

**POLAND SINCE 1939.** In September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. By early October the country was partitioned once again. Under Nazi rule, most Jews were forced into ghettos and the community was largely annihilated through mass killings by shooting squads and killing centers. Even after World War II, Jews faced adversity under communism and did not remain in large numbers. After the fall of the Communist system in the 1990s, however, Polish Jewry has experienced revival.



An armband, part of the uniform of guards who stood watch at the gate of the Vilna ghetto, where the Nazis confined the city's Jews during World War II. (YIVO Archives)

**Poland Repartitioned (1939–1941).** On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, and on 17 September the Soviet Union attacked from the east. About half of Poland's prewar territories, consisting of 196,000 sq km and including eastern Galicia, Volhynia, Polesie, and the Białystok, Nowogródek, and Wilno (Vilna) provinces, were annexed by the Soviet Union. The USSR transferred the city of Wilno and about 9,000 sq km of its surrounding territory to Lithuania in October 1939 but reclaimed the area when it occupied all of the Baltic States in June 1940. The rest of Poland fell under German occupation. Some 92,000 sq km of the country's northern and western regions, including Pomorze, Poznań, Upper Silesia, most of the Łódź province (along with the city itself), and parts of other provinces, were incorporated directly into Germany; the remainder, some 97,000 sq km containing Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin, Kielce, and Radom and most of their provinces, was constituted as the Generalgouvernement (Government General), a quasi-colonial region administered by a German civilian bureaucracy headed by Governor-General Hans Frank.

As many as 1.3 million Jews lived in the annexed Soviet territories, making up almost 10 percent of the total population, the large majority of which consisted of ethnic Ukrainians and Belorussians. They were joined by about 350,000 Jewish refugees from the German zones, including 12,000–15,000 Jews who had settled in Wilno when the city had still been under Lithuanian rule. Upon annexing the region, the Soviet government recognized as Soviet citizens Jews (and other non-Poles) who were permanent residents of the area, while offering refugees the choice of either taking on Soviet citizenship or returning to their former homes. The refugees who were living in Wilno had a third alternative: those possessing an entry visa to another country were allowed to travel across the USSR. As many as 5,000 Jewish refugees managed to escape the war zone in this way. An indeterminate number of the remaining refugees wanted to go back to their former homes; however, instead of being returned to the German-occupied areas, most were deported to the Soviet interior, along with many permanent residents who were exiled as part of the efforts of the authorities to Sovietize the newly conquered Polish territories. Altogether, about 1.4 million Polish citizens were sent to the

Soviet interior between 1939 and 1941, including about 400,000 Jews. Conditions for the deportees were severe; perhaps one-third died of cold, malnutrition, or disease. Nevertheless, although it could not be foreseen at the time, deportation to the Soviet interior offered Polish Jews their best chances for survival.

Those who escaped deportation were subjected to intense pressures under the Soviet ideological system. In accordance with the Communist ethos, the Jewish middle class found its industrial and commercial enterprises and larger private homes nationalized and confiscated. Jews were also affected by new taxation and monetary policies. Shopkeepers now sought work as paid employees in government-owned stores, while Jewish factory owners became likely candidates for exile if they did not quickly find new “proletarian” occupations. Large numbers of Jewish independent artisans were now forced into cooperatives, as were many Jews who had worked in the service industries. At the same time, the Soviet economy offered numerous opportunities for women to find jobs, causing significant changes to the gender distribution of the Jewish workforce. Moreover, Jews who had received secular educations found new opportunities for employment in public administration.

The Soviets generally regarded Jews as potentially the most loyal element among the ethnic groups in the annexed Polish territories, and in the early stages of their rule were glad to appoint them to local administrative posts. From early 1940 on, however, many such Jews were replaced by Ukrainian or Belorussian Communists imported from regions that had been part of the USSR before the war. Jews also tended to be underrepresented in elected governmental bodies; their numbers did not correspond to their percentages within the population. Nevertheless, the initial impression made by Jews as servants of the new regime, together with the widespread welcome that Jews accorded the conquering Red Army immediately following the Soviet invasion (generally signifying their expressions of relief over not having fallen into German hands) exacerbated Polish-Jewish tensions as well as relations with the region's other ethnic groups.

Although Jews suffered hardships in the Soviet system, under German rule the conditions were far more severe. During the first months of occupation, members of the Einsatzgruppen (Special Task Forces) often engaged in gratuitous acts of cruelty against Jews, spreading terror throughout the occupation zone. Between December 1939 and March 1940, 200,000 of the 600,000 Jews in the incorporated territories were deported to the Generalgouvernement, often in the most brutal fashion. They were concentrated around Nisko (Lublin province) in the southeastern corner of the Generalgouvernement, where the Germans initially planned to establish a “reservation” for Jews from regions throughout Europe. With the abandonment of these plans in the spring of 1940, many deportees were viciously expelled across the new Soviet border.

Meanwhile, the lives of the approximately 1.5 million Jews already living in the Generalgouvernement were unsettled by a series of harsh decrees. In November 1939, Jewish bank accounts were blocked and the right to withdraw funds was severely restricted. A month later, Jews over the age of 10 were ordered to wear an

armband bearing a Star of David, and boys and men aged 14 through 60 were compelled to register for forced labor. Registration procedures notwithstanding, German press-gangs began to kidnap Jews at random for labor details. In January 1940, Jews were forbidden to travel by train. Much Jewish property was confiscated, and Jewish schools were closed.

Beginning in October 1939, increasing numbers of Jews were forced to live in ghettos, where food rations were minimal, living space overtaxed, and sanitary conditions inadequate. Jews from smaller towns and villages were often deported to ghettos in nearby cities. In some ghettos, factories producing goods for German consumption provided employment to a small percentage of residents; most Jews, however, were gradually forced to sell off their possessions in order to procure food and pay rent. Although Jews developed a wide array of self-help organizations to contend with these conditions, mortality in the ghettos was staggering. More than 43,000 Jews died in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941 (almost 10 percent of its population), the large majority from illness (mostly typhus), starvation, or cold. [*See also Ghettos.*]

Jews' ability to cope with the severity of the ghetto regime was hampered at first by a dearth of experienced leaders, as much of the prewar Jewish political leadership had escaped abroad during the first months of the war. On 28 November 1939, Governor-General Frank ordered all Jewish communities to establish Judenräte (Jewish councils). Although the order called for Jews to elect their own representatives, in fact Judenrat members were invariably appointed by the German authorities and were responsible for carrying out the occupiers' instructions. Hence, in only a few ghettos did these councils gain their people's confidence. An alternative leadership, however, arose only gradually. It came mainly from within the ranks of the self-help organizations, especially from leaders of youth movements, whose energy and strong sense of mutual responsibility helped them build effective frameworks for supporting not only their own members but the broader community as well. [*See also Judenräte and Other Representative Bodies*]

Jews found only occasional sympathy among the Polish population. Poles themselves were sorely oppressed by the occupiers, and during the early stages of the occupation their situation was even more severe in some respects than that of the Jews. Moreover, the German authorities worked assiduously to exacerbate Polish-Jewish tensions in order to forestall the development of a common resistance. Although some witnesses reported generally greater solidarity in the face of common suffering, more observers took note of frequent Polish expressions of gratitude that the Germans were finally "solving Poland's Jewish problem." On the whole, the Polish community seems to have looked upon the treatment of Jews with much ambivalence. While prewar antipathies remained widespread, few Poles were willing to join actively with the Germans in their oppression. Most simply ignored the Jews' plight.

**Destruction (1941-1944).** On 22 June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Within a month, German forces occupied all of the former Polish territories that had been taken over by the USSR in 1939. Eastern Galicia was added to the

Generalgouvernement, the Białystok district was annexed to Germany, and the remaining Polish lands were incorporated into two newly formed colonial areas, Reichskommissariat Ostland and Reichskommissariat Ukraine, each of which included non-Polish areas as well.

Following on the heels of the invading army, the Einsatzgruppen shot Jews en masse in virtually every captured city, town, and village. At first the killings were aimed mainly at Jews who had held positions in the Soviet administration, and then at Jewish community leaders, but within a short time all Jewish men, women, and children became targets. Within three weeks, 5,200 Jews were shot in Białystok, 5,000 each in Wilno and Tarnopol, 3,500 in Złoczów, and 3,000 in Lwów. By the end of October, the Jewish death toll in the newly captured territories had reached 150,000. Jews who had escaped the first sweep of killings were incarcerated in ghettos. The overwhelming majority were shot in a series of murderous actions during the two years that followed.

These killings were an aspect of the Nazi plan to annihilate all of European Jewry, which crystallized in 1941. In December 1941, the murder campaign was extended to the rest of Poland. Jews throughout the country were killed primarily by asphyxiation in special killing centers, to which they were transported. Approximately 2 million Polish Jews perished in this fashion, mostly between March 1942 and October 1943. [*See Killing Centers; Operation Reinhard*].

Until the murder campaign was already well underway, Polish Jews did not comprehend that the Germans intended to kill all of them. Even then, such an understanding was confined at first only to a small group of leaders. Heads of some of the larger Judenräte believed that their ghettos might be spared if they could demonstrate their usefulness to the German war effort. In attempting a strategy of “salvation through work,” these leaders often took extreme measures to force ghetto residents to meet stringent German production demands. Doing so usually increased the estrangement of the head of the Judenräte from the bulk of the ghetto population. Nevertheless, many Jews believed falsely that employment in a German-run factory increased their chances to avoid deportation to a killing center. The competition for a limited number of jobs in those factories thus often pitted Jews against one another, weakening communal solidarity.

Opposing such behavior and beliefs were the leaders of the youth movements. On 31 December 1941, Abba Kovner, head of Ha-Shomer ha-Tsa'ir in Wilno, called for the formation of an armed resistance movement, arguing that the Nazis would allow no Jew to escape a death sentence. Throughout 1942, armed underground organizations were formed in 24 Polish ghettos. In Warsaw, Białystok, and several other ghettos they engaged German forces in combat; elsewhere, they conducted commando operations, broke out of ghettos to join partisan groups, or helped Jews escape across the borders. Nevertheless, in many cities the resistance groups not only clashed with the local Judenräte but also failed to gain broad backing among the ghetto population, who believed (correctly) that in the end Jewish fighters could not stop the Nazi murder campaign. [*See also Armed Resistance; Youth Movements*].

The Polish underground offered some marginal succor to Jews seeking to resist or escape their executioners, but such assistance was not of high priority to these groups. In late 1942, the secret Council for Aid to Jews, code-named Żegota, was established under official Polish auspices to help Jews hide from their pursuers; it was able to assist approximately 4,000 Jews. The Polish underground also helped Jews transmit information about their situation to the West in the hope that Allied governments might intervene on their behalf. The Polish Home Army supplied some light arms to the Warsaw ghetto fighters. Many individual Poles also extended a hand to Jews [*see* Righteous Gentiles]. Countless others, however, refused to assist when asked, blackmailed Jews in hiding, or even handed Jews over to the Germans. In a small number of towns, including Jedwabne and Radziłów, Poles even perpetrated murderous pogroms against their Jewish neighbors as Germans looked on. In the end, though, both assistance and complicity were atypical; as before the beginning of the mass killing, most Poles simply did not concern themselves with the dire threat facing Jews.

After October 1943, only one major ghetto had avoided liquidation--Łódź, where 70,000 out of an initial 164,000 Jews remained alive. In August 1944, with the advancing Red Army but 120 km away, this last great concentration of Polish Jewry was sent to its death. Never again would so many Jews live in a single Polish city. Almost 3 million Polish Jews, close to 90 percent of the country's prewar Jewish population, perished between September 1939 and January 1945, the vast majority as a direct result of the German government's ideologically driven desire to see them die.

**Liberation, Reconstruction, and Flight (1944-1947).** The map of Poland changed again as a result of the German defeat. The territories that had been annexed by the USSR in 1939 remained for the most part under Soviet control, with the new Polish-Soviet border corresponding largely to the Polish ethnographic frontier. However, Poland took control of the former German territories of Lower Silesia and Pomerania, along with approximately half of what had once been East Prussia.

Liberation of the Polish lands took place in three distinct stages. Soviet troops reentered the eastern borderlands in January 1944 and took control of what was to become Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine during the following month. In July of that year, the German occupiers were expelled from the area between the new Polish-Soviet boundary and the Vistula River. The territories west of the Vistula (including Warsaw) came under Red Army control in January and February 1945. A Polish civilian regime (the Polish Committee of National Liberation) was established under Soviet patronage in the latter two regions immediately upon liberation. Polish rule was extended *de facto* to Lower Silesia and Pomerania shortly thereafter.

It is estimated that some 30,000-50,000 Jews were present in the territories that formed the new Polish state at the time of liberation. These numbers included about 10,000 Jews in the lands east of the Vistula, 15,000-20,000 in western Poland, and an additional 5,000-20,000 who continued to live as non-Jews under false

identities they had assumed during the war. This total represented approximately 8-14 percent of the full remnant of Polish Jewry after the Holocaust, which numbered around 350,000. An additional 70,000-80,000 Polish Jews were liberated from camps in Germany and Austria. Between May and December 1945, some 40,000 such Jews returned to Poland, bringing the number registered with the Central Committee of Polish Jews as of 1 January 1946 to 81,500. By far the largest group of Polish Jewish survivors (about 230,000 individuals) spent the war years in the Soviet Union, most having been deported to the Soviet interior between 1939 and 1941. About 180,000 of them opted to return to Poland in accordance with the Polish-Soviet repatriation agreements of September 1944 and July 1945. The Central Committee counted 240,000 Jews in Poland as of 1 July 1946, although because of duplicate registrations the actual number was likely only between 205,000 and 210,000. An additional 30,000 Polish Jews who had initially elected to remain in the USSR returned to Poland in 1957.

The Jewish population of postwar Poland was in flux, however, not only as a result of the arrival of successive waves of refugees but also because of two great surges of emigration. During the first wave, from July through October 1945, 40,000-50,000 Jews left the country; during the second, from May through September 1946, more than 100,000 additional Jews departed. A smaller but still incessant stream of emigrants was also recorded outside of these periods of mass flight. Thus it appears that between 266,000 and 281,000 Jews set foot on Polish territory at some time between July 1944 and July 1946. By the middle of 1947, however, only about 90,000 remained.

Most of the Holocaust survivors who left Poland during the first two years after liberation did so with the help of a semiclandestine organization called Berihah Operated by Zionist parties and youth movements that had reestablished themselves following liberation, this movement brought some 120,000 Jews out of the country, directing them mainly to displaced-persons camps in the U.S. occupation zones of Germany and Austria, whence, it was hoped, they would proceed to Palestine [*see Berihah*]. Nevertheless, it appears that strongly held Zionist convictions motivated only a minority of those departing. For the majority, the decision to leave, whether under the auspices of Berihah or in some other fashion, legal or illegal, was evidently prompted by a combination of factors. First was the psychological difficulty many survivors experienced upon returning to their former homes. There they confronted the loss not only of their families but also of the Jewish institutions--indeed, the entire Jewish way of life--they had known earlier. Second was the inability of many to find an adequate source of livelihood in a Polish economy that had been destroyed by the war and was now being rebuilt in accordance with Communist principles, upon foundations that left little room for Jews to resume work in their traditional occupations of trade and crafts. Even as late as mid-March 1946, no more than half of the Jews seeking employment had found jobs; in some provinces, the Jewish unemployment rate exceeded 80 percent. Wartime dislocation and economic distress left many Jews homeless: fully one-third of the 15,000 Jews who had concentrated in Łódź by June 1945, for example, were

reported needing a place to live, while the shelter operated by the local Jewish Committee held only 1,250 beds. As the Polish Jewish population grew with each successive stage in the country's liberation, and especially with repatriation from the Soviet Union, unemployment and homelessness became ever more extensive.

Jews also generally feared for their physical safety in the face of repeated outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence between fall 1944 and summer 1946. As many as 600 Jews (by some estimates many more) were killed in attacks during this interval. A proclamation by the Jewish Youth Committee of Kraków summarized the situation after a pogrom in that city on 11 August 1945: "Jews are returning from Russia, antisemitism is getting stronger, pogroms are spreading, and no one knows what tomorrow will bring; it is impossible to stay here!"

Still, various groups made serious efforts to reestablish a viable Polish Jewish community. Leading those efforts was the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, formally constituted in February 1945 by representatives of four Jewish political parties--Poale Tsiyon C.S. (Socialist Zionist), Left Poale Tsiyon, Ihud (an alliance of General Zionists and Mizrahi), and the Bund--together with a group of Jewish activists from the Polish Workers (Communist) Party [*see Central Committee of Jews in Poland and entries on the above-named political parties and activist organizations*]. Between 1945 and 1950, the Central Committee presided over an extensive network of local and provincial Jewish committees that oversaw a range of social welfare, educational, and cultural institutions, including a supply distribution network, children's homes, schools, youth centers, homeless shelters, health clinics, sanatoriums, libraries, employment agencies, vocational training courses, and loan banks. At first, the majority of communal resources were devoted to providing immediate relief for Jews in economic distress: in 1945 the committees maintained 22 shelters with more than 5,300 beds, served an average of 765,000 meals monthly in 44 public kitchens, and distributed some 35,000 packages of food, clothing, and medicine. By 1946, however, the emphasis shifted to self-help. Under the auspices of its Productivization Division, the Central Committee catalyzed the establishment of 106 cooperative enterprises by the middle of that year. These operations employed 2,387 Jews in manufacturing, construction, and mining, while the committee's local placement services helped some 40,000 Jewish men and women to find jobs.

Cultural activities were stressed as well. By mid-1946, 24 Jewish elementary schools had been founded in which Yiddish served as the language of instruction and Hebrew was studied one hour daily. The Central Committee's official Yiddish-language weekly, *Dos Naje lebn* (The New Life), reached a circulation of 7,000, and more than 20 additional Jewish newspapers were published in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. A Central Jewish Historical Commission gathered Holocaust survivors' testimonies and published several vital studies and anthologies; a Yiddish theater staged productions on a regular basis; and a 15-minute Yiddish radio broadcast was aired each evening.

A countrywide Jewish Religious Community, led by David Kahane (1903-1998), who served as chief rabbi of the Polish Armed Forces, was established

separately from the Central Committee in 1945. This organization supervised synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, provided for the preparation and distribution of kosher meat, and arranged for marriages and divorces to be concluded in accordance with Jewish law. In 1948, the Religious Community was absorbed into the Central Committee.

Much of the Central Committee's efforts centered about a program to resettle large numbers of Jews in the newly acquired territories of Lower Silesia and Pomerania. The committee hoped that in these regions the employment opportunities would be greater than in other parts of the country and that a new basis for relations between Poles and Jews could be established. By mid-1946, some 70,000 Jews--mainly repatriated from the Soviet Union--resided in these areas. Most settled in and around Wrocław, which became home to the country's largest Jewish community. Still, unemployment persisted as more than 50 percent of employable men could not find work. Anti-Jewish violence was not absent.

The Polish government, dominated by Communist elements, endeavored--in word, at least, if not always in action--to facilitate the stabilization of Jewish life. The administration officially delegitimated the public voicing of sentiments hostile to Jews and enjoined anti-Jewish discrimination in public employment. It also allowed Jews to form self-defense committees and even took some direct action aimed at curbing anti-Jewish violence. Such steps were consistent with the new regime's self-interest. Lacking strong support among the ethnic Polish majority, the government depended disproportionately upon Jews to provide the clerical and administrative personnel it needed to establish its authority. Government service thus became an area in which Jews could find jobs. Some Jews even rose to the highest ranks in the state and Communist Party apparatus, including Politburo leader Jakub Berman (1901-1984) and Minister of Industry Hilary Minc (1905-1974). However, such heavy Jewish involvement in the regime reinforced the longstanding stereotype identifying communism with Jewish rule. Much--though by no means all--of the violence against Jews was perpetrated by right-wing political groups seeking to overthrow the Communist regime altogether. Suppressing anti-Jewish attacks thus became an element in the government's campaign to overcome violent opposition to its rule.

At the same time, the administration did not place significant obstacles in the way of Jews wishing to leave the country between 1944 and 1947. It even conducted a "green border" policy between August 1946 and February 1947, permitting Berihah units to operate openly. The government did so for several reasons. Reducing the number of Jews in the country helped it represent itself as working toward a monoethnic Poland, a goal also proclaimed by parts of the anticommunist right. Similarly, helping large numbers of Jews leave under Zionist auspices chimed with Soviet support for Zionist aspirations in Palestine as part of Moscow's efforts to undermine the British position in the Middle East. Finally, some government leaders appeared to have felt sincere sympathy for survivors of the Holocaust and hoped to help them rebuild their lives as they wished.

Jewish and governmental efforts, combined with the sharp decrease in

Jewish population numbers after the mass exodus of 1946, brought a measure of stability to the Jewish situation by 1947. After the Kielce pogrom of 4 July 1946, in which 42 Jews were killed following rumors of a ritual murder, anti-Jewish violence virtually disappeared and with it the sense of crisis that had dominated Jewish life since liberation.

**To the Edge of Disappearance (1948-1990).** Despite stabilization, about 30,000 additional Jews left Poland in the two years after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This exodus took place against the background of government measures limiting the role of the Jewish institutions whose creation the regime had encouraged in the years immediately following liberation. Beginning in 1948, responsibility for educating Jewish children was transferred from the Central Jewish Committee to the state, and Jewish cooperatives were absorbed into the general cooperative economy. Jewish political parties were liquidated in 1949 and 1950, as was the Central Committee itself. In 1950, the state-appointed Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów (Jewish Social and Cultural Society), headed by Communists Hersz Smolar (1905-1993), Szymon Zachariasz (1900-1970), Józef Łazebnik, and Ber Mark (1908-1966), took over the responsibility for all Jewish cultural activities. In the Stalinist spirit then pervading the entire Soviet bloc, Jewish publications were subjected to strict ideological tests. In the same year, the state ceased to grant Jews emigration permits, reflecting the Soviet Union's growing hostility toward Israel.

Emigration became possible again between 1957 and 1959, following the return to power of Władysław Gomułka, secretary-general of the Communist Party, who had been deposed in 1948 for opposing certain aspects of Stalinist policy. Gomułka exploited the fact of the Jewish origins of some of the leaders he overthrew in order to present himself as the true initiator of a monoethnic Poland. In this connection, he encouraged Jews who continued to identify as such to leave the country. Almost 50,000 did so, most going to Israel.

Those who remained enjoyed several years of relative quiet, and the visibility of Jews in Polish public life faded markedly. Intermarriage became the norm. Nonetheless, in March 1968, following the severing of diplomatic relations with Israel after the Six-Day War and in the context of mounting internal disputes in the regime's higher echelons, the Gomułka government began an aggressive public anti-Jewish campaign in which Jews--or, more strictly speaking, "Zionists"--were presented as Poland's enemy within. The Interior Ministry compiled a card index of all Polish citizens of Jewish origin, even those who had been detached from organized Jewish life for generations. Jews were removed from jobs in public service, including from teaching positions in schools and universities. Pressure was placed upon them to leave the country by bureaucratic actions aimed at undermining their sources of livelihood and sometimes even by physical brutality. Over the next two years, some 25,000 Jews fled, reducing the Jewish population of Poland to between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals.

Some Jewish cultural institutions, including the Yiddish State Theater founded in 1950 and directed by Ida Kamińska (1899-1980), the Jewish Historical

Institute (successor to the Central Jewish Historical Commission), and the Yiddish newspaper *Folks-shtime* (The People's Voice), remained in operation throughout the Stalinist and Gomułka years and even through the subsequent two decades of Communist rule following Gomułka's deposition in 1970 for his inability to control widespread worker unrest. However, the active Jewish community consisted almost entirely of an older generation. Most observers at the time predicted that the thousand-year Jewish presence in Poland was on the verge of extinction. [See Theater, *article on Yiddish Theater; Jewish Historical Institute; and Folks-shtime.*]

**Jewish Revival and the Postcommunist Era.** From the mid-1970s on, challenges to Communist rule became more formidable, as young dissident intellectuals began to forge effective alliances with disgruntled workers. Many of these protesters were descendants of assimilated Jewish families, and they cited the regime's ongoing suppression of Jewish culture as yet another indictment against it, chiding it for concealing Poland's rich multicultural heritage. Exploring Judaism, of which few had any substantial knowledge, thus became an avenue by which these intellectuals of Jewish or part-Jewish origin expressed their political opposition. In 1979, a small group embarked upon a course of self-education and founded the *Żydowski uniwersytet latający* (Jewish flying university). Some of the so-called "new Jews" also began a movement to locate and restore the remaining physical traces of the Jewish presence in Poland, including synagogues and cemeteries. In the early 1980s, the Citizens Committee for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries and Cultural Monuments was established, becoming a focus for Jewish activism.

Such activism struck a responsive chord with a portion of the broader Polish public. By the late 1980s, a significant market was eager to read literature on Jewish themes, especially works by previous generations of Polish Jewish writers such as Julian Tuwim, Adolf Rudnicki, Julian Strykowski, and, above all, I. B. Singer. There were also demands for Jewish folk art and Jewish food. Public interest in Jewish matters was particularly stimulated by the appearance in 1987 of an article entitled "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," by Catholic intellectual Jan Błoński, which called, inter alia, for acknowledgment that the history of Polish Jewry was an essential component of the history of Poland. Such acknowledgment was presented as crucial to Polish society's working through the legacy of the Holocaust.

All of these trends were intensified with the fall of Communist rule in the 1990s. Assisted by philanthropies from abroad, most notably the U.S.-based Ronald Lauder Foundation, the Polish Jewish community employed two rabbis, operated a small network of Jewish schools and summer camps, and sustained several Jewish periodicals and book series events. Academic Jewish studies programs were established at Warsaw University and the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Kraków became home to Fundacja Judaica, which sponsored a wide range of cultural and educational programs on Jewish themes for a predominantly Polish audience. Trips to sites of Jewish interest became an important component of Poland's tourism industry. In 2000, Poland's Jewish population was estimated to have risen to as many as 10,000 or 12,000.

The increasing visibility of Jews and Jewish themes in postcommunist Polish life also created a certain backlash, which became particularly apparent during a two-year debate (2000–2002) over revelations concerning Poles from the town of Jedwabne who had massacred the town's Jews in July 1941. It remains to be seen how this backlash will influence the recent Jewish revival.

[See also *Holocaust and the biographies of principal figures mentioned.*]

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