

Stanisław Krajewski

# Small Numbers, Big Presence

Jews in Poland after World War II



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*To Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett  
with gratitude for her support and friendship*



Stanisław Krajewski has played a unique role in the history of Polish Jews, both in the struggle to democratize Poland after 1968 and in the attempt since 1990 to revitalize Jewish life in the new conditions of pluralism and open discussion. In this path-breaking book, he reflects on the evolution of Polish Jewry in these years against the background of its enormous contribution to Jewish religious traditions and its tragic fate in the Holocaust. A Jewish community, 'small in numbers' but with a 'big presence', continues to function in Poland. This book is essential reading for all those who wish to understand this remarkable phenomenon.

Antony Polonsky, Emeritus Professor of Holocaust Studies, Brandeis University  
Chief Historian, Global Education Outreach Project, Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw

....The book *Small Numbers, Big Presence: Jews in Poland after World War II* not only deserves careful reading, but is a unique contribution to the reflection on the place of Jews in the contemporary history of not only Poland, but also in the whole world for a number of reasons. The most important is Stanisław Krajewski's ability to capture complex phenomena with often mutually exclusive interpretations in a surprisingly new and original way. Perhaps it has to do with his mathematically honed perception of reality and his ability to call a spade a spade. He can, to paraphrase Marcel Proust, see clearly in horror. Thus, what happened to Polish Jews is terrifying, but even more astonishing is their ability to rise from the ashes.

This is not only a history of Polish Jews after the Second World War, but a unique anthropological study of a religious minority in a country first dominated by the communist regime (1945-1989) and then building democratic structures in a rapidly changing and globalizing world. At the same time, it is a country in which the dominant role has until recently been played by the Catholic Church, whose influence increased immeasurably during the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005), only to diminish rapidly in recent years. This context is important because the fate of Polish Jews and the slowly reviving life of Jewish communities after 1989 were closely intertwined with that of the Polish Church.

Stanisław Obirek, Professor at the American Studies Centre, University of Warsaw

*Small Numbers, Big Presence* is history rooted in assiduous dispassionate research, but no less, in passionate commitment to Polish Jewry. As much Pole as Jew, Stanislaw Krajewski was a witness to Poland's postwar Jewish renaissance and the Jews' de-assimilation. A frontliner in many struggles and triumphs, he tells the story with an insider's knowledge of the intricacies of events and personalities. The author's heartfelt personal experience shines through, combined with sober reflection on the deeper meaning for the Jews and for Poland.

Moshe Rosman, Professor at the Koschitzky Department of Jewish History, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

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# Introduction

This book provides an account of the presence of Jews in Poland after World War II. Some chapters refer to earlier periods, but in the hope of providing a better understanding of the origins of post-war developments, the narrative is always guided by our focus on the past eight decades. It is obvious, and stressed in Chapter 3, that the post-war era cannot be compared with earlier periods. Jews have been incomparably less numerous and often deeply assimilated. Nonetheless, their story, that is, our story, is worth telling. Naturally, it is important to Jews in Poland. It is also of special interest to Jews all over the world because Poland used to be the center of the Ashkenazi Jewish world. What is more, Jewish topics attract considerable interest in contemporary Poland, both affirmative and antisemitic. Therefore, the best summary of the post-war period of Polish-Jewish history is “small numbers, big presence,” as was emphasized by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett during our work on the core exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Jews in Poland. It is my pleasure to dedicate this book to her, in recognition of her guidance and influence and with gratitude for over four decades of our friendship.

An explanation is needed to clarify what this book is not. The title’s phrase “big presence” can suggest that the focus is on the Poles’ attitudes towards Jews. One can invoke Polish critical scholars who try to detect antisemitic patterns deeply embedded in Polish culture, especially in connection to the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> Yet, while those patterns form an important part of the background of the situation of Jews in post-war Poland, this book is not primarily about them. I do not believe that everything significant for the Jewish experience is reducible to antisemitism and the Shoah. The focus here is on Polish Jews, individuals and institutions. On the other hand, the book does not contain documents, detailed descriptions of events, lists of leaders, numbers, and organizations.<sup>2</sup> The essays collected here

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1 For example, Forecki 2010, Janicka and Żukowski 2016, Żukowski 2018, Forecki 2018, Zawadzka 2023. A collection in English is available: Grudzińska-Gross and Matyjaszek 2022. Also Kichelewski 2018 is based on a rather similar approach. Zubrzycki 2022 attempts a more comprehensive picture; her focus is not primarily on antisemitism.

2 Some such accounts are available, for example, Cała and Datner 1996, Berendt et al. 2000, Aleksy 2002, Urban 2005, Berendt 2006, Rykała 2007, Grabski 2015. Individual stories are described in many books, for example Niezabitowska and Tomaszewski 1986, Wiszniewicz 2008, Auerbach 2013, Wiszniewska 2014, Tuszyńska et al. 2018, Grinzwieg Jacobsson 2022, Sochańska 2022.

describe Jewish life, that is, major trends within the Jewish community, varieties of Jewish attitudes, the concepts that illuminate the Jewish experiences in post-war Poland. Hence, such topics as assimilation and de-assimilation, religious legacy, the Communist project, Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The book is scholarly and also deeply personal. It covers a period which is more or less the extent of my life. Moreover, all the post-war events and processes described here have a strong connection to my life and to my family members. In some developments I have taken an active part, primarily in the post-1968 mini-renaissance of Jewish life, especially in its religious variety, as well as all the advances in Jewish-Christian relations and particularly Jewish-Christian dialogue. Thus, the essays included in the book are written by an academic who was a participant in many of the described events. The following one-sentence summaries of the chapters reveal my personal connection to their contents. My personal involvement means that, as much as I tried to be fair and objective, I am not as distanced as some other writers have been or will be. Nevertheless, I hope that my remarks are valuable not only as reminiscences and reflections, but also from a purely academic perspective.

The book consists of eight chapters of unequal length. Seven have already been published, albeit mostly in a somewhat different form, and I thank the original publishers for their consent to adapt the texts for this book. Specifically, I refer to the POLIN museum for chapters 1 and 3, the journal *Jewish History Quarterly* for chapter 2, Academic Studies Press for chapter 4, the journal *Contemporary Jewry* – or rather the University of Warsaw that made it possible for the paper to be available in open access – for chapter 5, the journal *Studies in Jewish Christian Relations* for chapter 7. Chapter 6 was written specially for this book, but it contains much material appearing in my earlier publications, namely 2005, 2007a, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2016a, 2018a, 2020, 2020a, 2021a (the numbers refer to the References section at the end of the book.) Fragments of chapter 8 appeared in Polish only.

Chapter 1, “Religious Legacy of Polish Jews,” appeared in the book *Legacy of Polish Jews*, accompanying an extension of the permanent exhibition at the POLIN Museum. (See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Tamara Sztyma 2021.) It is an attempt to sketch a comprehensive survey of specifically religious aspects of the legacy of Polish Jews, which informs my own involvement in Jewish life.

Chapter 2, “How Jewish Were Jewish Communists?” has recently appeared in the journal *Jewish History Quarterly*, published by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (See 2023.) It presents a study of the first generations of radical Jewish leftist leaders, among whom one can find my own ancestors. I argue that they were quite strongly un-Jewish, an identity they worked hard to assume,

even though virtually all critics, as well as admirers, have been perceiving them as Jews.

Chapter 3, “Jews in Post-war Poland,” forms a part of the catalogue accompanying the core exhibition at the POLIN Museum. (See 2014.) It presents a survey of the history of Jews in Poland from 1944 to 2014 (with a postscript about the last ten years). The story is closely related to my own life, especially its second part: the developments originating in 1967 and especially since the 1980s.

Chapter 4, “Assumptions behind the Work on the Post-war Section of the Core Exhibition in POLIN,” appeared in a volume devoted to the history of Jews in Poland and in particular to the analysis of the background of the exhibition at the POLIN Museum. (See Antony Polonsky, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Andrzej Żbikowski 2018.) I have identified the main assumptions that, consciously or not quite so consciously, guided our work on the last part of POLIN’s core exhibition. Its concept was prepared by Helena Datner and me.

Chapter 5, “The Concept of De-assimilation: The Example of Jews in Poland,” has recently appeared in the journal *Contemporary Jewry*, accompanied by responses from other authors. (See 2023a.) It introduces the concept of de-assimilation, which is relatively novel, and is in my opinion very helpful in describing the character of Jews in contemporary Poland, especially those of my generation. I am myself very much a “product” of the process of de-assimilation.

Chapter 6, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Post-War Poland,” is new, and, as already mentioned, draws on my other texts published in both Polish and English. It sketches out Jewish-Christian relations in general and surveys the Jewish-Christian dialogue in post-Shoah Poland. A significant part of it refers to events in which I took part or to which I had some personal connection. It is fair to say that I have been more seriously involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue than any other Polish Jew after World War II.

Chapter 7, “Pope John Paul II’s Encounters with Polish Jews,” was published in the journal *Studies in Jewish Christian Relations* (see 2020), and its earlier, shorter version appeared in the 2014 book in Polish, *Oblicza dialogu*, edited by Dorota Boczowska-Molenda. It contains an account and an analysis of all four meetings of the Polish pope with Polish Jews. It has a strong personal flavor as I am probably the only person, and certainly the only Jew, who participated in all those meetings and is still alive.

Chapter 8, “Is the Holocaust Unique?,” addresses “Holocaust envy” and presents the idea that the common perception of the uniqueness of the Shoah is due to the special status granted by Western culture to Jews, basically because of their Biblical heritage. I believe that nobody has presented this thesis so directly. Fragments of chapter 8 appeared in Polish only, in my 2019 book, published

in Cracow by the Austeria publishing house, and in an article in the journal *Chrześcijaństwo-Świat-Polityka. Zeszyty Społecznej Myśli Kościoła* No 22 (2018), as well as in my column in the *Chidusz* magazine No 3/2023.

The English texts of the chapters were either written by me or, in the case of chapters 1 and 3, translated from Polish by translators engaged by the editors of the original publications. The texts were corrected by native speakers of English, among whom I would like to mention Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Sue Throckmorton, and especially Yale Reisner who read most of the text. I am deeply grateful to them for their kind, generous assistance. The final draft was corrected by Marcin Pędich. And the book was born thanks to Łukasz Gałęcki.

My engagement in Jewish life and attempts to understand it has led to the present book. I was greatly influenced by my reading experience; many of the books and papers that have influenced me are in the bibliography at the end of this volume. I was also educated and inspired by direct contacts with many friends, collaborators, and occasionally opponents. It is impossible to mention here all those individuals to whom I owe my interest in the history of Polish Jews, my involvement in the recent phase of this history, and my passion for interfaith dialogue. Yet I feel I need to mention at least some of them.

First, let me say that many people have influenced my involvement in research in the fields of mathematics, logic, philosophy and theology. Others facilitated my participation in social and political initiatives, from the hippie movement to dissident anti-Communist circles to NGO activities. Still others shared my mountain hikes and climbs, especially in the Tatra Mountains. All those areas of activity are, for me, occasionally somewhat connected to Jewish life. Yet they are autonomous enough to ignore the people with whom I got in touch during those activities in these musings. A short list of persons who have been most essential for me in the more narrowly defined field of Jewish history, life, and interreligious contacts is presented below. I hope that on another occasion I will be able to present a considerably longer list and say more about all those people.

I am particularly grateful to my wife Monika, with whom I have shared Jewish life and so much more for the last fifty years. I owe a lot to my two sons, so different from each other in their attitudes to Jewish tradition. My parents influenced me greatly, even if unintentionally; they did not introduce me to Jewish practice, but did transmit what is most basic: ethical values. Among the people of my parents' generation to whom I owe the most are Rafael (Felek) Scharf, a dear friend who continued pre-war involvements in a passionate way, Chone Shmeruk, who was as much a scholar as a witness, Israel Gutman, who knew so much about war time events, not only those in which he himself had taken part, Józef Lichten, who was deeply involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue and made



me realize that this could be a lifelong passion, Chaskel Besser, who personified the traditional rabbinic attitude in its noblest version, Michael Wyschogrod, who was the first religious Jewish philosopher I met, Norman Solomon, who combined openness with traditional observance, Zusya Efron, who explained to me and Monika about both art and Israel, and Shlomo Carlebach, who inspired as much with his famous tunes as with his teachings. One man living in Poland also belonged to that generation: Szymon Datner, who was a teacher and also a role model to me. In addition, I benefitted from contacts with others, such as, Paweł Wildstein and Michał Friedman.

Among the people of roughly my generation, the most influential foreign-born friends have been Michael Schudrich, who represented the Lauder Foundation and organized the unforgettable educational summer and winter camps before he became the chief rabbi of Poland, Helise Lieberman, who established the first Jewish school in Poland after 1968, and Yale Reisner whose knowledge was always helpful. All of them bring to mind the Nożyk shul in Warsaw, to which I belonged for many years. The Polish Jews of my generation who were the most significant to me include such friends as Włodek, later Zeev, Lidert, with whom I discovered Jewish issues in my teens, and Kostek Gebert who has become a major Jewish voice, and was creating, together with me and others, the “Jewish flying university”, which started in 1979. In that circle there were also Rysia Zachariasz and Jurek Kichler, who was close to us, even though he resided in Cracow and later in Wrocław; in the 1990s he became the first president of the union of reborn Jewish communities. Among other individuals important to me were Bella Szwarzman-Czarnota, who was able to transmit the Yiddish tradition, Gołda Tencer, who was active in not only Jewish theater, Henryk Halkowski, who presented Jewish Cracow to our generation, Gerardo Ojeda-Ebert, whose passion was helpful in particular when we created the Jewish telephone hotline shortly after 1989, and Helena Datner, with whom we worked together on the post-war part of the POLIN exhibition.

I also drew inspiration from some people of the next generation, to wit, Miriam Gonczarska, who has eventually become a (de facto) rabbi, Piotr Paziński, a writer who followed Gebert as the editor of the journal *Midrash*, Bogna Pawlisz, who initiated a short-lived but memorable youth journal *Idele*, and later Stas Wojciechowicz, who has been the rabbi of the Reform synagogue *Ec chaim*, in which I have been very active for more than a decade. Among other Jewish institutions that are as helpful as they are inspiring, I should list the Cracow JCC, with its leader Jonathan Ornstein, and Wojtek Ornat, who created in Cracow, together with Małgosia, an intellectual center and the publishing house Austeria, which published several of my books. Finally, a more recent circle of Jewish friends

has been established, namely the B'nai B'rith lodge Polin, and many of its active members, such as Sergiusz Kowalski and Anna Dodziuk, are important to me even if our approaches differ.

However important it is to have Jewishly active friends in Poland, I have learned much more from several Americans and Israelis of roughly my generation, some of whom have become close friends of my family. My wife and I met almost all of them in Poland in the pre-internet era. Most of them were university professors. Among the American friends are Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who was our host in New York and then led the POLIN museum exhibition team, David Roskies and Shana Novick, who introduced us to the Anshei Hessed shul, Michael Steinlauf, who makes me think of the person I might have become, had my parents emigrated to the West right after the war, Sam Norich, who was our contact with the American YIVO world, Ruth Gruber, a journalist who has become an expert on the Central European Jewish remnants, and good friends who are great authorities on the history of Jews: Gershon Hundert, who passed away in 2023, Antony Polonsky, and Sam Kassow. We were also close to the prematurely departed historian Martin Gilbert from England. On another front, Michael Signer and David Novak reinforced my wish to be part of the interfaith dialogue. Among other important American friends who helped me develop my Jewish involvement, I want to mention Hillel Levine, Eva Fogelman, and Jerome Chanes, as well as friends who are not active in academia, Beverly Luchfeld and Bina Presser, as well as Hershel Lieber who taught us Hassidic traditions in a convincing manner. Last but not least, I was influenced by several people from the American Jewish Committee, with which I was associated for more than decade.

Several Israeli friends of my generation, who have come to the old-new land from various countries, have become important points of reference to me. Among them are Moshe Rosman as a historian and, together with Lynn, also a host, Yossi Klein-Halevi, a major writer who has been a brotherly soul and, together with his wife Sarah, hosted me in Jerusalem, Ilya Dvorkin, who presented insights relating to all areas of Jewish culture and has also been our connection to Russian legacy, David Rosen, who has shown how to combine religious and political dimensions of interreligious dialogue, and Alon Goshen-Gottstein, who has skillfully indicated spiritual aspects of this dialogue. More recently, I have felt close to Ephraim Meir, whose approach to dialogue seems identical to mine. When talking about the interfaith realm, I must mention how much I owe to the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) and to several of its leaders, both Jewish, beginning with Sigmund Sternberg and Ruth Weyl (both from a

generation more senior than mine), and Christian, including Jacobus Schoneveld, John Pawlikowski, and Philip Cunningham.

These Christians bring to mind the Polish non-Jews who have significantly affected or inspired my Jewish involvement. In the previous generation there were well known intellectuals, especially the indefatigable Władysław Bartoszewski, who had been actively involved in helping Jews during the Shoah and later became a historian of that period, and finally a politician, Jerzy Turowicz, who for decades edited the most influential intellectual weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, where I used to publish, and Staszek Musiał and Michał Czajkowski, both Catholic priests with hearts open to Jewish experiences. Slightly younger than them was Janek Jagielski, whose passion matched his knowledge. Of my generation or the next, there are several people with whom I had the pleasure of collaborating: Michał Klinger, my first teacher of the Bible, Janusz Makuch, the creator of the pioneering Jewish culture festival, Andrzej Folwarczny, who developed a network bringing together foreign Jews and local Polish activists preserving Jewish traces, and Bogdan Białek and Zbigniew Nosowski, important journalists who in various periods served together with me as co-chairmen of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews (or *Polska Rada Chrześcijan i Żydów*). Many other active members of this organization have been significant for my own involvement. They include Marek Nowak, Marta Titaniec, Zuza Radzik, Magda Czyż, Anna Bodzińska NDS, and most recently Kasia Kowalska NDS, the present co-chair of the council.

\*

The history of Polish Jews has not come to an end. It can involve unexpected turns. In 1946 many Jews were escaping Poland and went to the Land of Israel. In the wake of the 1968 antisemitic campaign sponsored by the Polish government, even assimilated Jews had to consider whether they needed to emigrate, and many did. A few decades later, following the February 2022 Russian invasion, some Ukrainian Jews found themselves among the masses of Ukrainians finding shelter in Poland. Since October 2023, dangers to Jews in Israel have caused some Israelis with Polish roots to think about looking for refuge in Poland. While I do not pretend to know the future, I suspect that even if the number of Jews in Poland remains small, our presence will continue to be big.

Warsaw, December 2023, Hanukkah<sup>3</sup> 5784.

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3 The spelling of “Hanukkah” is an exception, as are spellings of other widely accepted words, for instance, Hasidism. Otherwise, in the book I consistently render the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet as “ch” rather than “h”, alone or with a dot.