



Thus, *prima facie*, all this looks like elaborate nonsense, but when many people, without having been manipulated, begin to talk nonsense, and if intelligent people are among them, there is usually more involved than just nonsense.

—HANNAH ARENDT, "Personal Responsibility  
Under Dictatorship"

On April 30, 1997 . . . Rwandan television showed footage of a man who confessed to having been among a party of *genocidaires* who had killed seventeen schoolgirls and a sixty-two-year-old Belgian nun at a boarding school in Gisenyi two nights earlier. It was a second such attack on a school in a month; the first time, sixteen students were killed and twenty injured in Kibuye.

The prisoner on television explained that the massacre was part of a Hutu Power "liberation" campaign . . . During [this] attack on the school in Gisenyi, teenage girls who had been roused from their sleep were ordered to separate themselves—Hutus from Tutsis. But the students had refused. At both schools, the girls said they were simply Rwandans, so they were beaten and shot indiscriminately.

—PHILIP GOURREVITCH, *We Wish to Inform You  
That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*

## INTRODUCTION

The origin of this book, as is so often the case, is in another book. Years ago I read a volume of documents edited by Miriam Hochberg-Mariańska, a wartime member of an organization called Żegota, which on behalf of the Polish underground was helping Jews hiding from Nazi persecution. Hochberg-Mariańska was Jewish but she had what at the time were known as "good" looks, which meant that she could pass for an ethnic Pole. She worked in the Kraków branch of Żegota, and was very courageous.<sup>1</sup>

After the war, she traveled all around Poland on behalf of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, also a risky business then, to look for Jewish children who had been placed with Polish families. Many of these children had been orphaned, or relatives who had miraculously survived the war did not quite know where to look for them. This was one of many important tasks at the time for the remnants of Polish Jewry—to retrieve its surviving dispersed and lost youth.

Hochberg-Mariańska was instrumental in this effort and soon published a slender book describing the fate of a few children and their rescuers.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to this volume, she noted that several courageous Poles who had saved Jewish children declined to have their identities revealed in print. Presumably to clear up the matter, she then wrote a sentence that completely threw me off: "I don't know if anyone living outside Poland will understand and accept the fact that saving a life of a defenseless child, pursued by murderers can bring the rescuer shame or unpleasant consequences."<sup>3</sup>

I was living in Poland at the time, and this certainly did not make any sense to me. Why would those who would later be honored as the Righteous Among Nations not want their role as rescuers of Jews to be known?<sup>2</sup> Why were they afraid to be recognized for what they had done in their own communities? Since then, having read a number of memoirs by rescued Jews, I have come to realize that it was a ubiquitous phenomenon.

Perhaps the best-known episode of this sort can be found in Marcel Reich-Ranicki's memoirs. For decades now one of Germany's most influential literary critics, with an acerbic wit and erudition both admired and feared by the greatest of German writers, Reich-Ranicki as a boy moved from Poland to Germany only to be sent back in the forced expulsion of Polish Jews by the Nazis in 1938. He spent the early war years in the Warsaw ghetto, working for a time as a translator for the chairman of the Judenrat. He then hid, together with his wife, on the so-called Aryan side.

The relevant fragment of his bestselling memoirs, describing a moment after liberation, goes as follows: "We were about to leave when Bolek said: 'I have a drop of vodka here, let's drink a little glass.' I could sense that he had something else to say to us." Reich-Ranicki thus sets up the farewell scene, when he and his wife were leaving the apartment of the Polish couple who had saved their lives. "He was speaking slowly and seriously: 'I implore you, don't tell anyone that you were with us. I know this nation. They would never forgive us for sheltering two Jews.' Genia remained silent. I deliberated for a long time as to whether I should quote this frightening remark here. But, on the other hand, we have never forgotten that it was two Poles to whom we owe our lives—Bolek and Genia."<sup>3</sup>

Personal documents from the period leave no doubt that this same realization came as a shock to numerous survivors, while fear together with tangible persecution marred the lives of many rescuers after the war. "In conclusion of my story," writes Dr. Henryk Stecki, "I also want to

<sup>2</sup>Yad Vashem, or the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, was established in Israel in order to perpetuate the memory of victims of the Holocaust. Article 9 of its founding law (passed in 1953) mandates the Authority to perpetuate the names "of the high ranked righteous who risked their lives to save Jews." The Department for the Righteous Gentiles was established at Yad Vashem "to award honors to persons recognized as belonging to Hasdeai Ummot ha-Olan [literally, "the pious ones of the nations of the world"]—a rabbinic term denoting righteous Gentiles] who risked their lives to rescue Jews in the Holocaust" (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 16, p. 698).

mention that after I returned to Kraków, some 2–3 weeks following my departure from the village where I stayed last, it became known that I was a Jew. Already after this area got liberated I was threatened there with death, and the good, innocent ["*Bogwi ducha winni*"] people who gave me shelter were threatened with flogging and having their house set on fire."<sup>4</sup>

Regina Alnowa's husband served as an officer in the Polish army before the war. After an *Aktion* in Przemysl she found herself in desperate straits. "All acquaintances and good friends completely failed me," she writes in her deposition before the Jewish Historical Commission after the war. "[I]n the end I remembered the family of my husband's commanding officer and I was kept there for about 10 days. The younger lady probably would have kept me longer, but her mother was very nervous, so I decided that I must leave their house. I will always keep a recollection of this woman, but I will not mention her name because under the present circumstances I would risk exposing her to contempt from her compatriots. I find this all the time to be the case that people who saved the Jews do not want their fellow citizens to know about it."<sup>5</sup>

In the Memorial Book of the Ostrołęka Jews, a righteous Gentile named Przechodzien is commemorated with gratitude by the Holcman sisters. "He really helped us a lot, until peasants from nearby villages started to persecute him, called him 'a Jewish knave,' cursed him, and even threw stones at him," they wrote. "After the liberation we found out that he was murdered."<sup>6</sup>

An ethnographer who conducted almost two hundred interviews in the 1970s and 1980s with Polish villagers for her study about the image of the Jew in Polish folk culture never had any difficulty drawing people out on the subject.

The exception was the village of Mulawicze. In several successive homes I was received coldly when I asked the first question. When I got to the house of the village administrator, for a long time I carried on a general conversation with him until finally, after breaking the ice, I got to the point. Even here I encountered incomprehensible resistance, but in the end I managed to start the interview. At a certain moment the respondent

<sup>4</sup>In the jargon of the period, a Nazi sweep through a designated locality aiming to round up Jews for extermination was called an *Aktion*, in Polish, *akcja*, an action. The term is customarily used now in Holocaust literature.

said: "During the war, this boy with three fingers missing walked around the village; people helped him, and thanks to this he survived the war . . ." Following this, in the greatest secrecy he revealed to me the name of his neighbor who had concealed a Jewish boy . . . This woman, illiterate, living in poverty, saddled with four children and a sick husband who died shortly after, unhesitatingly took on her shoulders a risk which could have cost the lives of her entire family. The entire village . . . took responsibility for his survival. The village administrator gave warnings of visits by the Germans, who were stationed in the village school. Thanks to this collective effort the boy survived the war. What is most surprising in this whole matter is the concealing of this event to that day. In a certain sense, *Mulawicze* had still not ceased to conceal "Wintank."<sup>8</sup>

Why did Poles who assisted their Jewish neighbors in a time of mortal peril become social outcasts in their own communities after the war? Why would a remote village fearfully conceal its wartime rescue of a Jewish orphan? Whence anti-Semitism in Poland "after Auschwitz"? This book, in essence, should be viewed as an attempt to answer such questions.

I write here a narrowly focused story, and my subject is circumscribed. It is framed by the Holocaust and Communism, two landmarks of Eastern European Jewish experience. The latter serves as a boundary not solely because events described here take place while Communists were consolidating their rule over Eastern Europe, but also because local attitudes toward the Jews were refracted through the prism of the putative relationship between Jews and Communism. Indeed, the still dominant interpretation of postwar anti-Semitism in Poland attributes it to Jewish responsibility for the "Sovietization" of the country. Customarily this line of argument is referred to as "Judo-Communism," or *żydokomunizm*.

What I am about to tell in *Fear* involves overturning strongly held stereotypes and peeling off layers of prejudice. Wartime and postwar anti-Semitism in Poland has never been examined for what it was, but has always been conflated in the minds of Jews and Poles alike with something else, and conveniently deproblematicized. In a well-known

<sup>8</sup>What comes to mind, by contrast, is the village of Chambon in France, which celebrates its collective wartime rescue of Jewish citizens, has several websites, books written about it, a documentary film, a foundation.

quip by the onetime Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir, Poles suck anti-Jewish hatred with their mothers' milk. In the Polish Catholic imagination, Jews are God-killers; they use the blood of Christian children for matzo, and they are also Communist. Both views are untenable in the light of common sense or empirical evidence. But to challenge and examine them in order to acquire a better understanding of postwar anti-Semitism, one has to move carefully.

The nature of prejudice is to make unwarranted totalizing claims, whereas understanding advances through elucidation of careful distinctions. These are directly opposed mental exercises. And if one tries to argue prejudice away by the usual procedure of testing hypotheses (that is, by pointing to alternative explanations, or false deductions, or limitations in the empirical evidence) one enters a kind of discourse where the prejudice's basic premise is already accepted. Instead of naming the bad faith from which the prejudice sprouted, we end up framing the argument, half-apologetically, as if we granted that the prejudicial claim were empirically derived. Yet simply to identify bad faith underlying a prejudice does not explain it away, either.

Since we cannot hope to find a direct way out of a tangled web of layered fictions and facts in a single push, I wondered what could be the best manner to present my inquiry. The answer emerged in the process of writing—as a circuitous effort of successive approximations. When trying to take apart a pile of elements that are loose yet wedged against one another, one may not produce a persuasive "either-or" story laid out in a chronological sequence. Instead, we must poke the pile repeatedly from many directions and at different angles, or else important residue will always remain. What I offer here, therefore, is not diachronic but analytical history. I go back and forth in time over different aspects of events bearing on understanding the phenomenon of postwar anti-Semitism in Poland. The flow of events is marked and distinct in the book, but it is also refracted in successive attempts to problematize issues from a perspective that is slightly but constantly changing. Furthermore, the text is in dialogic relationship with the footnotes, sometimes closing off and sometimes opening up alternative interpretive vistas.

I want readers turning the pages to experience from time to time a sense of discomfort. It is all to the good to feel compelled occasionally to go through a page or a chapter over again, querying the soundness of argument or the clarity of exposition, or else to move forward briskly in order to read in a rush what comes next, just to see if what so far has ap-

peared odd and fragmented could possibly make sense as the story unfolds. I think it does in the end. But this is not a "nice" story and we should not be smoothly eased into it. I would not know how to lead anyone gently through it, anyway.

In what follows I make an effort to disentangle anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz from various phenomena with which it has been conflated. I describe it in the dual context of the Holocaust and the imposition of Communist rule on Eastern and Central Europe. At the risk of running ahead of myself, let me simply assert here what emerges in the conclusion of the book by way, I believe, of a comprehensively documented story: it was widespread collusion in the Nazi-driven plunder, spoliation, and eventual murder of the Jews that generated Polish anti-Semitism after the war, not the alleged postwar Jewish collusion in the imposition of Communism on the Poles. Far from championing Jewish "interests" of any kind, the Communist authorities in Poland ignored the suffering of Poland's Jewish citizens at the hands of their neighbors both during and after the war. The Communist Party aimed to distance and insulate itself as much as it could from the "Jewish question" in order to gain a modicum of legitimacy in the eyes of the Polish population, and adopted what at best can be described as an attitude of benign neglect in matters Jewish. When Stalin's increasingly aggressive anti-Semitism factored in, the implicit social contract between Communist authorities and the newly subjugated Polish society—that they mutually benefited from considering the wartime fate of Polish Jews a nonissue; that they would not scrutinize what exactly happened to the Jews during the war; and that they would encourage and facilitate departure from the country by the remainder of Polish Jewry—became a given. My sense is that this was an implicit "give" for the "take" of power, which the Communists grabbed at the Soviet Union's and their own behest.

Here follows a quick guide to the organization of the book. In the first chapter, my intent is to convey the sense of betrayal widely shared among the Poles as a result of the experience of the Second World War and its political aftermath. In the chapter's closing pages, readers will find a narrative encapsulating the main events leading to the subjugation of the Polish society by the Communist Party, and turning the country into a satellite of the Soviet Union against the will of the majority of the Poles.

In chapter 2, I discuss a wide range of anti-Jewish practices in postwar Poland, including the commodification of Jews resulting from

wartime plunder. I further argue that not only society at large but also the administrative apparatus and the judiciary in Communist Party-dominated Poland manifested what must be recognized as institutionalized anti-Semitism.

In chapter 3, I present a detailed description of the most violent anti-Semitic episode in postwar Europe (certainly, the culmination of anti-Jewish violence in Poland at the time)—the pogrom in Kielce. In chapter 4, I discuss reactions to the pogrom among various milieus of the Polish population, while all along drawing observations concerning the place of Jews in the moral economy of postwar Polish society.

In chapter 5, I reflect on how the Holocaust and the behavior of the lower strata of Polish society toward the Jews has been registered in the collective consciousness of Polish intelligentsia.

In chapter 6, I sketch the historical antecedents of a belief widely held by Poland's population and its historians, that Jews have a special affinity for Communism. I examine the resulting notion of "Judeo-Communism" (*sydhokomunizm*) in its applicability to the interwar period, and the framing of the so-called Jewish question by Stalin and the Soviet Communist Party during the war and immediately thereafter. Finally, I examine the myth of Judeo-Communism and how it related to political practices of the Communist regime in Poland in the immediate postwar period. And in my conclusions I attempt to pull together various interpretive strands elucidated earlier in the book.