

IN THE SHADOW OF AUSCHWITZ

Teaching the Holocaust in Poland

BY BURTON BOLLAG

POLISH SCHOOL children are now taught an uncensored version of history. Gone are the taboos and blatant distortions imposed by the former Communist authorities. Yet, until now, there has been one subject about which students have been kept in the dark: their former Jewish neighbors.

Sixty years ago Poland had the largest Jewish population in the world. On the eve of World War II, 3.5 million people—one out of every ten Poles—were Jewish. They played a central role in Poland's cultural and economic life, while maintaining a flourishing culture of their own. Today only a few thousand Jews remain. Not only did the people disappear, as smoke up Nazi chimneys, knowledge of their existence evaporated, too. Public school history books contain only a few passing references to the Jews, and the official school curriculum gives the Holocaust a mere mention during a lesson on World War II.

And yet the past keeps casting troubling shadows. Young Poles can't help but see the synagogues that dot the country: strange empty buildings with alien symbols, representing an unknown culture. In recent years, several Catholic priests have been—belatedly—censured by their superiors for anti-Semitic preachings. Graffiti scribbled on the sides of Polish buildings call on local soccer teams to beat “the Jews,” as rival teams are disparagingly referred to. When children get angry, they as likely as not call one another “dirty Jew.” Until now, although individual teachers may have intervened, the schools have done little to discourage this kind of mindless anti-Semitism in a country virtually devoid of Jews.

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This denial of an important part of Poland's history suited the former Communist authorities. The Soviet bloc was allied with the Arab states against the Jewish state, Israel; and the cause of the Soviet Jews had been taken up by the rival superpower, the United States. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war was followed by a wave of officially backed anti-Semitism in Poland. It culminated in the purging from their jobs of many of the Jews who were left in Poland and prompted many of them to emigrate to the West. Often, linguistic gymnastics were employed to avoid mention of the Jews. Museums and schools spoke about the “three million Poles and members of other ethnic groups” killed in the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. As with other controversial issues, the Communist authorities did not tolerate open debate.

When Communism collapsed with Poland's first free elections in 1989, the restrictions on free expression also ended. But the new history books, hastily produced to replace the Communist texts, remained largely silent on the Jews. Since then pressure has been building—from both inside and outside Poland—and the education system is finally beginning to confront the country's Jewish past.

In 1995, Poland signed an agreement with Israel. Warsaw pledged to teach more about its Jewish history. Israel in turn promised to tone down its accusations of Polish anti-Semitism. New textbooks have yet to be produced. But one clear sign of change is the separate lesson on the Holocaust supposed to be added to the public school curriculum next fall. “I think the Polish authorities take the issue very seriously now,” says Jan Gross, a professor of political science at New York University.

Gross, a Jew who emigrated from Poland in 1969, is angry that Poland has not yet confronted its behavior during and after the Holocaust. He points out that few

Poles know about the massacre of Holocaust survivors in the town of Kielce in 1946, which helped persuade many of the remaining 250,000 Jews in Poland to leave. "Ignorance of the Holocaust shows up again and again in an inability to deal with current conflicts," says the professor. He cites the ongoing controversy at Auschwitz, where Catholic radicals have angered Jewish groups—and embarrassed Polish authorities—by erecting several hundred large wooden crosses just outside the camp. Official attitudes have clearly changed since the collapse of Communism, says Gross. But "there is a dramatic need for teaching materials: books, slides, etc. There is so much to do."

Jan Gross traveled to his native country last September to lecture on the issue in Cracow, Poland's beautiful medieval capital. The venue was the third annual Teachers' Conference on Teaching the Holocaust. The conference was sponsored by Cracow's Center for Jewish Culture and the Spiro Institute of London, which popularizes Jewish culture and sends concentration camp survivors to speak at British public schools. Ninety public school teachers from across Poland attended the three-day conference, along with a handful of scholars and researchers. The participants are part of a growing—but still very small—movement of Polish scholars and educators who are exploring and teaching the rich, 800-year history of the Jews on Polish soil.

"We are not doing this to please Jews in America or anybody else" says Joachim Russek, president of the Judaica Foundation, which runs the Center for Jewish Culture. "It is in Poland's vital interest to build up a democratic society that is free of xenophobia." Like most Poles, Russek, who trained as a specialist in international law, is a Roman Catholic. So are almost all of the conference participants.

A Day Trip to Auschwitz

Some of the people attending the conference make a day trip to Auschwitz. The camp, formerly the largest Nazi extermination center, and now a museum, is located about an hour's drive south of Cracow. The teachers enter through the camp's main gate, under metal letters that still spell out the German words that mocked those who entered but never left: *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work will set you free). They tour exhibits documenting the machinery of mass murder and see mounds of suitcases, shoes, eyeglasses, hair, prostheses left behind by victims.

Groups of Polish school children file by quietly. Do they understand? Asked what happened here, 14-year-old Angelika from Przemyśl in eastern Poland shows that she knows part of the story: "Jews, Poles, and Gypsies were killed here. The Germans deceived them, told them they were going to work."

The teachers take a five-minute bus ride to Birkenau, a subcamp on the other side of the huge complex. Here the ruined remains of one of Auschwitz' four large gas chambers and crematoria have been left as they were when the Nazis dynamited them in a last-minute effort to hide their crimes. The group's guide, historian Mirosław Obstarczyk, picks up what looks like a pebble; it is an unburned bit of human bone. The teachers are walking on the ashes of the 1.5 million men, women, and children—90 percent of them European Jews—who were murdered here.

The Poles living in the area knew when a transport had deposited its human cargo, says Obstarczyk. There was soon more smoke coming out of the tall chimneys above the crematoria. "People in the area say you could taste it in the air. It was sweetish and sticky."

A major problem for many visitors is that they lack information to place what happened here in some his-

torical context, according to Obstarczyk. When told about the execution of a prisoner who had been kept alive as a slave laborer, one American visitor asked, "Where were his lawyers?" Obstarczyk says that Polish and Jewish young people are well prepared in comparison with some other visitors: "The worst are Scandinavian and American young people. They have no context to comprehend what happened here."

The Polish teachers' conference is held in a former Jewish study house in Kazimierz, Cracow's old Jewish quarter. Once home to a thriving Jewish community of 65,000, Cracow now has 100 Jews. Lectures and panel discussions deal with aspects of Jewish history in Poland and with various approaches to teaching the subject. Participants are eager to share their experiences. One teacher says that Jewish history represents a dead past for his students. More international student exchanges are needed, he says, so that young Poles can meet living young Jews from other countries. Another teacher says that teaching students about the Holocaust is a way to sensitize them to broader human rights principles: "Today in Poland it's not OK to dislike the Jews, but it is OK to dislike the Roma," he says, using the preferred term for Gypsies.

A middle-aged teacher with a barrel chest and a white sweater stands up and relates proudly how his class carried out a six-month project in which students helped restore the Jewish cemetery in their town and used it as a tool to explore local Jewish history.

Teaching the Unimaginable

There are several workshops offering participants the chance to get a more intimate understanding of new teaching ideas, even if the tight schedule allows them little time for active participation. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, a social psychologist from Jagiellonian University here, co-leads a workshop entitled "Teaching Tolerance—Reducing Prejudice."

"Start a lesson on the Holocaust in an unconventional way," urges Ambrosewicz-Jacobs. "Believe me, students will remember it." She tells participants about the famous exercise done by an Iowa school teacher, Jane Elliot, in the late 1960s, after the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Elliot's goal was to teach the meaning of prejudice. One day her blue-eyed students were given privileges denied to the brown-eyed ones. The next day the roles were reversed.

Such participatory methods are alien to Poland's conservative teaching tradition, as the teachers remind Ambrosewicz-Jacobs. She counters by urging them to "trust your intuition."

Foreign specialists in Holocaust education tell the Polish teachers at the Cracow conference about changing pedagogical approaches in their own countries. In the first years after World War II, many European countries invented and taught myths about how theirs had been a nation of resistance fighters. There was little interest in hearing from people who had survived the concentration camps. In any case, people who had endured such unimaginable experiences were often too traumatized to speak publicly. By the 1970s, attitudes began changing.

"Survivors have started getting recognition, not only

as victims, but as people with stories to tell," says Levien Rouw of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, who spoke to teachers attending the conference. Holland was a country with one of the highest proportions of its Jewish citizens killed. Seventy-five percent of the 140,000 Dutch Jews were murdered by the Nazis. "A mistake made by many well-intentioned teachers is to focus on the horrors alone," he says. "Psychological studies have shown that people don't like victims. It's necessary to humanize those who were victimized, to focus on the experiences of one or several people."

Also at the conference in Cracow, is the House of the Wannsee Conference, a German organization dedicated to promoting Holocaust education. The group is based in the villa on Wannsee Lake in Berlin where, on Jan. 20, 1942, Nazi officials drew up plans for the total destruction of European Jewry. The group's Annegret Ehmann tells the Polish teachers that Holocaust education in Germany "is becoming increasingly student-oriented." At a growing number of German schools, students are led to care for abandoned Jewish cemeteries or to investigate the life of a Jewish student expelled from their school. "This gives students more motivation and involvement," she says.

Despite the enthusiasm evident at the conference, a certain tension is never far from the surface when Poles discuss the Holocaust. "There is a stereotype about Polish co-responsibility for the Holocaust," Jozef Brynkus, an instructor at a Cracow teacher training college, tells the meeting in a defensive tone of voice. "It's horrible, and it's due to American ignorance."

Facing History?

It was during the ultimately successful Solidarity-led opposition to Communist rule during the 1980s that interest in Jewish studies awoke in Poland. Scholars say two events played a key role. In 1985, Polish state television broadcast part of the highly acclaimed documentary film "Shoah" by French journalist Claude Lanzmann. It consists of gripping interviews with survivors, witnesses, and those who participated in the murder of the Jews. In 1987 a Catholic journal published an article by literature professor Jan Błoński entitled "The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto." Both works showed that although the Poles were not the perpetrators of the Holocaust, they displayed a variety of responses to the tragedy: Some hid Jews at great personal risk, others turned them over to the Nazis, and many were callously indifferent.

"It was a shock," says Piotr Trojański, a history researcher at Cracow Pedagogical University, who helped organize the conference. "Before that, the popular image was that Poles had mostly helped the Jews."

Today, several leading Polish universities have established Jewish studies departments; Warsaw and Jagiellonian universities have each opened an institute. Most universities are said to have at least one researcher working on some aspect of Jewish history. Yet the role of the Catholic Church's anti-Semitic teachings—not repudiated by the Vatican until well after the war—is still a highly sensitive issue. Scholars say it is the only

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major topic on which Holocaust research and discussion among Poles have yet to begin in earnest.

While universities are increasingly taking the issue seriously, a change in the public school curriculum is only planned for the next academic year. Until now, the teachers who went to the trouble of coming up with more on their own were rare. At his high school in Warsaw, teacher Robert Szuchta gives his students old photos and maps and sends them out to locate places that were once part of the Jewish ghetto, demolished by the Nazis. He shows them part of the film, "Shoah" in which old Poles, standing in front of a church, display their prejudices toward the murdered Jews. Then he gets his students to talk about what

they have seen.

"They try to justify the behavior of the Poles by attacking the others: The Jews were passive, the French deported Jews, and so on," he says. "The important thing is to get them to think about it, to relate the Holocaust to situations today, like Bosnia and Kosovo."

A few blocks away from the conference, Wioletta Olesiuk, a schoolteacher from Białystok, visits Cracow's old Jewish cemetery. Walking among tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions dating to the sixteenth century, she says she wants her students to know who the Jews were. Olesiuk's interest in the history of her former Jewish neighbors began when she started noticing unusual, once ornate buildings in certain neighborhoods of Białystok, left in ruins. "I began asking myself, why don't they renovate these buildings?" Finally she understood. The buildings had be-

longed to the city's now vanished Jewish community. Then, two years after the end of Communism, she attended a Polish production of the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof." At the same time, she befriended a fellow teacher from Israel.

After a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C., she returned to Białystok bursting with questions about the former Jewish community in her city. Local libraries and scholars provided few answers. "They were often uncomfortable with the questions," she says.

"Ten years ago I taught the Holocaust like other teachers," she says, "ten minutes during one 45-minute lesson." Now Wioletta Olesiuk takes her students, who range in age from ten to fifteen, to visit a renovated synagogue in a nearby town, to Białystok's former Jewish ghetto, and to the local history museum, where they see photographs documenting the Holocaust. Then she talks with her students about what they saw. "They are very emotional and relieved to talk," she says. "They say, 'I have my room, my bed. I like my life. The children in the ghetto didn't have that.'"

"I can say I get them to look at things differently," she says, with a hint of pride. But the same is not true of the prospective history teachers she instructs at Białystok University. "Most are not interested," she says. "They never learned about the Holocaust in public school."

For Robert Szuchta, Wioletta Olesiuk, and a few others, modifications of the public school curriculum cannot come soon enough. Their hope is that the changes will be sufficient to help the next generation of young Poles see things differently. □