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## The View of Israel in Post-Communist Poland (1989 – 2012)

Since 1989 democratic changes in Poland have radically improved the official view of Israel. This essay will trace how Polish attitudes toward Israel have evolved over twenty years of democracy, and what issues have dominated public discourse.<sup>1</sup> To begin, it should be stressed that from 1967 to 1989 information about Israel was very limited in Poland in no small part because, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, most Soviet-bloc states broke diplomatic relations with Israel and supported the Arab states.<sup>2</sup> The Communist-controlled mass media's portrayal of Israel as an "aggressive power" in the Middle East painted a black image of Israel in the minds of Poles and a positive view of "friendly" Arab states, especially Syria and Iraq.

Yet by the 1980s, as political opposition took shape in the Solidarity movement, the state-sponsored anti-Israeli propaganda had become less and less effective. Many Poles had reacted against state opposition to Israel, developing a pro-Israeli stance. Sympathies toward the American ally Israel were encouraged by political opposition circles as a reaction to anti-Israeli Communist propaganda, and many Poles came to appreciate Israel's achievement of having constructed not only a wealthy state out of very few resources, but also the sole democratic state in the Middle East. When in fall 1989, not long after the collapse of the Communist regime, Polish television broadcast on prime time on a Sunday morning the film *Shalom*, a TV

<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on Polish attitudes towards Israel, as opposed to attitudes towards Jews. Sources are limited to verifiable texts – printed and available in the internet – and do not include anonymous online opinions wherein the author and general appeal cannot be ascertained (so-called "internet trolls").

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Bożena Szaynok, *Poland and Israel 1944–1968. In the Shadow of the Past and of the Soviet Union* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2012), 406; Monika Kalinowska, "Stosunki polsko-izraelskie po 1967 roku [Relations between Poland and Israel since 1967]," *Marzec '68 z czterdziestoletniej perspektywy*, ed. Danuta Kisielewicz and Małgorzata Świder (Opole: Uniwersytet Opolski, 2008), 280.

documentary made by Israeli television, many Polish viewers watched with great interest.

In February 1990, Poland's new democratically elected government (which included many Solidarity movement leaders) took a major step by re-establishing diplomatic relations with Tel-Aviv.<sup>3</sup> Shortly afterwards a new Polish government allowed the transfer of Soviet Jews to Israel via Warsaw's airport. Logistically difficult, not to mention dangerous, the operation allowed about 26,000 Jews from the Soviet Union to emigrate to Israel.<sup>4</sup>

From that time onward, all Polish governments have declared neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and have stressed both the right of Israel to exist in safe and recognized borders and the need to create a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders.<sup>5</sup> Even Jewish politicians and mass media have recognized Poland as one of the few countries to refrain from open criticism of Israel. Various Polish governments have stressed the historical ties between Poles and Jews, supported the presence of a sizeable Jewish population in Poland, and initiated commemoration of the Shoah.<sup>6</sup> The 1991 visit of the legendary Solidarity leader and Polish president Lech Wałęsa to Israel demonstrated the continuing improvement of bilateral relations and prompted a number of initiatives helping to further enhance cooperation between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> "Israel Days," organized in towns across Poland since 1994, have allowed many Poles to better understand Israel. The Festival of Jewish Culture in Kazimierz (near Cracow), organized in 1998, celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of Israel. And since the early 1990s, the Polish-Israeli Friendship Society has played an important role in fostering a positive view of Israel in Poland.<sup>8</sup>

Pope John Paul II played a crucial role in building a positive view of Jews and Israel among Catholics in his native Poland.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Dyduch, *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie w latach 1990–2009* [Relations between Poland and Israel in 1990–2009] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2009), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Jacek Stawiski, "Jak godzić ogień z wodą [How to reconcile fire with water]," last accessed 12 November 2012, [http://tygodnik.onet.pl/31,0,67221,jak\\_godzic\\_ogien\\_zwoda,artykul.html](http://tygodnik.onet.pl/31,0,67221,jak_godzic_ogien_zwoda,artykul.html).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. See also Dyduch, *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie*, 43–68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49–54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 221–222.

On the occasion of the Holy Father's visit to Israel in 2000, Israel once more found a positive place in Polish political, religious, and cultural discourse.<sup>9</sup> Catholics were pleased that the Israeli government had preserved Christian holy sites, and growing numbers of pilgrimages to the Holy Land allowed Polish citizens to see and better understand Jewish history and religion.

Another important shift in Polish perceptions of Israel occurred after the Al-Qaida attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. Since 9/11, Israel has been seen as a close American ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism – a fight in which Polish forces have participated both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2000 and 2005, post-Communist president Aleksander Kwasniewski visited Israel. In a speech at *Yad Vashem*, he stressed “Polish interest in Poland's Jewish culture” and “relations between Poland and Israel on many levels.”<sup>10</sup> Even right-wing politicians, such as the late Lech Kaczynski (elected president in 2005), began to see Israel as a bulwark against fanatical Islam.<sup>11</sup> A year after his election, Kaczynski visited Israel. Of the many bilateral agreements he signed, one sponsored encounters between Polish and Jewish youth. The 2008 visit of the new Polish prime minister Donald Tusk (from the Liberal Party) further strengthened the relations between the two nations. His visit coincided with the official inauguration of the “Year of Poland” in Israel, the first important cultural event in Israel dealing with Poland.<sup>12</sup> In 2008, Kaczynski declared that Polish leaders unanimously condemned antisemitism and unequivocally supported Israel<sup>13</sup>. This assertion was repeated and strengthened in February 2011 by Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski. In a statement carried widely by Polish media, he stressed that Poland and Israel had become close partners over the past ten years, and that Israel could rely on Poland's friendship and solidarity. In Sikorski's view, Polish solidarity with Israel was spiritually

<sup>9</sup> See Luiza Arabella Wawrzyńska-Furman, *Judaizm a ekumenizm w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II* [Judaism and ecumenism in the light of the teaching of John Paul II] (Toruń: Europejskie Centrum Edukacyjne, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Dyduch, *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie*, 89–90 and 134–135.

<sup>11</sup> Stawicki, “Jak godzić ogień z wodą.”

<sup>12</sup> Dyduch, *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie*, 327–328; Kalinowska, “Stosunki,” 286.

<sup>13</sup> Dyduch, *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie*, 328.

rooted in the trauma of the Holocaust having been carried out by Nazi Germany on Polish soil – against Polish will, but in front of Polish eyes.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, since 2009 Israel's policy toward the Palestinians and the separation wall led to disruptions in the positive change in Polish perceptions of Israel. Ironically, criticism has arisen not from the right, but from the left side of the social and political spectrum. The very same Polish press which had previously played such an important role in building a positive view of Israel now criticized Israel's political line. Having first served as the unofficial weekly of the democratic opposition and "Solidarity," the Catholic paper *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*Universal Weekly*), edited in Cracow, in 1987 initiated a lengthy and important discussion about Polish responsibility for the Shoah, thus facilitating the first open scholarly discourse on Polish-Jewish relations during the Nazi occupation of Poland between 1939 and 1945.<sup>15</sup> In an article entitled "Why I'm sailing to Gaza," published in July 2011, a commentator stressed that Israel's policy toward the Gaza strip reminded him of the Nazi imprisonment of Jews in ghettos during World War II. In the polemical left-wing weekly *Polityka*, the world-renowned philosopher Zygmunt Baumann (who had been forced to emigrate from Poland in 1968 amid a communist-led, antisemitic purge) leveled an open critique of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, asserting that Israel's construction of a wall around "occupied territories" was "an effort to outdo those who had ordered [building] the wall around the Warsaw ghetto."<sup>16</sup> Further articles similarly described the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians as second-class citizens (i.e. the ban on unauthorized well-dig-

<sup>14</sup> Sikorski, "Polska jest krajemfilosemickim [Poland is a philosemitic country]," *Bibuła* 28. February 2011, last accessed 14 August 2012, <http://www.bibula.com/?p=33547> (Sikorski's words were printed in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*).

<sup>15</sup> Jan Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto [Poor Poles Look At Ghetto]," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 2, 11 January 1987, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Gaszenie pożaru ogniem [Extinction of fire by flames] (an interview of Artur Domasławski with profesor Zygmunt Baumann), 16 August 2011, last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.polityka.pl/swiat/rozmowy/1518590,1,rozmowa-artura-domoslawskiego-z-prof-zygmuntem-baumannem>. Baumann's statement caused fierce controversy. See for example the text of *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist Konstanty Gebbert, who described Baumann's words as "vile", last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.polityka.pl/swiat/analizy/1518844,1,izrael-i-palestynczycy-polemika-k-geberta-z-prof-baumannem.read>.

ging by Arabs, the expulsion of Bedouins, etc.).<sup>17</sup> Right-wing commentators have gone much further, however, attacking the Polish government's participation in "Israeli-American invasions of sovereign countries," its never-ending "servility" toward Jews and Israel on every issue, and its tacit acceptance of "genocide" in the Gaza Strip.<sup>18</sup> Polish public opinion has also steadily turned against Israeli behavior and come to consider Palestinians as victims of Israeli politics. Nonetheless these tendencies can also be found in other European societies.<sup>19</sup>

Jewish accusations concerning the behavior of Poles during the Holocaust and Jewish demands for compensation for plundered and lost property influenced the Polish attitude towards Israel.<sup>20</sup> In 2012, a small-town Polish high school planned to invite a Palestinian activist. The ensuing intervention by the Israeli embassy in Poland elicited much criticism among Poles and a negative reaction from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>21</sup> Recently, the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran has also negatively influenced Polish attitudes towards Israel.

It should be stressed, however, that the perception of Israel in Poland is also influenced by American support of the Israeli government in the Middle East. In recent months, an astonishing manifesto of support for Israel originated from the right wing of the Polish political scene. A far-right wing journalist from the monthly *Frona* stressed that Poland (or Poles, or Catholics) needed to maintain a strategic alliance with the

<sup>17</sup> See for example Magdalena Muhgrabi, "Do ostatniej kropli [Till the last drop]," *Polityka*, 12 December 2008, last accessed 21 February 2013, <http://www.polityka.pl/swiat/analizy/1504498,1,swiatowy-dzienwody-bez-wody.read>; Artur Domaslawski, "Wygnanie z ziemi obiecanej [An exile from the Promised Land]," *Polityka*, 28 January 2012, last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.polityka.pl/swiat/analizy/1523343,1,beduini-z-wyrokiem-na-przesiedlenie.read>.

<sup>18</sup> "Wspólne posiedzenie rządu Polski i Izraela [A common meeting of Polish and Israeli governments]," *bibula* 23.12.2010 r, last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.bibula.com/?p=29648>.

<sup>19</sup> Stawicki, "Jak godzić ogień z wodą".

<sup>20</sup> Mirosław Kokoszkiewicz, "Gdzie zakotwiczy lotniskowiec USS 'Israel'?" [Where the USS "Israel" is going to anchor?], *bibula* 6.07.2012, last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.bibula.com/?p=58439>.

<sup>21</sup> I LO w Tarnowie: Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych uważa za niesłuszną interwencję ambasady Izraela [I LO in Tarnów: Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers intervention of the Israeli Embassy inappropriate], last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.tarwizja.pl/index.php/informacje/2990-i-lo-w-tarnowie-ministerstwo-spraw-zagranicznych-uwaza-za-niestosowna-interwencje-ambasady-izraela>.

United States and Israel because these states played a significant and positive role in defending Christian civilization.<sup>22</sup> This view of Israel as a strong American bulwark in the Middle East (sometimes sarcastically referred to as the “USS Israel”) reveals abiding changes in perceptions of Israel by groups that until now had sustained a rather reluctant attitude to that country.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, negative views have grown on the left, which used to be sympathetic to Israel.

It is also important to highlight recent non-political activities that have fostered a positive view of Israel in Poland. History books describe the relations between Poland and Israel as beginning immediately after World War II. Notable in this respect are two books on Polish-Israeli relations before 1967. One, by Bożena Szaynok appeared in English in 2012;<sup>24</sup> the other, a source book edited by Szymon Rudnicki and Marcos Silber, appeared in both Polish and Hebrew in 2009.<sup>25</sup> Israeli history can also be studied in Poland using works by foreign scholars like Colin Shindler, whose work has been translated into Polish,<sup>26</sup> and by journalists like Paweł Smoleński, who recently published *Israel Does not Fly any Longer*.<sup>27</sup> Also influential is Teresa Torańska's documentary film *Dworzec Gdański* [Gdański Railway Station], in which Polish Jews who had to leave their homeland during the Communist antisemitic purge of 1968 are interviewed. Both this film and a book based on it published in 2008 have played a role in educating Poles about Israeli citizens who still cultivate the Polish language and remember their roots.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Wywiad z Tomaszem Terlikowskim”, 19 February 2011, last accessed 12 November 2012, <http://fzp.salon24.pl/280017,wywiad-z-tomasz-p-terlikowskim>.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Jacek Kwieciński, “Izrael – wróg publiczny nr 1? [Is Israel public enemy no 1?],” *Gazeta Polska*, No. 33, 17 August 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Szaynok, *Poland and Israel*.

<sup>25</sup> *Stosunki polsko-izraelskie (1945–1967). Wybór dokumentów*, ed. Szymon Rudnicki and Marcos Silber (Warszawa: Archiwum Państwowe, 2009). Likewise, in 2010 the young Polish scholar Joanna Dyduch wrote an important analysis of Polish-Israeli relations since 1990 entitled *From Normalization to Strategic Partnership* (Dyduch, *Stosunki*).

<sup>26</sup> Colin Shindler, *Historia współczesnego Izraela* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 2011). The English version appeared as *A History of Modern Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Paweł Smoleński, *Izrael już nie frunie* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Teresa Torańska, *Jesteśmy. Rozstania 68* [We are. Separations 68] (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2008).

To conclude, there is reason to hope that a positive view of Israel may be nurtured in Poland in the future. As mentioned earlier, a bilateral agreement between Poland and Israel fosters significant growth in the number of organized encounters between Polish and Jewish youth. A particularly valuable educational initiative has been organized by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.<sup>29</sup> Polish fellows spend three months in Israel to learn about Israel's history, tradition, and culture, as well as about the current social situation there. At the same time, young Israelis come to Poland for a similar purpose. In both cases, young people meet, exchange ideas, and play sports together. There is hope that such initiatives may foster a positive view of Israel in Poland, and vice versa.

<sup>29</sup> See *Wymiany studentów z Polski i Izraela* [Exchange of Polish and Israeli students], last accessed 21 February 2013, <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/pl/cms/wymiany-studentow-z-polski-i-izraela/>.