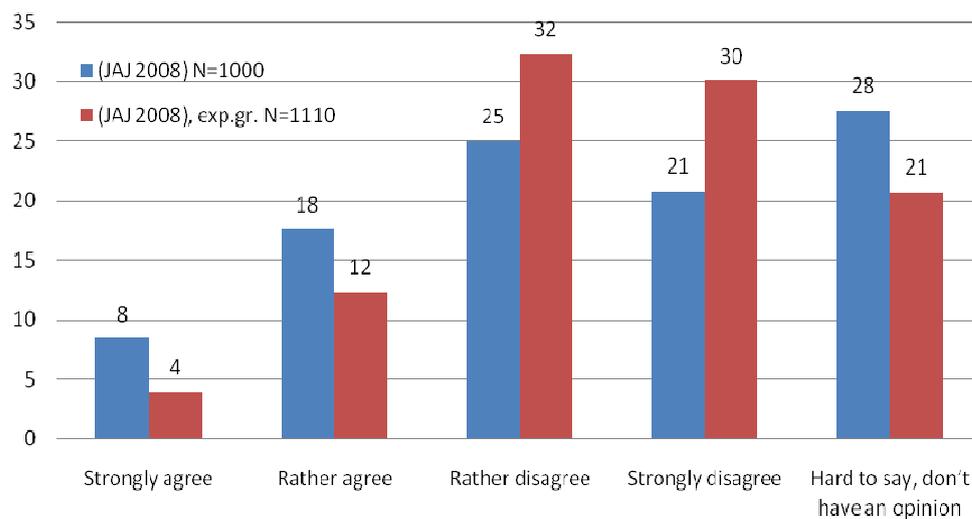
Table 2 Some people think that there is too much discussion about the Holocaust. Do you agree with this opinion?

	Total	Sex		Age		School Type		
		Female	Male	16–17	18–19	Academic	Technical	Vocational
Strongly agree	6.5%	4.5%	8.9%	5.6%	12.9%	4.0%	7.3%	12.5%
Rather agree	17.0%	13.6%	21.4%	16.6%	19.8%	15.1%	19.2%	16.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	40.7%	41.0%	40.3%	41%	38.8%	40.2%	39.8%	45.3%
Rather disagree	24.6%	27.4%	21.2%	25.0%	22.4%	26.0%	23.9%	21.9%
Strongly disagree	10.4%	12.4%	8.0%	11.3%	4.3%	14.7%	8.3%	2.3%
No answer	0.8%	1.1%	0.2%	0.6%	1.7%	0.0%	1.4%	1.6%
Total	1000	558	439	880	116	450	422	128

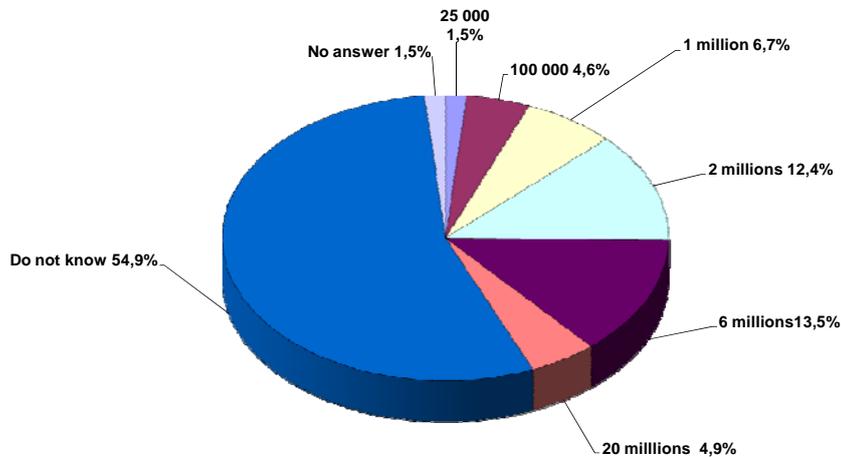
⁸ Benz Wolfgang (2006), *Anti-Semitism Today*. In: *How the Holocaust Looks Now*. International Perspectives. Ed. by Martin L. Davies and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 261-271; Bilewicz Michał (2009a), *Antysemityzm w Polsce: Formy, przyczyny i konsekwencje zjawiska*. In: *Uprzedzenia etniczne w Polsce. Raport z ogólnopolskiego sondażu Polish Prejudice Survey 2009*, Centrum Badań nad Uprzedzeniami [manuscript], 31-40; Bergmann Werner, *Anti-Semitic Attitudes in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 2008, [Volume 64, Issue 2](#), 343–362; Zick Andreas, Kuepper Beate, Hoevermann Andreas, *Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination: A European Report*, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 2011.

A negative opinion towards Jews may arise from a conviction some people have that Jews themselves are to blame for what happens to them. In Poland in the 2008 study 26% of the sample of young Poles (16% of the experimental sample) strongly or rather agree with the opinion that Jews are to be blamed for what happens to them, whereas 46% disagree (62% of the experimental group students). More than one quarter of those surveyed have no opinion on the subject.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of response to the question “There is also an opinion that Jews themselves are to blame for what happens to them (%)”



The study conducted in 2008 revealed that only 14% of 16-17-year old high school students gave the correct answer regarding the number of the Jews murdered during the Holocaust (34% of the respondents from the experimental group). Perhaps the low level of knowledge about the Holocaust among Polish youths can be attributed to a reluctance to learn about the suffering of Jews. The survey questionnaire used in the author's study in 2008 contained questions permitting a comparison to be made of the level of knowledge about the Holocaust in two groups of students, control and experimental. The percentage of those students who in their definitions included the terms genocide, mass killings or murder of Jews in reference to the Holocaust was much higher in the experimental group (59%) than in the control group (33%).

Table 4. How many Jews died during World War II?

Generalised symbols of WWII victimhood have always played a role in Poland, and after the fall of Communism, the abandonment of censorship and the emergence of memory of the Holocaust, their role increased in importance, particularly as regards attitudes toward Jews and a perceived rivalry in suffering.⁹ The collective memory of one's own nation as a victim of history, war or foreign occupation certainly does not apply only to Poles. This phenomenon is present in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In Ukraine there is competition of suffering, and some researchers compare victims of the Holocaust with the victims of the Great Famine (*Holodomor*).¹⁰ In Moldova the existence of competing victim groups is also present.¹¹

Students in the surveys of 1998 and 10 years later have a sense that Polish suffering during WWII might not be acknowledged enough if Jewish suffering were highlighted.¹² Such a notion is common in many societies divided by conflicts of memory. Acknowledging the suffering of Others does not mean giving up claims of in-group suffering and one's own identity, be it in Israel or somewhere else, is rightly noticed by Haddad, Manço, Eckmann.¹³ In total 11% of the Polish students

⁹ The term "competition among victims" (original: "la concurrence des victimes") was introduced to social science by Jean-Michel Chaumont (1997) in his book: *La concurrence des victimes: génocide, identité, reconnaissance* and has since become popular.

¹⁰ Podolskyi Anatolii, *A Reluctant Look Back. Jewry and the Holocaust in Ukraine*. In: *Osteuropa. Impulses for Europe. Tradition and Modernity in East European Jewry*, 2008, 278.

¹¹ Dumitru Diana, *Moldova: The Holocaust as Political Pawn*. In: *Osteuropa. Impulses for Europe. Tradition and Modernity in East European Jewry*, (2008), 310.

¹² Sinnreich Helene, *Polska i żydowska historiografia stosunków żydowsko-polskich podczas drugiej wojny światowej*. In: *Polacy i Żydzi. Kwestia otwarta*. (eds.) Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska (eds.), Biblioteka "Więzi", Warszawa, 117-126. [English title: *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham], 2008, 122.

¹³ Haddad Kévin, Manço Altay, Eckmann Monique, *Antagonismes communautaires et dialogues interculturels. Du constat des polarisations à la construction des cohésions*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.

said that Poles suffered more than Jews, and almost twice as many (20%) admitted that Jews suffered more than Poles.

Table 5. Frequency distribution of responses to the question “Do you think that Jews suffered the same, more or less than Poles during the war?” (National random sample)

	Total	Sex		Age		School Type		
		Female	Male	16–17	18–19	Academic	Technical	Vocational
Jews suffered more than Poles	20.3%	17.9%	23.5%	20.0%	22.4%	20.4%	20.4%	19.5%
Poles suffered more than Jews	10.6%	7.2%	15.0%	9.7%	18.1%	8.0%	10.9%	18.8%
Both nations suffered the same	28.3%	30.5%	25.7%	29.8%	16.4%	32.2%	26.8%	19.5%
It is hard to compare	31.0%	34.2%	26.7%	31.6%	25.9%	33.6%	29.1%	28.1%
It is hard to say	9.6%	10.0%	8.9%	8.6%	16.4%	5.8%	12.6%	13.3%
No answer	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.9%	0.0%	0.2%	0.8%
Total	1000	558	439	880	116	450	422	128

The most popular response was the answer “It is hard to compare” (1/3 of all responses). A similar number of respondents (28% in the control and 32% in the experimental group) think that “Both nations suffered the same”. In a Hungarian study conducted by Andras Kovács¹⁴ as many as 57% of respondents stated that Hungarians suffered as much as Jews during WWII.

The percentage of respondents who believed that Poles helped Jews during the war “as much as they could” rose almost 6% between 1998 and 2008, indicating an increase in more defensive responses. The percentage who believed that Poles “could have done more” (11%) and “did not help at all” (2%) did not change significantly (in 1998 the responses were 9% and 2%, respectively).

The percentage of respondents obtaining the highest values on the scale of traditional antisemitism in the national samples of Polish adults in Krzemiński’s¹⁵ 2002 study (12%) was higher than in author’s sample of youths in 2008 (9% and 4%). The group lacking traditional antisemitism is over 12% larger in the author’s sample of youths.

Slightly more respondents (70% in the national sample and 74% in the experimental group) in the 2008 study registered a zero value on the scale of modern

¹⁴ Kovacs Andras, “Anti-Semitism and the Young Elite in Hungary.” [In:] In: Sociological Papers, 1996, vol. 5, no. 3, 1-74; Kovacs Andras, Antisemitic Prejudices in Contemporary Hungary, Acta no. 16. Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism. A special research unit of SICSA. The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999.

¹⁵ Ireneusz Krzemiński (ed.), Antysemityzm w Polsce i na Ukrainie. Raport z badań, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2004.

antisemitism. A greater difference in values between the experimental and control groups of students is found in the case of the scale of traditional antisemitism. This permits one to conjecture a hypothesis that exposure to educational programmes teaching about Jewish history and culture decreases traditional antisemitism to a much greater degree than modern antisemitism.

The small number of Jews in Poland contrasting with the presence of the myth of the power of Jews was reflected in the youth survey, albeit not with such a wide scope and to such an extent as among adult Poles. In comparisons with similar analyses of Krzemiński's 2002 study and Kucia's study¹⁶ we can state that, in our 2008 study, the percent of respondents without traces of antisemitism is higher (total 70%) than in Kucia's study of 14-18-year-old students before visiting the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau (66%) and Krzemiński (32% in 2002 and 38% in 1992). Strong antisemitism among the adult population in Poland lay at 17% in 1992 and 27% 10 years later in Krzemiński's 2002 study after the debate on *Jedwabne*.

As we can see, modern antisemitism among students in Poland is lower than among the adult population, and rejection of antisemitism is much stronger among youths than among adults.¹⁷ The differences in the distribution of the results between Krzemiński's sample of Polish adults (2002) and the authors' sample of Polish youths in 2008 in response to the indicators of the scale of modern antisemitism are easily detected at first glance. The most interesting differences are between the percentage of respondents who obtained the lowest (0) and the highest (4) values. The percentage of respondents who did not agree with any of the statements and who obtained a zero value on the Krzemiński's modern antisemitism scale was 32% in the sample of Polish adults in 2002, compared to 70% of Polish youths in 2008. The percentage of respondents who obtained the highest value, indicating the maximum level of modern antisemitism, on Krzemiński's scale of modern antisemitism is again much higher amongst Polish adults (27%) than amongst Polish youths (5%).

Conclusions

Indifference during the Holocaust has caused fear of the accusation of compliance, which was, and still is, covered by silence and/or other defensive mechanisms. The books of Polish scholars such as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, Alina Skibińska, Adam Puławski, Jakub Petelewicz and Andrzej Żbikowski reveal the darkest pages in the history of a Poland occupied by the Germans where Jews were afraid of their neighbours as well as where some ethnic Poles made the decision to risk their life and help Jews. The new historiography referring to the attitudes of Poles toward Jews during the Holocaust is not present, however, in new Polish textbooks. Even today, 13 years after the signing

¹⁶ Kucia Marek, Czy wiedza o Zagładzie eliminuje antysemityzm? In: Diatłowski Jerzy, Rąb Karolina, Sobieraj Iwona (eds.), *Holocaust a teodycea*, Wydawnictwo Homini, Kraków, 2008, 213-228.

¹⁷ Kucia, Marek, *Holocaust Sites, Relics, Representations, and Memory: The Case of Auschwitz*. In: *Fact[s] and Lies in the Common Knowledge on the Holocaust*. Conference Materials, 2005.11.17. Daria Nałęcz and Mariusz Edgardo (eds.), Ministry of Foreign Affairs et al., Warsaw-Cracow, 2006, 119.

by Poland of the Stockholm Declaration, students still know very little about the Holocaust despite numerous governmental and non-governmental educational initiatives. This is perhaps the reason for a lack of strong correlation between such variables as knowledge about the Holocaust, memory of the Holocaust and antisemitism. We need to look at these variables separately in studies of Polish youths.

Antoni Sulek analyzed the responses to the survey question: "Which groups have too much influence in Poland?" The respondents included politicians, business community and the Catholic Church. Only 2% of those surveyed mentioned Jews. But when asked specifically to assess the scale of Jewish influence, 23% answered "too much". "This experiment shows that sometimes it is enough to directly refer to the 'Jewish matter' to activate antisemitic thinking," says Sulek. "However, there is room for moderate hope. Eight years ago, 43% said Jews had too much influence. ... Generally speaking, one could say that in Poland the distance from Jews is slowly diminishing, but still remains significant." According to his findings, 84% of Poles are now more likely to accept Jews as neighbours than they did 10 years ago, when only 75% said they would. Whereas 20 years ago, 40% would have advised acquaintances not to marry a Jew, 10 years later the number dropped to 33%.¹⁸

Using surveys in my own studies, I am aware of the critical approach of some scholars to this method of collecting data. The Polish anthropologist and ethnographer Joanna Tokarska-Bakir¹⁹ emphasises that data are not facts and numbers can be constructed using the methods of data collection. Surveys bring representative, but terse, decontextualised results. Bearing in mind the differences in attitudes resulting from the methods of research employed, I usually use mixed methodologies and combine quantitative and qualitative techniques in my own studies.

Whether educational initiatives have an impact on the attitudes of Polish society towards Jews is to be determined in empirical, and much needed, research that still has not been carried out. Education about the Holocaust in Poland is not only challenged by the meanders of educational policy such as the new reform of 2008. The radical reform in 2008 transferred modern history, and consequently the topic of the Holocaust, from the third grade of the history curriculum of middle schools (age 15-16) to the first grade of high schools (age 16-17). This topic, nonetheless, was left in middle school Polish literature curricula and ad hoc in the social science curricula, bizarrely in a section entitled "patriotism of today."

Another significant factor is a reluctance to lose the image and status of a special nation, particularly one affected by the injustices of history, including 123 years in the remote past being divided up between three imperial neighbours and more recently painfully affected by WWII (about 2 million victims) followed by Soviet political influence. The fear of accusations of individual collaboration and

¹⁸ Shula Kopf, Poles Confront the Dark Side, <http://www.jpost.com/Jerusalem-Report/Poles-Confront-the-Dark-Side> [accessed 15 December 15, 2013].

¹⁹ See: Tokarska-Bakir Joanna, *Jak wyjść ze zмовy milczenia. Nauki społeczne wobec stosunków polsko-żydowskich*, 2010, http://www.archiwumetnograficzne.edu.pl/downloads/polemika_z_sulkiem.pdf [Accessed 1 January 1, 2013].

incomplete awareness of the betrayal of their own citizens of Jewish origin under German occupation by some segments of society are other factors that counteract open learning about the Holocaust. The attachment to victimhood is still strong. A general lack of bad memories should be challenged. The lack of a sustained institutional effort to incorporate shameful facts concerning the murder of Jewish co-citizens into curricula and textbooks distorts national identities.

There is a complex web of problems related to remembering the Holocaust in Poland, known as the principal location of the Holocaust. Among the main factors determining the evolution and constraining the expression of Holocaust memory in Poland were a mass of traumatic emotions, moral challenges and the politics of Communism, including censorship. In addition, fear of condemnation interplayed with a need to admit guilt. The context of Polish attitudes toward the Holocaust, i.e., the policies of the occupier, is also an important factor and often underplayed by many researchers writing on this topic. But the harsh conditions of German occupation, Poland's own enormous losses, and the false attributions and projections of Stalin's crimes onto Jews associated with Communism do not, and cannot, explain the murdering of women, children, elderly people and infants. Therefore, a cognitive understanding of the mechanisms of scapegoating and/or acting out do not, and should not, diminish moral obligations resulting from past atrocities committed by the in-group. The reality, however, is different, and collective amnesia is still present in Poland and many other countries, along with the attempt, initiated by governments and NGOs, to contribute to a collective remembrance of the Holocaust.

As the most recent research demonstrates, there are some positive changes in attitudes towards Jews and the Holocaust among Polish youths. However, there is a danger that students' consciousness with regard to the Holocaust may become limited to bare historical facts or mere repetition of certain general statements without a deeper understanding of the essence of the phenomenon and the losses to Poland and Polish culture. Despite numerous initiatives in local communities, a considerable proportion of young people did not seem to realise that Holocaust victims, apart from the Jews deported to death camps in Poland from other European countries, were also Polish citizens living in Polish cities, towns and villages.

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