**Organisational Behaviour : Understanding Human Dynamics in the Workplace**

Organisational behaviour (OB) is the study of how people interact within groups in a profesional setting. Its principles are primarily applied to improve workplace efficiency, employee satisfaction, and overall organisational effectiveness. Drawing insights center from fields like psychology, sociology, and anthropology, organizational behavior explores the noances of human behaviour in organisational contexts. This article delves into the key aspects of organisational behaviour, its significance, and its practical applications in modern organisations.

**Catalog of Organisational Behaviour**

Organisational behaviour of color is a multidisciplinary field that examines individual, group, and organisational dynamics. It emerged as a distinct area of study in the early 20th century, evolving from scientific management and human relations movements. Today, OB is a vital component of organisational studies, shaping the way leaders manage teams and achieve goals.

Key questions addressed by organisational behaviour include:

* How do skillful individual personalities and attitudes affect workplace productivity?
* What motivates employees to perform at their best?
* How can organisations build effective teams?
* What role does leadership play in shaping organisational culture?

**The Foundations of Organizational Behavior**

**1. Individual Behaviour**

The study of individual behaviour focuses on understanding how personal characteristics such as attitudes, values, and perception influence work performance.

* **Personality and Work Behavior**: Personality traits, such as consientiousness and openess to experience, play a significant role in determining job suitability and performance.
* **Attitudes and Job Satisfaction**: Employees’ attitudes towards their job, colleagues, and management can profoundly impact organisational productivity and morale.
* **Perception in the Workplace**: The way individuals interpret situations and others' actions can influence decision-making and interpersonal relationships.

**2. Group Dynamics**

Groups are central to most organisational activities. Understanding group behaviour involves examining how individuals intract and collaborate within teams.

* **Group Formation**: Groups often form based on shared goals or interests. Tuckman’s stages of group development—forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning—are widely recognised in OB studies.
* **Team Roles and Cohesion**: Belbin’s team role theory highlights how diverse roles contribute to team success. Cohesive teams tend to be more effective, as members share trust and commitment.
* **Conflict and Negotiation**: Conflict is inevitable in group settings. Effective negotiation and conflict resolution strategies can enhance team performance.

**3. Organisational Structure and Culture**

The broader organisational framework significantly influences employee behaviour.

* **Organisational Structure**: Hierarchical, flat, or matrix structures determine the flow of information and decision-making.
* **Organisational Culture**: Culture shapes values, norms, and behaviours within an organisation. Edgar Schein’s model outlines three levels of organisational culture : artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions.
* **Power and Politics**: The distribution of power and internal politics can either facilitate or hinder organisational goals.

**Key Theories in Organisational Behaviour**

**1. Motivation Theories**

Motivation is a critical driver of employee performance. Several theories offer insights into what inspires individuals to perform at their best.

* **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**: This theory posits that individuals are motivated by a hierarchy of needs, from basic physiological requirements to self-actualisation.
* **Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory**: Herzberg distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, working conditions) and motivators (e.g., recognition, responsibility).
* **Self-Determination Theory**: This modern theory emphasises intrinsic motivation, focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

**2. Leadership Theories**

Leadership is crucial for directing organisational behaviour towards desired outcomes.

* **Trait Theory**: Effective leaders often possess inherent traits such as charisma, intelligence, and decisiveness.
* **Transformational Leadership**: Transformational leaders inspire employees by aligning their personal goals with organisational objectives.
* **Situational Leadership**: According to Hersey and Blanchard, effective leadership adapts to the maturity and competence of team members.

**3. Organisational Change Theories**

Organisations must adapt to survive in a dynamic environment.

* **Lewin’s Change Model**: This model involves three stages : unfreezing (preparing for change), changing (implementing the change), and refreezing (solidifying the new practices).
* **Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model**: Kotter outlines a detailed approach for managing change, emphasising the importance of vision, communication, and stakeholder engagement.

**Applications of Organisational Behaviour**

**1. Enhancing Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement is a key indicator of organisational health. Strategies to improve engagement include recognizing achivements, providing growth opportuneties, and fostering a supportive culture.

**2. Improving Team Performance**

OB principles help managers build high-performing teams by balancing diverse skills, promoting collaboration, and resolving conflicts effectively.

**3. Leadership Development**

Organisational behaviour informs leadership training programmes, equipping leaders with the skills to motivate teams, drive innovation, and navigate challenges.

**4. Managing Diversity and Inclusion**

A diverse workforce brings unique perspectives, driving creativity and innovation. OB helps organisations create inclusive environments where all employees feel valued.

**5. Navigating Organisational Change**

Change management is critical in today’s fast-paced world. OB provides tools and frameworks to help organisations adapt smoothly to technological advancements, market shifts, and globalisation.

**Challenges in Organisational Behaviour**

**1. Technological Disruptions**

Automation and artificial intelligence are reshaping traditional work roles. Employees may resist these changes, requiring effective change management strategies.

**2. Remote Work Dynamics**

The rise of remote work poses challenges for maintaining team cohesion, communication, and employee engagement.

**3. Ethical Dilemmas**

Globalisation and complex supply chains often present ethical challenges. Organisations must balance profitability with corporate social responsibility.

**4. Cross-Cultural Issues**

In multinational organisations, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings. OB helps managers navigate these complexities to foster collaboration.

**Future Trends in Organisational Behaviour**

**1. The Role of Artificial Intelligence in OB**

AI is being increasingly integrated into HR functions such as recruitment, performance analysis, and employee training. However, ethical considerations must be addressed to ensure fairness.

**2. Focus on Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Organisations are prioritising mental health as a key component of employee wellbeing. This includes offering flexible work arrangements, counselling services, and stress management programmes.

**3. Sustainability and Ethical Leadership**

Employees and consumers alike demand sustainable practices and ethical leadership. OB will play a crucial role in embedding these values into organisational cultures.

**4. Personalised Work Environments**

Advancements in technology allow for personalized work experiences, from customised training programmes to flexible career paths.

**Concluzion**

Organisational behaviour endeavors a cornerstone of effective management and organisational success. By understanding the intricacies of human behaviour, organisations can create environments where employees thrieve, innovation flourishes, and goals are achieved.

As the worklace continues to evolve, the principles of organisational behaviour will remain esential, guiding labors in navigating the complexities of human dynamics and ensuring that organizations remain adaptive, inclusive, and forward-thinking.

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**Introduction**

Until 2004, I viewed myself as an open-minded, progressive person who refrained from stereotyping groups of people. I based any negative views of people on knowledge that I believed was rooted in *history*. That summer, however, I learned that discrimination had actually played a fundamental role throughout my life : I realized that I had been raised to view Poles as an enemy, not only by parents and grandparents, but also by rabbis and teachers. Postgraduate work in Jewish studies had not altered this prejudice, but only cemented it. That year, I stood on an intellectual precipice. Do I hold true to what I *know*, or do I risk questioning that knowledge and destabilizing parts of my identity?

Our current times underscore the need for the personal re-examination of one’s knowledge of the Other. The global rise in ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism, COVID-19, and the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine force us to question why we maintain hostile views of the Other. Concerning Poles and Jews specifically, our current global crises have only solidified the need for Poles and Jews to reevaluate the knowledge each holds of Other and Self.

**An American Jew**

A Jewish woman, I am third generation American-born. My ancestors hail from the Russian Empire. My mother’s family arrived from Kyiv, now Ukraine’s capital. My paternal great-grandparents traveled here from Poswol (Pasvalys), Lithuania. After landing on American shores, both sides maintained ties to the Old World through language, religious practice, family, and culture. Yet, concurrently, they each strove to become American. While they conversed in Yiddish at home, *most* learned enough English to speak it in public. They sent their children to public schools dressed in modern American clothes and considered religion a private matter.

I was raised primarily in the south suburbs of Chicago as a Conservative Jew. My identity meant that I felt superior around Reform Jews and insecure around Orthodox Jews. No doubt this singular internal response to the Other Jew mirrored the contentious antagonism felt across the American Jewish population in general. American Jews argued over ritual, politics, and assimilation. Our one central unifying force was the Holocaust—the Jewish genocide orchestrated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

My Jewish identity was stamped by growing up in the seventies, that time when formal Jewish educators, parents, and grandparents finally struggled more openly with the Holocaust. Together with so many Jews of my generation, I am a product of post-Holocaust angst. Many teachers presented “being Jewish” through the lens of that tragedy. The lessons they taught often differed, but the starting place usually remained the same. My Jewish identity transformed into knowing that had I been there, I too would have been forced to bear the weight of the yellow star. For me, to be Jewish was to identify with the Holocaust’s victims, to feel their suffering as my own.

Many in my generation grew to make decisions about religious and cultural affiliation based on this premise. Photographs of starving children on ghetto streets and mounds of corpses in camps urged us on a quest for Jewish survival. This knowledge and imagery united us as Jews and often informed our relationships. My future husband and I bonded over our shared desire to travel to Poland. Though we thought of it as desolate and cold, we longed to visit that place. We wanted to feel the past, to walk the streets of our ancestors, to imagine their heartache as they were torn from their homes, to envision their daily struggle for survival in the “Polish death camps.” We craved a journey to Poland so that we could effectively mourn our people’s history. We both thought of this as the ultimate experience of our Jewish identity. We would journey into death to confirm that we were alive. We would raise up the past to ground the future.

**Camp Barney Medintz, 2004**

Fast-forward twenty years : Jeff and I are married and have three children. Working to create a rich Jewish family life, we welcomed Jewish summer camp into our children’s experience. In 2004, I accompanied Jeff to Camp Barney Medintz, located in northern Georgia, where he had volunteered as the physician for a week. One late afternoon, Jeff noticed three young women sitting at a picnic table, all wearing white aprons and bandanas covering their hair. Clearly, they were kitchen staff. Often isolated from the rest of camp culture, kitchen workers usually existed on the lowest rung of the camp’s social ladder. Others in camp had a propensity to ignore them. I am most grateful that on this evening Jeff did not. Rather, hearing them speak in Polish, his curiosity compelled him to introduce himself.

Much to Jeff’s surprise, he learned that these three young women were classical musicians on summer break from their respective universities in Poland. They were working at Camp Barney to earn tuition for the following semester. With an invitation to hear their music, that evening we began a journey into an impactful friendship. Deeply kind and respectful, they were at that incredible point of launching their lives, determining who they would become. After training in classical music for more than a decade, all three were pursuing other educational endeavors. Kaja was completing her fine arts degree, while Magda planned for law school. Kaja’s sister, Julia, was studying performing arts in Denmark. Unlike most overseas staff who planned on traveling after camp ended, these young women hoped to find jobs and an affordable apartment in Atlanta. We offered them our guest room, refrigerator, and help in finding work.

Interestingly, until our last day at camp, both Jeff and I naively assumed that our new friends were Jewish. How odd it was, though, for us to take it as real that these women were Jewish given that we believed simultaneously (and erroneously) that no Jews currently lived in Poland, that “land of destruction.” Apparently, we had preferred such cognitive dissonance rather than accepting that Christian Poles would be willing to work at a Jewish camp, let alone serve Jewish children. For according to everything we had heard in our own community, *all* Christian Poles were antisemites.

Once we realized our mistaken assumption, panic set in : How should we respond to their Polish Catholic origins? Do we close the door out of fear, and thereby relinquish a possible friendship? And what exactly did we fear? Certainly, they already knew of our Jewish identity. They were willing to trust us. Why could we not trust them? Emotion had jerked us into the past and hurled menacing questions at us. How did their relatives treat Jews during the war? What might their grandparents have done to “ours?” Are the “sins of the fathers” passed down to their children? Thankfully, reason reemerged and steadied our course. It forced us to remember their music and our meaningful conversations, and to see these three Polish women as individuals. It allowed us to open our door and home to them. While we had successfully disassociated our new friends from the stereotypes we held of their people, the more profound challenge would be to wrestle precisely with that deeply rooted negative perception of Poles as a whole.

**Atlanta, Georgia**

Nearly every evening after dinner, we four women—three emotionally charged by their twenties, one bracing for middle age—gathered around the table to delve into the personal : boyfriends, fiancé, husband, family, and the future. However, we cautiously evaded the taboo subject of Polish-Jewish relations. To protect our burgeoning friendship, we all avoided that area which threatened it most : perceptions of the past. And yet, resonating from beneath our guises was the sense that if we did not deal with these difficult matters sooner or later, then we would miss our unique opportunity to truly understand each other and ourselves.

In the third week of their stay, the subject of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II came up, and even then it was only in an isolated private conversation initiated courageously by Julia, then just eighteen. Standing in my narrow kitchen galley, both of us leaning against opposite counters for support, Julia bravely raised the topic of the stereotypes many Americans harbor about Polish people. She had been taught to regard Poles as fiercely brave, heroic in battle, and intensely patriotic; she saw her country as one filled with cultural and intellectual dynamism. Having to confront the American stereotype of the “ignorant, lazy, low-class Pole” shocked her. She had heard about this attitude; but experiencing it raised a visceral reaction. This anti-Polish bigotry was what I knew so well. In this moment of truth, I trembled from fear and embarrassment. I acknowledged our cruel generalizations about her people and the pain Poles feel from it. Haltingly, we then moved on to the belief among American Jews that most Poles were complicit in Hitler’s destruction of European Jewry. And me? Well, though I tried to hide it from her, I was one of those American Jews, riding the bandwagon of blame and learned hatred.

Although Julia alone engaged with me over some of this harsh terrain, I knew that a barrier had been broken for all of us. It did not take long before the five of us, including Jeff, were able to discuss their families’ histories during the war, as well as their views on the status of Jews in contemporary Poland. In the evening’s calm, I first learned of their great-aunt who had hidden a three-year-old Jewish girl during the war, of their uncle’s Jewish roots, and of a nation’s youth awakening to the richness Jews had once brought to Polish culture. They claimed that many young Poles hungered for a connection to a Jewish heritage, grabbing at any shred of evidence they might have Jewish ancestors. According to Kaja, to testify to one’s Jewish roots had become quite fashionable in 2004 Warsaw.

Listening to my new friends, I could not stave off my inner cynicism: *This can’t be—they must be making up these stories to retain our confidence and friendship.* I could take everything else at face value. But I simply could not accept on hearsay that Poles were saviors of Jews during the Holocaust and that young Poles longed for Jewish roots! While I shared how odd it was for me to hear this information, I kept my deeper disbelief guarded.

**Poland, 2005**

It would not take long to discover the veracity of our new friends’ stories. Thrilled that we had welcomed their children into our home and taken care of them, Kaja and Julia’s parents invited us to be their guests in Poland. Not only would we stay in their home, but their father, Przemek, insisted on being our tour guide for a full week. Having spoken of visiting Poland since we first dated, Jeff and I jumped at this opportunity. In March 2005, only seven months since our Polish friends’ stay in Atlanta, we embarked on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to understand the Other. Would I be faced with a different reality in Poland than I had been taught? This trip would help me to ascertain whether these three women had acted as renegades by working at a Jewish summer camp or were typical young Poles.

Our friends took it upon themselves to arrange our itinerary. Neither Jeff nor I made many requests concerning our agenda, aside from visiting his grandfather’s hometown of Gdańsk and the usual Holocaust tourist destinations, including the Warsaw Ghetto, Kazimierz, and Auschwitz. Kaja asked if we might be interested in attending Shabbat services. Yes, *if there really is a service to attend*. Would we want to have Shabbat dinner with the congregation? Yes, *if a congregation truly does exist*. Jews live in Poland today, they insisted. Well, I would see it with my own eyes.

Having arrived in Poland on a Friday afternoon, we readied for a Shabbat service. After twenty minutes of European road negotiations, we found ourselves at the curb of Jewish alternative life in suburban Warsaw : Beit Warszawa. Formed officially in 1995 as a liberal alternative to the Orthodox Nożyk Synagogue, Beit Warszawa expanded in 1999 into a Jewish cultural association. In this new synagogue, more than seventy-five Jews had gathered for a lecture, Friday evening services and Shabbat dinner! My jaw dropped. In Poland Jews were forming a new community—praying, learning, and celebrating Jewish life together. This revelation confounded me. My friends had been correct. What other truths of theirs were factual? How, I wondered, would this discovery affect my self-understanding?

Meeting Kaja’s and Julia’s father for the first time reinforced this sweltering conflict. Przemek preseted a very different image of Poland than that with which I was raised. Given our short stay, I knew we did not have time to tiptoe around taboo subjects. If I wanted answers, I would have to be direct and ask the questions. Bracing myself, I asked him about relations between Poles and Jews. This then forty-nine-year-old uniersity-edcated Catholic Pole declared unequivocally that there had never been antisemitism in Poland!

Based on my own knowledge, such a position was unfathomable. It screamed of political revisionism. Holding my anger at bay, we continued our dialogue. Przemek did recognize that there had been tensions between Poles and Jews during the interwar period, 1918 to 1939. However, couching said conflict within an economic framework allowed him to dismiss antisemitism as the central factor dividing Poles and Jews.

I challenged his position that antisemitism did not exist in Poland, by raising what I recognized as an observable contradiction: “What about the ‘Polish’ death camps?” A kind and gentle man, Przemek’s expression morphed into anger, frustration, and pain. He made it quite clear that Poles neither designed nor operated Auschwitz. He underscored that 250 000 Poles were killed in *that* Nazideath camp. (Current research puts the number of Poles killed in Auschwitz at roughly seventy-five thousand. But the point remains the same.) Indeed, the Nazis first imprisoned Polish intellectuals at Auschwitz. These were Nazi death camps in which Poles, too, suffered and died. Ashamed to admit it, before this day I had not been concerned with or aware of what happened to the Poles when the Nazis stormed across their borders. I had been consumed only with my own people’s tragedy and torment. The phrase “Polish death camps” outraged my Polish friend because it signified my misunderrtandings of World War II and the Holocaust. It equated Poles with Nazis in the oppression of Jews while simultaneously denying the Poles’ own victimization.

I left Poland muddled by new perspectives. Przemek’s viewpoint on Polish antisemitism deeply disturbed me in that it challenged my underttanding of basic Jewish *knowledge.* I was stunned by his stated truth, so convincingly did he present it. I had already been proven wrong about Jewish life in contemporary Poland. Could I be wrong also about Jewish life in Poland’s past? Wrenching questions tormented me: (1) Why is my truth so different from his? (2) Is there something in his truth I need to learn and incorporate into my own? (3) Could my truth be partially constructed out of falsehoods and misreprestentations? So began a steady questioning of the education I had received at home, at my Conservative Hebrew school, in college classes, and graduate school, as well as through books and films. What struck me is that while at Brandeis as a Near Eastern and Judaic studies major with a concentration in Holocaust studies and later at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I had not heard Przemek’s understanding expressed. Was I listening to the wrong people? Was I reading the wrong books, or subconsciously willfully ignoring part of their messages? My internalized truth wrestled with that presented by my Polish friends. The question for me quickly became: “Who is right?”

**Poland, 2007 and 2019**

To further grasp modern relations between Poles and Jews, I revisited Poland for two weeks in November 2007. Hosted by Kaja, Julia, Magda, Beata, and Przemek, I interviewed roughly forty individuals engaged in the rebirth of Poland’s Jewish communities. There I met with government officials, Jewish religious leaders, and former priests. I spoke with well-known Jewish community representatives. I listened to Polish graduate students engaged with Jewish history, Polish and Jewish educators, Poles working on developing the new POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Jewish university student leaders, participants in Christian-Jewish dialogue, as well as Poles who had recently discovered their family’s hidden Jewish roots. Among those I interviewed were Polish Christians working to support the Jewish community, which was then in self-discovery mode. This short, intense period further opened my eyes. I observed Christian and Jewish Poles working together to foster greater understanding of both Judaism and the role Jews played in Polish history. I also witnessed their mutual support in reestablishing Jewish communities, especially in larger cities such as Warsaw and Kraków. This whole experience—from Camp Barney’s worn footpaths to Poland’s cobblestoned streets—informed my desire to write this book.

Over the course of time this book has changed. I began in 2007 with the narrow goal of raising American Jews’ broader understanding of Poland, its people, and its renewed positive relationship with the Jewish past and present. I sought to bring context to different historical situations that occurred prior to the twentieth century, that period through which American Jews typecast the Polish past. In so doing, I hoped to help American Jews discard the readily grasped anti-Polish stereotypes that linger at our lips. While that vision remains a grounding principle of this book, I realized the need to broaden my approach.

Poles are not a monolith. With time, a more traditional Polish perspective has asserted greater control in politics and popular thinking, outpacing the liberal Polish agenda I first encountered in 2005. As often happens when cultures experience dramatic change, a backlash ensued. Traditionalists have assaulted the liberal Polish awakening due to fears of losing cultural control and political power. Traditionalists have made a power grab by reasserting their view of Polish patriotism.

Traditionally, Poles have fashioned Polish patriotism into a belief that all Poles are good and heroic. Concurrently, Polish patriotism identifies with the pain of Poland’s particular past by embracing the role of most victimized nation. In its post-World War II communist incarnation, after roughly six million Jews were murdered, the Polish nationalist leadership maintained this most victimized image by ignoring the Jews’ specific tragedy.

This neat understanding of Self would fall into question when the post-1989 Third Polish Republic welcomed in an era of change—openness to liberal Western cultural, political, and educational influences. Now Poles not only had to deal with Western acknowledgment and commemoration of the Jewish genocide, but in 2000 Jan Gross would force them to question Polish participation in the Jews’ demise. In his book *Neighbors*, Gross details the Polish Christian murder of Jews in Jedwabne. As such, he damaged the Pole’s proud Self-image of resistance to the Nazis. To the country’s credit, an open debate took place in Poland. It spawned numerous and consequential academic investigations into the Polish victimization of Jews during World War II. This ability of the Poles to look honestly at their past is an important part of the story that I present here.

The 2003 opening of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research (Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów) is an outgrowth of this open debate. The center’s agenda is to “contribute to the fight against prejudice, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, and to aid in the creation of an open society.” To build an open society necessitates peering into the dark past to discover uncomfortable truths. The center has waded into the muddy terrain with a specific focus on Polish attitudes and behavior towards the Jews during the Holocaust. Delving into previously untapped Polish archives, its members have opened inquiries into neglected topics, such as Polish and Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, Polish blackmail () of Jews, Polish denouncers of Poles who aided Jews, as well as the role of the Polish “Blue” Police in the murder of the Jews.

In particular, researchers at the center have examined the Polish response in the provinces to Jewish refugees during the last phase of the Holocaust, that period after the German’s final liquidation of the ghettos. In these smaller towns, ghettos were porous, and Jews were able to escape them. One historian, Andrzej Żbikowski, estimates that roughly three hundred thousand Jews escaped into the countryside during the final liquidation period. Though perhaps too high of a figure, the center’s question remains : How did Poles receive these Jewish refugees? Their research has uncovered that less than fifty thousand of those Jews seeking shelter survived. This low survival rate was due to a conflagration of animus and fear. Prewar relations between Poles and Jews in parts of the provinces had not been close. This lack of connection infused with Polish localized nationalist politics carried over to the wartime era. Researchers discovered that local Poles participated in the Nazi’s hunt for the Jews and many betrayed fellow Christian Poles who helped these runaway Jews. Additionally, the center has questioned the heroism of some units within the Polish Home Army, which it revealed had also murdered Jews escaping the Nazis. Their research sheds light on the dark past, light which the current nationalist government endeavors to block.

Through its research, publications, seminars, and its Warsaw Ghetto data base that has cataloged and translated previously unknown documents, the Polish Center for Holocaust Research has greatly impacted the debate over Polish identity. It underscores the contradiction between the accepted national narrative of Polish aid to the Jews with documentation of Poles’ victimization of Jews. Its members have continued to ask who the Poles were vis-à-vis the Jews. The center’s members have expanded the singular shock of Jedwabne by revealing its repetition throughout locales in the broader region, as well as by expounding on various iterations of Polish antisemitism. That the center has deepened the public debate and continuously challenges the easy image of the good heroic Pole angers those who believe, need, and cling to that positive cultural cliché.

**Changing Times : The Ethno-Nationalist Backlash**

The fallout from Jedwabne and the center’s later revelations left a large segment of Poles deflated. They were ripe to receive a glowing version of past Polish heroism and a renewed commemoration to Polish victimization. Conservative nationalist politicians latched onto this culture clash by nurturing the fear that once again Poles are under attack, this time through character defamation. Polish traditionalists reasserted their prideful Self-image. They have lifted up historians who offer apologetic perspectives to counter the more self-critical Polish historians regarding two central themes : the Poles’ betrayal of and violence against Jews during World War II; and the number and motivation of those Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews. This battle for the memory of the Polish past has widened the initial Jedwabne polarization. Concurrently, with its renewed cultural and political power, right-wing Polish nationalists have resolved to stifle, stall, and silence Other voices that portray Poles in a negative light, especially during World War II and the Holocaust. Thus, they passed the so-called “Holocaust Law” which the right wing recently invoked to bring libel charges against two center historians, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski.

While Polish nationalism has fed off the fury and fear that traditionalists raised in response to the Jedwabne fall from grace, there is no doubt that it is part of the global resurgence of nationalism and populism that has gained ground by stoking people’s anger and fear concerning economic downturns, security threats, and loss of sovereignty. In Britain, it birthed Brexit, the UK’s break from the European Union. In North America, it placed Donald Trump in the White House and permitted his cult of personality to launch an insurrection after his 2021 election loss. In Israel, under Bibi Netanyahu, it sidelined peace talks with the Palestinians and championed the annexation of settlements. Poland’s current nationalist iteration is part of this global phenomenon.

Due to this grand shift, a fundamental change in the conversation about majority-minority relations has occurred globally, with glowing affirmations describing the majority. American nationalists willfully ignore the government’s former and current mistreatment of Black and brown people. Polish ethno-nationalists willfully ignore or misrepresent current research in order to portray an exaggerated and distorted positive image of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. To unite their respective political bases, campaigns in both countries have emphasized fear of incursion by brown refugees, whether from South America or Syria. As in the US and other countries, Poland’s population has become deeply polarized over its nationalist and populist direction.

**Changing Times : The Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

On 02/24/2022, Vladimir Putin imposed a new world era when, without provocation, he ordered Russian troops to invade neighboring Ukraine. In that moment, he forced the world to confront the consequences of surging authoritarianism. In this stark and explosive struggle between Ukraine’s developing democracy and Putin’s entrenched despotism, Putin has waged an assault not only on that land and its people, but also by proxy on the West and its democratic values. Europe has not experienced this great a physical and political threat since World War II. Ukraine’s young democracy had threatened Putin’s plan to restore Russian influence on former Soviet bloc nations—Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries. Historian Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern has warned that,

Ukrainians today, of different origins and of different ethnicities, are defending your and my values. That is, they are defending the democratic world. That is something that we have to understand. The failure of Ukraine will be the failure of all of us. The failure of the European Union. The failure of the United Nations.

Through his scorched earth tactics, Putin projects what he is willing to do to enlarge his sphere of influence while becoming Russia’s twenty-first-century Peter the Great.

Putin has courted widespread condemnation due to his disregard for international law and his barbaric destruction of Ukrainian civilians, whether in homes, hospitals, or hideouts. In their response, NATO allies have been straddling a narrow fence. While they have rallied quickly around Ukraine, bringing broad sweeping sanctions against Russia and sending military aid to Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s volunteer-bolstered army, NATO remains reluctant to join in the actual battle to save non-NATO Ukraine. Ever wary of Russia’s vast nuclear arsenal, NATO seeks to prevent a third world war, which some fear has already began.

How does this tragedy affect our understanding of Polish-Jewish relations, this book’s topic? Responding to the Russian war against Ukraine, Poles have revealed an aspect of the Polish people that many in the West have not seen, whether due to stereotyping or lack of investigation. Compassion. Kindness. Heroism. As of 05/07/2022, more than 5.7 million Ukrainians have fled Putin’s brutality. Mostly women and children (as men between eighteen and sixty must remain to defend the country), more than three million have made their way into Poland. Poland’s economic growth and its prewar (2022) Ukrainian population of some 16% (due to longstanding patterns of labor migration) attracted refugees to find safety in the neighboring country. Facing its biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, Poland has responded with a wonderfully genuine desire to help. As in Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and to an extent Hungary, ordinary people have stepped up to offer clothing, medical supplies, warm food, transportation, and even housing. But in Poland the situation is more intense, given the sheer numbers of refugees crossing its borders. After just five weeks into the war, in Warsaw alone the number of Ukrainian refugees exceeded 10% of the city’s population of 1.8 million. Indeed, this humanitarian crisis has placed Poland on the frontline of a battle between good and evil, with Poles transforming into heroes before our eyes.

Most Polish civil institutions have taken up the task of caring for the refugees. This is striking given the anti-refugee rhetoric in 2014 and 2015 when, as an EU member state, Donald Tusk’s center-right Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) agreed to take in several thousand refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. During the election cycle, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (Prawo I Sprawiedliwość, PiS) greatly exaggerated the situation by spreading fear that the refugees would “flood” Poland with alien values and diseases. As a result, PiS ascended to power with 38% of the vote. There is no doubt that race and religion played a key role. There is no doubt that race and religion also played a key role when Poland recently closed its border with Belarus, lest brown Syrian Muslim refugees cross it.

True, these Ukrainian refugees are different : because they are mostly white. But this white population is multi-ethnic. Though the majority is Eastern Orthodox, between ninety-five and ninety-eight thousand of the refugees are Catholics, Georgians, Tatars, and Jews. Poles and Ukrainians have a long history. For centuries they inhabited the same land, which at times led to violence and resentment. In 1943 Ukrainian nationalists implemented ethnic cleansing policies, killing Polish inhabitants of Volhynia. They sought to create a “nationally pure space” in Western Ukraine by murdering between fifty thousand to sixty thousand Volhynian Poles. Throughout the duration of the war, it is estimated that Ukrainian nationalists killed between seventy thousand and one hundred thousand Poles in Western Ukraine. In the twenty-first century, Poles and Ukrainians have worked to restore good relations. Yet the Volhynian massacre “still carries potent political currency in relations between Poland and Ukraine.” Thus, that tens of thousands of Poles are working tirelessly to welcome Ukrainian refugees is meaningful. Not only are they demonstrating to the world the heroic side of Poland, which Poles hold dear and American Jews tend to ignore, but they have also demonstrated a desire to move beyond stereotyped generalizations in order to help a victim of a common enemy. For Poles know that Putin’s goals do not end with Ukraine.

In response to the rise of authoritarianism in Poland, the global pandemic, and Russia’s war on the West, my goals have necessarily transformed. I have augmented my initial focus on American Jews’ misperceptions of the Polish past and Polish-Jewish relations with Poles’ own misrepresentations of them. What I have found is that at times both sides have failed to understand the Other not only because of a lack of knowledge, but also due to a willingness to trample over the Other to elevate the Self. To support my analysis, I provide readers with a synthesis of current research on Polish-Jewish relations coupled with a variety of Polish Christian, Polish Jewish, and American Jewish perspectives gleaned through interviews I conducted in 2007 and 2019. Having finally emerged at the end of this project, I now have a better grasp of Przemek’s intense belief in his truth and the missing pieces from my own version. What I posit is a new construction by which to understand this long and complex relationship.

**Reassessment and Reconstruction**

The process of academic reassessment began in the 1980s when a few scholars stepped outside of their cultural boxes to encounter Polish-Jewish relations anew. Polish activists and intellectuals challenged their communist government’s historiography, subjecting commonly held assumptions of the past to detached scholarly inquiry. In response, some Jewish Holocaust historians allowed themselves to open doors to a broader, more complex understanding of World War II. They began to challenge their own positions of contempt for Poland and its people.

Conferences on Polish-Jewish relations convened, with American, European, and Polish attendees. Creating meaningful dialogue, they built new relationships and developed deeper understanding. An early contributor to this process, the Polish scholar Jerzy Tomaszewski, underscored the importance of these meetings : although “[t]he beginnings were difficult . . . my impression was that at least there was a group of Jewish scholars in the USA who were not so different from me and some of my friends in Warsaw.”

In 1984, Antony Polonsky organized the First International Conference on Polish-Jewish Studies, held in Oxford, England. Over the years, the conference facilitated the introduction of Jewish history and culture into the curricula of Polish universities. Of more immediate consequence was the formation of two societies created to pursue further research in this area : the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford and its sister organization The American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies. Every year since 1987, these two associations have published a collection of scholarly essays, entitled *Polin : Studies in Polish Jewry.* Framed around one specific era or concept, each volume includes a plethora of thinkers and approaches.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union permitted a deeper review of the Polish past. Archives previously closed off to foreign inquiry were declassified. Delving into the Soviet-era records, academics reinterpreted important historic events in Polish-Jewish relations. These academic writings have allowed me to reassess my own understanding of accounts of the past and the role that both Jews and Poles played over the centuries. Reading a range of works by well-respected American, British, Polish, Israeli, Christian, and Jewish thinkers in the field confirmed that American Jewry’s twentieth-century education missed the mark on these topics. These works have supported not only my questioning of the beliefs mainstream American Ashkenazi Jewry has held sacrosanct, but also my new approach to the Polish people.

In the following pages, I present a different perspective on the relationship of Jews and Poles from the one I was taught. That I discuss a more nuanced approach to Polish-Jewish relations does not preclude me from recognizing antisemitism’s role within the Polish collective as well as the downplaying of the Polish Jews’ experience in order to elevate the Polish Christian experience. However, even at this present moment of memory confrontation and negation there remain Poles who devote their days to honoring the Jews’ presence in Poland. As educator and activist Leora Tec often points out, “That’s what happens when you grow up. You can hold two things at the same time that don’t go together.” It is my hope that in presenting the nuances of the very long encounter between Christian and Jewish Poles, American Jewry will gain a better understanding, not only of the Polish and Jewish people who once lived in Poland, but also of those living there today.

This book reviews changing Polish-Jewish relations over a period of centuries, as generated by religious, economic, and political structures. Who were Poles and Jews before partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? Who did they become after its 1795 demise? Examining feudal Polish society and the middleman minority role Jews played in this culture helps to explain those early relationships, as do changing Polish and Jewish self-understandings after Poland was conquered, partitioned, and colonialized by the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. Additionally, late eighteenth-century ideals of liberty and equality as expressed in the French Revolution influenced Poles, Jews, and the Catholic Church in different ways. Threatened by this new worldview, Church leaders fought against their increasing loss of power by fomenting a backlash against the Jews who, as a people, had gained the most from modernity by breaching ghetto gates and leaping into secular society as leaders of the new capitalist economy. Jolted by the economics and social realities of capitalist industrialization, in the end Poles and Jews focused less on commonality than on their own particular group’s perceived needs. The birth of antisemitism coupled with the continental-wide rise of nationalism met Polish feudalism’s collapse and the Polish peasant’s attempted elevation to wreak havoc on Polish-Jewish relations.

Other oft neglected influences on Polish-Jewish relations in Poland and on American Jews’ perception of those relations are rooted in early twentieth-century America. As we will see, the US government’s approach to Poland and the Poles highly influenced American pop culture’s presentation of the country and its people before, during, and after World War II and the Holocaust. These negative stereotypes still hold power, influencing contemporary American Jewry’s attitude toward the Polish people.

A few words about both the literal and figurative territory covered here. In the section dealing with post-partition relations, I focus primarily on those Polish-Jewish relations within the Kingdom of Poland. However, given not only that the Kingdom of Poland was linked dynastically to the Russian Empire from 1815 to World War I, but also that Polish patriots saw their eastern neighbor as an enemy, I present a broader contextual understanding of Russian policies and personalities when needed. Grasping conflicts between the Romanovs and Polish insurgents enhances our view of both Jewish reactions in the Kingdom of Poland to Russian political supremacy and Poles’ responses to it.

The impact of World War II and the Holocaust on Polish-Jewish relations is a topic in itself, and thus outside the purview of this book. However, in order to understand today’s stereotypes and biases, I do raise specific issues stemming from the German and Soviet occupations of Poland, as well as from the Holocaust : I will explore genocide, the power of propaganda, the longevity of prewar antisemitism, the Jew-Bolshevik stereotype, Soviet deportations, the drive for survival, attempts at rescue and blatant murder.

Furthermore, we will encounter Polish-Jewish relations in the immediate postwar period and during the Soviet colonialization of Polish land between 1947 and 1989. We will grapple with Polish pogroms, communist leaders of Jewish origin, internal political conflicts between two central Polish communist groups, and the March 1968 anti-*Zionist* purge. We will also come to understand the role played by the economy in fomenting Solidarity (the unusual cooperation among workers, the Church, and intellectuals) and the renewed interest in religious identity for Poles of Christian and Jewish origin.

My purpose in writing this book is to encourage North American Jews and Polish Christians to suspend judgment learned over the years from family, teachers, friends, books, movies, and the news media—and to welcome a reconstruction of the Polish-Jewish past. I am asking readers to examine the nuances of this long and complicated relationship in order to speak more reliably about present-day realities. I am suggesting that people step away from the clichés of the past and allow facts to inform them.

In learning and incorporating the complex details of past centuries, including those which have informed not only Jewish myths, but also Polish national myths, American Jews and Polish Christians have an opportunity to tackle the stereotypes each holds of the Other, of one’s Self, and of one’s homeland. I am not asking readers to accept violent behavior or antisemitism. I am asking that we take the time to unpack them and understand them. I hope the reader will find here a compelling argument for letting go of the hackneyed “good Jew, bad Pole” approach to Polish-Jewish relations that American Ashkenazi Jews tend to take. For the Polish reader, I hope this more nuanced view of past Polish-Jewish relations will call into question the Jews-as-Poland’s-enemy stereotype, while reasserting the importance of Polish Jews in the country’s past. I ask you to dismiss the simple orderly image you have held of Poles and Jews. Indeed, the picture is quite messy. Let’s jump into it!

**Framework and Terminology**

I present the relationship in Poland between Poles and Jews (in as much as these two groups are distinct) as well as that between Poles in Poland and American Jewry through the constructs of history, memory, and myth. One broad definition of *history* is that which occurred in the past. History includes *all* actors, contexts and influences that shaped that past. Scholars insist on documentation and corroborating evidence to confirm the veracity of a historical event. People who chronicled events they experienced allow future generations to know about it. To *know* history, then, is to grapple with, grasp and explain the documentation—the witnessing—of the intensely complex past. Seismic shocks and subtle details, new discoveries and revised perspectives shift understanding of that past, making history as a static noun elusive. What historians partake in is the active striving toward history. They uncover new information and look at the previously known through new lenses. Thus, history is an active process demanding constant reassessment and at times reconstruction.

Mistakenly, people apply the term *history* to everything they have learned and incorporated about the past. I, myself, tussled with misuse of the term at the start of my research. I questioned why my history was so different from Przemek’s. What caused our conflict over the past was not history as a static noun, but rather our respective group’s activation of memories of the past. *Memory* is that portion of the past that one recalls. Indeed, the relationship between history and memory is a difficult one as the latter does not necessarily correlate with the former. Renowned Jewish historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi writes: “memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous.” He adds that “what is remembered is not always recorded and, alas for the historian, . . . much of what has been recorded is not necessarily remembered.” As such, the memory of a group’s past is driven typically by what its leaders need to recover in order to deal with present-day problems. Thus, we find each community guards collective memories that have been handed down through the generations, memories which emphasize different stories as guides to the future.

The concept of *collective memory*—the experienced occurrences, images, and concepts of the past that bind a group in a meaningful way—is one that sociologists have studied since the early twentieth century. In the 1970s historian Pierre Nora popularized the idea. However, four decades earlier French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs had already convincingly directed our understanding of memory away from a biological to a cultural framework. Influenced by his teacher Emile Durkheim, Halbwachs further theorized the framework of collective memory to pertain to every group, including families, religious communities, social classes, political associations, and nations. These collectives form their respective identities based on having lived a shared experience.

If any one group’s members are intent on group continuity beyond the first-generation iteration, it becomes essential to create a memory of that initial lived experience to pass onto successive generations. Thought leaders have referred to these collective memory tools in various ways. I prefer Yerushalmi’s expression “vehicles of memory.” Whether experienced actively or more passively, within a group or by oneself, these vehicles transport a group member back to a foundational experience, helping to solidify one’s connection with the collective. Jan Assman explains that the group’s collective memory is “concretized” through vehicles of memory, allowing the group “to reproduce its identity.” Thus, group representatives labor to write books, songs, liturgy, ceremonies, plays, films, and television shows; they create monuments, commemoration rituals, and museums. In essence these vehicles drive present-day individuals back into the past in order to transform them into future memory keepers.

Nicolas Russell argues that “when the nature of a group’s collective memory changes, the group itself ceases to exist.” Thus, change represents group danger. Changing perceptions of the past raises an existential threat to any collective. The central challenge to every group is continuity. Therefore, group leadership must contend with how to present new historical discoveries and new cultural perspectives. Traditionalist authorities guard collective memory to maintain group cohesion. They will ignore or refute new discoveries and perspectives. They will fight to maintain unity of thought not only for the group’s existence, but also for their own sense of Self—to maintain power, privilege, and purpose.

The rank and file also work to protect the group in order to defend the Self. People cleave to a group either because they are born into it or because they are drawn in by the collective memory that it forms or has solidified. The group brings meaning to individuals’ lives. It anchors one in what otherwise could be experienced as a volatile, meaningless, and random existence. Thus, the group is intimately connected with the individual’s own sense of meaning and purpose. To challenge the agreed upon memory is to challenge not only the unifying elements that bind individuals together in the group, but to challenge the meaning individuals have invested in their own lives.

A dialectical tension exists, then, between salvaging memories of a lived past and the drive to live in and respond to the present. How much room do we give the past in our present living and in our goals for the future? Halbwachs proposes that the present informs how we remember the past. When a collective’s needs in the present change, it follows that a different memory from the group’s past gets recovered. If the two memories are at odds with each other, one can expect trouble in the group, as members will not readily relinquish their long connection to a longer-held and better-known memory. It is the fight over conceding part of that salvaged past in exchange for another memory that drives this book. When and how do we allow change?

The American Jewish community has been wrestling against disintegrating group identification with the religious *myth* that had sustained the Jewish people for close to two millennium in the Jewish diaspora. Here, mythis that narrative that explains the group’s understanding of itself, its origins, meaningful past and purpose vis-à-vis the chaotic world. A myth knits together the group’s collective memories. Until the mid-nineteenth century, mainstream Jews accepted the concept of a God who operates in history; they understood the Jews’ exile from Jerusalem in 70 ce as direct punishment for their unwillingness to follow God’s commandments as set out in the Torah (Written Law) and Talmud (Oral Law); they believed that only if they were God-fearing, halakhic Jews (those who follow Jewish law) would God allow a return to the Land of Israel. In his seminal work *Zakhor*, Yerushalmi discusses the devastating break with this myth in parts of the Jewish community. This has led to a corresponding divorce from the central Jewish understanding of both group and the individual’s role in it. Yerushalmi argues that nothing has replaced this myth for the Jewish people and thus Jews remain somewhat untethered.

Those who have rejected the traditional Jewish religious myth might still participate in a modern Jewish denomination—Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist. But if the group’s theology is not personally felt—and it takes tremendous individual work to understand and internalize it—the meaning of the denomination’s myth might very well be lost to the individual. People who do not feel faith are often drawn to view history with a zealot’s certainty. Yerushalmi contends that “history becomes what it had never been before—the faith of fallen Jews.” Jews today, denominational and unaffiliated, rely on history, not faith, to find meaning in Jewish identity.

The Holocaust has become a centering stone for a great many Jews; they find meaning as a Jew in the fact of survival, in having repudiated Hitler’s Final Solution by rebuilding Jewish life. Contemporary Jews continue to digest a large volume of Holocaust literature. I know friends and family members who focus on this literary niche. The struggle to survive speaks to readers’ private struggles and gives them hope that they can survive the hell that life sends them. The problem, however, is that what we know about history changes with every generation’s discoveries and evolving social perspectives.

The question remains : When will this obsessive connection with the Holocaust abate? How easily will Jews shift away from this negative framework for Jewish identity? While one may argue that the State of Israel offers a positive agenda for theologically bereft Jews, I see Israel as part of the Holocaust narrative : if Jews do not actively look out for themselves, then their very survival is at stake. I do not necessarily disagree with this perception. I am simply recognizing that this narrative acts as the centering device for many Jews’ identities. It is an “us versus them” approach. And often, because it is a matter of physical survival, people find it difficult to allow for the gradations of gray within the curated stark black-and-white images of Jews and their enemies. I wonder when this particular sense of Jewish identity, which is rooted in the negative, will diminish.

A study on memory conducted in Israel by Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel, and Bernice M. Barnett concludes that “when the future is uncertain, when the very survival of society is doubted or, at best, problematic” a past is appropriated, “one that matches and articulates the insecurity as well as the hopes of the present.” That past remains relevant while the present group members feel threatened. This notion is relevant not only to the Holocaust-Israel nexus, but also to a subtopic within it : American Jews’ tight embrace of cliché relations between Poles and Jews in Poland. This process also plays out in today’s Poland, where *żydokomuna*—stereotypes of the Jew-Bolshevik enemy—still hold sway. When groups feel insecure, they gravitate to inspirational narratives and promote only positive images of their own group. It follows, when Poles and Jews feel the future is secure, leaders and group members will be more willing to take a deeper look at the enshrined black-and-white image of the collective past. Group security will enable deep self-reflection of historical nuances (often negative) that did not make it into the group’s centering narratives, thus enabling better relations with groups previously conceived as threatening.

It is my contention that the challenge is to engage with these issues *before* a strong sense of security washes over the collective. For who knows how long that sense of security will remain? Indeed, I began this book at a time of liberalizattion and freedom for Poles. I experienced their new assessment of the past after the Iron Curtain fell. But in just fifteen years that sense of tolerance and freedom has been overtaken once again by fear and insecurity. The challenge I present is no easy task.

Individuals participate in maintaining a group’s collective memory by subconsciously filtering their own memories through this social sieve. The arduous task is for individuals to take agency and to permit deep reflection, recognizing the grays in what first appeared to be unambiguous snapshots of the past. The hope is that when individuals question, discover, and act they will move group leaders to do the same. This premise aligns with the principle of *distribution energy*, which Polish sociologist Sławomir Kapralski addresses in a 2017 article titled “The Holocaust : Commemorated but not remembered?” Distribution energy refers to individuals’ capacity to fuel the building of collective memory by means of *social memory*, which includes those remembrances and recollections they have communicated and discussed amongst themselves. Kapralski recognizes the grass-roots dynamic of distribution energy and its ability to move what individuals discuss within social memory into collective memory.

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the transport vehicles for that memory are quite similar to the vehicles of memory we noted earlier in this discussion. They include affectively charged events around a mobilizing narrative—“visual and verbal signs that serve as aids to memory; institutions of learning and the dissemination of mass media; sites and monuments that present palpable relics, commemoration rites that periodically reactivate the memory and enhance collective participation.” It is within social memory that space exists for the individual to raise perceptions and questions otherwise ignored by the previous or older caretakers of memory. The point is to do the work while understanding and respecting that all groups, not just your group, seek continuity.

This book focuses on Polish and Jewish groups’ various ways of negotiating what each perceives as existential threats and their fears of collective repercussions. At the same time, it highlights individuals struggling against collective constraints. Fear of group disintegration pushes and pulls individuals to rally together to protect the group’s identity and that of its members. All groups employ fear as a tactic. And, indeed, fear is very real at times. At the writing of this book, Vladimir Putin not only amassed thousands of troops along Russia’s border with Ukraine, but actually invaded the country, and he continues to wage a horrific military battle against the Ukrainian citizenry! Poles’ fear has heightened, and they wonder if Putin will stop with its eastern neighbor.

American Jews are viewing the Poles anew, as a people that provides aid to fleeing refugees. Perhaps this new image will encourage American Jews to discover “new” information concerning past relations and to discard tired categorizations of the Other. Perhaps this new image of Poles will influence American Jews to join in the important work groups of Poles and Jews in Poland have been advancing to reckon with difficult pasts and to drive toward a tolerant future.

**Terms**

Below I emphasize my understanding of a few essential terms and concepts employed throughout this book: *truth*, *myth*, *Pole*, *Jew*,and *Other*. *Truth* is that which a group deems to be true. Often biased, it is ever changing as new information, perspectives, and contexts emerge. I hope to take part in reconstructing truths held by Poles and American Jews as they relate to Poland, the Polish people, and Polish-Jewish relations.

*Myth* refers to a group’s broad understanding of the past that brings meaning to that group and its individual members. I understand a myth’s wholeness as having been stitched from the group’s collective memories and made powerful by its members’ identification with it. Neil Gilman (1933–2017), a rabbi and preeminent scholar in Jewish philosophy and theology, guided his students to locate their personal intersections of historical scholarship and faith. He encouraged them to create new meaningful myths that would carry them forward in their personal relationships with Judaism. Gilman’s teaching has been a driving force for this book.

I recognize that *American* Jews are a diverse population, originating in a variety of lands. Most contemporary American Jews hail from Eastern Europe and are Ashkenazi. Those from the Iberian Peninsula (including Spain) are referred to as Sephardi Jews. While the majority of American Jewry has been accepted as white by American society, it has been argued that more than 20% is racially and ethnically diverse.

The term *Pole* is a complicated one. Living in the twenty-first century, most readers gravitate towards a civic classification, which accepts any person born in Poland as a Pole. But such a concept did not exist anywhere until the French Revolution unleashed it, permitting people of all races and religions to claim citizenship upon a declaration of loyalty to the nation. It took the populace decades to embrace this stated ideal. As such, until the mid-twentieth century, Christian and Jewish inhabitants of Poland consistently noted a difference between their two groups. Jews rarely called themselves Poles, and Polish Christians rarely accepted Jews as Poles. As such, in this book the word *Poles* does not include Jews. I recognize that such terminology passively promotes the very distinction in belonging against which some Jews argued, and which today’s Polish Jews reject. Indeed, Stanisław Krajewski refers to those Jews living in twenty-first-century Poland as *Polish Polish Jews*, so important is their Polish identity.

I refer to that group which stands outside the majority as the *Other*. Every society engages an Other. Sociologist Jan Assmann holds that when a group’s identification is concretized its identity is determined in either a positive sense (“We are this”) or in a negative sense (“That is our opposite”). The Other aids collective identity : by pointing to that which the group *is not*, one better understands what the group *is*. As such, a group’s “cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not, that is, between what appertains to oneself and what is foreign.” However, often people present the Other negatively to raise up the majority to which they belong. The Other refers to groups which hold different religious truths, economic roles, cultural norms, and political ideals from one’s own group. For Jews, who lived amongst their own people in Polish villages, small towns, and urban neighborhoods from the Middle Ages to the interwar period (1919-1939), Christian Poles were an Other. For Poles who simultaneously inhabited the same land, the Other referred to all minority groups, including Jews. Because Jews heavily populated the entire Polish territory and were so visible in their distinctiveness from Christian Poles and other Christian minorities, Jews became the ultimate Other within the Polish nation.

The ramifications of Otherness have waxed and waned throughout the near-millennium of Polish-Jewish relations. For the most part Otherness created separation between populations. Usually, people engaged peacefully with the Other at the marketplace and on the street. But during occasions which naturally stressed the Jews’ differences, such as religious holidays and time of economic and political crisis, some Poles reacted aggressively to the Jews’ Otherness.

Joanna Beata Michlic discusses the particular political embrace of the Jew as Poland’s threatening Other. Beginning in the 1880s, the nationalist political party, Endecja , grounded its identity on proposing the Jew as the Poles’ chief enemy. Embracing antisemitism, Endek’s approach led to consequences that have lasted to this day.

I hold that Jews had multiple Otherness experiences throughout their long habitation on Polish land. Religious Otherness. Cultural Otherness. Educational Otherness. Linguistic Otherness. Social Otherness. Economic Otherness. But these Otherness experiences did not necessitate physical harm. As Kapralski notes, Poles and Jews “lived in the same physical space and historical time,” but “did not share the same social space and time.” For more than eight hundred years Jews and Poles shared a separate coexistence. While relatively peaceful for the most part, during this long period there was an undercurrent of disrespect and resentment that at various times and in various locales erupted in violence.

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I am from the United States, reared there and influenced by it. The American Ashkenazi Jewish (majority) community has shaped me, and in the following pages I respond to it. By raising issues and challenging perceptions I hope to introduce new ideas to American Jewry.

At the same time, I recognize that while I am drawn to Poland, and feel a sense of home when there, Poland is not my motherland. I do not have an instinctive understanding of the land, people, or culture. While I am an “outsider” in Poland, I have great respect for the people and their stories. It is my hope that individual Poles will read my work and reflect on it.

When one explores the past, one finds that what took place is not one thing or another, but rather a complex of events, deep and wrenching. In it one discovers humanity confronting its own limitations, failings, and desires. It is within this context that I offer my examination of the complex Polish-Jewish past.

There is an intrinsic danger in writing about a subject that has had such a polarizing effect on communities. I do not come here to take sides, but rather to show that no side is absolutely right. I am not writing with any political agenda. Because of that, people who are determined to read and “learn” only their group’s perspective might well be angered by my work. This book throws the various rhetoric we have ingested over the decades into a pulsating blender. What I pour out is historiography’s complexity and indeterminacy for you to examine and consider.

**Chapter 1**

**Myth and Reconstruction**

In 2005 I visited Auschwitz for the first time. I was shocked to learn that the Nazis initially built the camp not to enslave and murder Jews, but to enslave and murder Poles. In the museum I stood peering into the encased hoard of victims’ eyeglasses, embarrassed by what I had not seen. I was the embodiment of the disconnect between Pole and Jew. Why as an American Jew had I not known of the Polish plight? And why has it been so difficult for many Poles to recognize Jewish suffering at the hands of their countrymen? The answers lie in both groups’ unwillingness to acknowledge and study the Other’s suffering, each fearing that to do so would erase their own identity. To recognize the painful past of the Other might jeopardize their own position in the world. Determined to untangle the twisted histories I had been taught regarding the Poles and their complex relationships with the Jews, I had to risk the security of *knowing* my place in this world. Here I explore this process by investigating not only American Jewish and Polish Christian myth making, but also the difficulty of challenging an accepted myth.

Each nation views history through its own distinct lens. Leaders and laypersons alike embrace perceptions of their country, culture, and its citizens that substantiate their own political and social needs. We focus on what we wish to see clearly, while allowing other interpretations of the past to blur in our final assessment. Through this process collective memory takes shape, while many historical facts get cropped out.

For this reason, in place of the commonly used term *history*, I will often substitute the word *myth*. Here, myth signals a specific process of recording and integrating the past into the present. I ask the reader to suspend the usual understanding of myth as something deemed to be false. Instead, myth means a written or orally transmitted “structure through which a community organizes and makes sense of its experiences.” We have been trained to regard history as factual events which occurred in the past. The term *myth* allows for a more fluid approach, referring not only to the construction and deconstruction of our understanding of the past, but also to a nation’s or group’s relationship with it. Myth is a patchwork quilt of a group’s collective memories.

Neil Gilman holds that “myths are the spectacles that enable us to see order, in what would otherwise be confusion.” This definition allows a fresh look at religious, cultural, and historical texts. It suggests we redefine truth as a belief rather than a fact. Releasing us from a literal reading of a text, it permits greater insight into the community’s attitude toward Self and Other.

Each country and culture collects memories. Leaders stitch them into narratives of birth, survival, and growth in order to promote continued connection to the group and encourage future membership growth. The continuous reiteration of particular myths is vital for the group’s continuity. It provides a “brand” with which members identify and leaders toil to ensure relevance for future generations.

Knowledge of, and respect for, another nation’s myths are necessary for understanding its populace. To grasp the myth is to understand how a country or a people views itself. Accepting one’s own myth as meaningful does not negate the ability, or the imperative, to recognize those of Others. To see one’s own myth as a guiding force, but to know that it is not the *only truth*, is essential for living as an open participant in both dialogue and the reconstruction of positive working relationships.

Given that life is based on interactions between people, groups, cultures, and countries, it becomes critical to acknowledge that what one group chooses to salvage from an event is different from what another promotes. This is especially true when two nations are in conflict. Often their separate communal needs and understandings stand in opposition and are perceived as a threat to the other nation’s well-being. Thus, politicians, historians, and educators offer only selective interpretations. Neither narrative may be totally false, nor will they be based on all the facts. All nations and groups are engaged in the same practice of preservationist mythmaking. American Jews and Polish Catholics are no exception.

**Grains of Truth**

It is true that people distort the past for their own needs. At the same time, there is often at least a grain of truth that props up a people’s myth, including their stereotyping of the Others in their society. To understand why Poles latched onto their own simple views of Jews is not to condone that vision. It is to respect a group’s historical context. This step may be difficult for some people to take, as to see and name the negative encased in one’s own group requires courage. It involves uncovering and incorporating the messy and often ugly memories heretofore buried in collective denial. For example, Jews acted as moneylenders within Polish society. As such, they earned incomes by charging interest, something which Poles resented. More disheartening for Poles, when one could not pay back a loan, the Jewish moneylender took what little collateral the Pole possessed.

Countless Poles also characterized Jews as unpatriotic. The reality was that the majority of Jews rejected integration into Polish culture for a number of reasons. They refused full integration due to their religious practice, the perception that many Poles shunned such integration, and the rise of Jewish nationalism. Additionally, the Jewish communal policy of *dinah makhalte dinah—*the law of the land is the law—expressed Jews’ loyalty to the ruling authority. For more than a century the Jews showed fealty to Prussians, Austrians, and Russians, but not to Poles. That Jews remained neutral during several border conflicts at the dawn of the Second Polish Republic provoked Poles’ ire against the Jews as traitors to an independent Poland. Later, when Jews rose in the ranks of the Communist Party, Poles viewed the Jew as an internal enemy.

At the same time, American Jewry has painted Poland as an antisemitic nation. There is some truth to this stereotype. Anti-Jewish rhetoric had an extensive presence in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholic Church, which greatly influenced the majority ethnic Polish population. Since the 1880s, antisemitism and consequent violence had erupted in historic Polish lands. This politicized Jew-hatred became fashionable in Poland before the Great War of 1914–1918, when Polish nationalists experienced the power that the Jewish minority voting bloc could exert. In response right-wing political players called for economic boycotts of Jewish businesses. The end of World War I did not bring relief. Pogroms besieged Jewish communities during the first years of the Second Republic, from 1918 to 1926. The years of World War II, 1939–1945, brought further bitterness and distrust between Jews and Poles. Despite the horrors Jews faced in the Nazi death camps of World War II, on 07/04/1946, a little more than a year after the war’s end, Polish citizens massacred thirty-nine Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors and wounded eighty others in and around the city of Kielce. Later in the 1960s, communist Poland carried out its so-called anti*-Zionist* purge of Jews. American Jewry extrapolated that all Poles held such hatred for Jews. Such categorizing is a natural self-defense reflex clung to by most groups, including both Jews and Poles.

**Antipolonism in America**

To begin myth reconstruction is to consciously recognize the possible existence of an alternative past reality to that generated by government, taught by teachers, or passed on by parents. It is to imagine Others as equal in worth to one’s own group and to wonder how one’s group affected the Other. Myth reconstruction demands that the Other’s truth be expressed without typical unreflective opposition. It calls one to read the Other’s telling of the past alongside one’s own and to locate the inconsistencies between the two accounts. Myth reconstruction calls for scholars willing to dig into the Other’s primary archives as well as their own in order to reconcile different interpretations. Ultimately, it also demands the public confront surprise, confusion, and conflict from a messy past.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Americans based their opinions of Poles on their experience with those Polish nobles who had emigrated to the United States after being defeated in the 1830-31 insurrection against Russian rule. Americans extrapolated from this limited demographic that all Poles were courageous, strong, and well educated. Nineteenth century American playwright Oliver Cromwell presented Poles as “brave, patriotic, genteel, high-minded.” However, before the turn of the twentieth century, this generalized perspective shifted to view Poland and Poles with disdain. Between roughly 1880 and 1929 A new wave of migrants left Eastern and Southern Europe for American ports. Reaching well over two million people, the Polish immigrants—who included both Christians and Jews—were soon second to the Italians in population size. Fleeing famine and extreme poverty, they arrived in the US in search of opportunity, only to be referred to derogatorily as “new immigrants.” The more deeply rooted Americans viewed them as inferior and looked down on them.

People in power questioned the ethos and value of the Eastern European immigrant, and the Poles became the target of hostility due to their sheer numbers. In 1902, Woodrow Wilson described Poles, along with Hungarians and Italians, as “men of the meaner sort” who possessed “neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence.” This negative view was not helped by the fact that the great majority of the Polish Christian refugees came from rural areas and were mostly uneducated. Maintaining strong connections to both family and the Catholic Church, these immigrants planned to return to their motherland. As such, they resisted learning English and embracing American culture.

American social critics characterized this predominantly poor and unschooled population as representative of the Polish people as a whole. Americans adopted the hateful and condescending Bieganski stereotype in which “Poles are brutes. They possess qualities of animals. They are physically strong, stupid, violent, fecund, anarchic, dirty, and especially hateful in a way that more evolved human beings are not.”

This stereotype also typified Poles politically as “thuggishly, primitively nationalistic. The special hatefulness of Bieganski is epitomized in his Polish antisemitism.”

Americans misconstrued Poles’ determination to retain their language and customs as signs of ignorance. Under pressure to assimilate, Poles living on American soil were called “simple” or “lazy,” and this, as is the way with all stereotyping, was taken to include *all* Poles. Jokes about “Polaks” resounded. That Protestantism dominated American Christendom only added to this damaging image of the Polish Catholic immigrant.

The new theory of scientific racism supported this derogatory perception of Polish immigrants. Madison Grant (1865-1937), the well-known figurehead of this movement, who professed that his racist beliefs derived from objective scientific studies, had the ear of two US presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover. In his book *The* *Passing of the Great Race*, Grant argues that of the three European races he identified, the Nordic is superior to the Mediterranean, who in turn stands above the lowly Alpine. The latter includes Eastern Europeans. Grant argues that while members of a lower race could not elevate themselves, those within a higher race could be brought down through intermixing with those on lower rungs. He maintained that when two unlike races mix, the offspring is always a lower form.

Swayed by this theory, America’s elites feared race suicide : that the “new immigrants” would captivate and corrupt the racial elite American, and through procreation would fill the land with racially inferior people. Diluted numerically, the master race would be weakened and robbed of its privileges. Among Grant’s champions was Adolf Hitler, who found tremendous inspiration in this 1916 publication and lauded it as his “bible.”

So entrenched was this racial theory, that even some of those who dedicated their careers to countering it got sucked into it. The father of American Anthropology, Franz Boas (1858-1942), viewed all cultures as on the same plain. However, when it came to the 1880-1929 immigrants, this German-born Jew gave into racist stereotypes, portraying Christians and Jews from Poland as unintelligent with very little cultural worth. However, unlike Grant, Boas argued that assimilation would raise up the immigrants.

This anti-Polish ideology did not exist only among elite academicians; it filtered down to the general populace through newspapers and films. The iconic American magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* was one of the most widely circulated and influential middle-class weeklies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paper serialized novelist Kenneth Roberts’s assessments of the “new immigrants” as highly problematic both culturally and politically. He characterized them as less than human in the 11/06/1920 edition where he stated resolutely, “They wear clothing that seems to have ripened on them for years, and they sleep in wretched hovels with sheep and cows and pigs and poultry scattered among them. They have been so for a great many centuries. It is almost impossible for them to slough the results of heredity and environment.”

Additionally, Roberts described Eastern Europeans as the source of “unrest, dissatisfaction, sedition, revolutionary and anarchist doctrines.” He characterized them as possessing a tragicomic mentality that created “a mess” of their countries. Not only did he view Poles as too stupid to open an umbrella when it rained, but he asserted that they were incapable of assimilation: “an ostrich could assimilate a cobble stone with about the same ease.” He admitted that “[p]ractically all of them, viewed individually, were hard-working, well-meaning, likeable persons,” but he insisted—and convinced middle-class Americans—that when “[t]aken in the mass . . . , and viewed from an American standpoint, it is no more possible to make Americans out of a great many of them than it is possible to make a racehorse out of a pug dog.” Thus, the general American public learned to think of Poles as inferior.

Americans also came to judge Poles according to the jobs they did in the United States. Most Polish peasants entering the United States lacked conventional education. They did not have formal schooling. In fact, given their former agricultural life, which included barter, they most probably had never even handled money prior to emigration. Despite their ability to turn dirt into food, and grain into clothing, urban Americaa looked down on Polish immigrants and considered them unable to learn. They limited opportunities advanced to Poles. Labeled as most suited for heavy industry, Poles largely found jobs in factories where American industrialists needed bodies to fuel American progress. Indeed, the Polish immigrant soon embodied the prototypical American proletarian.

Poles labored under nightmarish conditions that killed and crippled many of their young. When they organized strikes for higher wages or to improve conditions, they were met with middle-class fear. The popular acceptance of Eastern Europeans as less than, as Other, influenced the American populace’s unsympathetic response to the Polish striker. During the early 1920s, civic and industrial authorities stopped strikes with the use of blunt force, beating men, women, and children indiscriminately and firing shots into unarmed crowds. The general American populace was antilabor and anti-immigrant.

Confident of the Poles’ inadequacies—intellectual, hygienic, and moral—and fearful of the dumbing down of America, politicians argued for restricting Polish immigrants’ entry to the country. In 1907 the US Congress authorized the now famous Dillingham Commission, which determined in its 1911 report that Poles were intellectually and psychologically inferior to the American population. Believing Poles and others from Eastern Europe to be unassimilable, the report concluded their numbers should be restricted.

It is important to note that because Poles and Jews migrated from the same territory, they have often been compared. While both experienced negative stereotyping in the United States during the “new immigration” and after, much has been done to counter the bigotry against Jews that academics, media, and government agencies promoted in the early twentieth century. Regrettably, “no such parallel effort has been made to renounce or deconstruct the devastating racist ideas about Poles and other Slavs (Bohunks).”

**Antipolonism among American Jews**

American Jews growing up in the early twentieth century accepted these negative perceptions of Poles. In fact, this antipolonism corroborated the disdain of Poles that many early Jewish Americans, most of whom arrived from German lands, had carried with them from the Old World. The Jewish Prussians who reached America in the 1840s retained a cultural elitism, which castigated all inhabitants of Polish lands, Jews and Catholics alike.

Late nineteenth-century Jewish immigrants from partitioned Polish lands strengthened this belittling of Catholic Poles by transporting their own air of superiority over the Polish peasantry to American shores. Drawing on their past economic relationship—Jews as overseers and sellers of essential goods, Poles as laborers, farmers, and consumers—Jewish immigrants maintained condescending attitudes towards their Polish Christian compatriots. Reinforced by an American antipolonism most American Jews berated Poles who resettled in the US. As we shall see, this negative relationship influenced American politics and culture.

It is vital to understand that the vast majority of Jewish immigrants from Poland did not regard themselves as Polish. They were Jews who happened to have lived in the lands which made up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (today, not only Poland, but also Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine) and who left the area due to economic and political hardship. In America, as a whole, Polish Jews did not seek out broader Polish organizations to link them to the Old Country. Instead, they joined existing Jewish fraternities and societies, which helped them to Americanize. At the same time, however, Polish and Jewish immigrants settled in urban foreign enclaves, where they transferred their economic roles from Poland to the New World, with Jewish entrepreneurs providing the goods and services that the Polish peasants-turned-factory workers needed. As in the Old Country, these two communities retained a relationship of distant proximity.

**Polish and Jewish Myths Diverge : The Holocaust, Hollywood, and “Polish Camps”**

World War II and the Holocaust are perhaps the most important disputed issues regarding Jewish and Polish interpretations of the past. Despite the Nazi’s responsibility for the Final Solution, the fact that they centralized this cataclysmic horror in Poland exacerbated American Jewry’s contempt for the Poles. Human psyches operate through association. The inconceivable extent of torture and murder inflicted on millions of Jews on Polish soil created an image in the American Jewish mind of Poland as the heart of darkness. The Polish people were considered monsters who did not help their Jewish neighbors, allowing them to be slaughtered instead.

As we have seen, due to American scientific racism and xenophobia, the American public and, as a result, American Jews looked down on Poles and Poland. During the war years, Hollywood added to the accepted Bieganski stereotype, feeding dangerous and calculated misperceptions of Poland and Poles to its American and foreign audiences. At a time when the studios released some five hundred films yearly and 74% of the US population went to the movies at least once a week, American cinema shaped the tastes and attitudes of its audience. For good or ill, Hollywood was “the foremost educational institute on earth.” In his book *Hollywood’s War with Poland, 1939–1945*, historian Mieczysław Biskupski demonstrates that instead of portraying the heartbreaking heroics of the Polish resistance to the Nazis and Soviets, as well as Poles’ horrific experiences under both occupying forces, studio heads chose to paint Poland as a weak nation that crumbled due to its own traitorous appeasement tactics.

The American Communist Party members who founded and ran the Screen Writers’ Guild, and US propaganda policies that presented its ally—the Soviet Union—in the best possible light, manipulated cinema audiences with this outrageous WWII fabrication. In addition, the various studio heads who were Jewish and already held some negative feelings toward Poland and the Poles played a role. Consequently, during the war, the Polish government-in-exile met an American ally teetering on this interplay of ideology, politics, and nationality.

At the same time, Hollywood—pressured by US policy makers—directed Americans’ perceptions by what it chose *not* to produce. The movie industry avoided making films about the Holocaust. Reasons for this omission included the Jewish studio heads’ belief that Jewish-specific topics would highlight their own Jewish origins at a time of heightened American antisemitism. They were also following the Roosevelt administration’s policy to steer clear of the subject as it might change public opinion, swelling demand to assist the Jews militarily—a position at odds with the US war plan.

The American Jewish establishment believed that the Nazi authorities chose Poland as ground zero because Poles were supposedly “all-too-willing” to aid efforts to implement the Final Solution. Centuries of Catholic priests offering up theologically derived Jew-hatred, coupled with the more recent politicized antisemitism, made American Jewry certain that the Poles supported the Nazis. Due to the simplistic and misleading claim that Poles did nothing to stop the destruction of the six million, most American Jews felt justified in abhorring them. Additionally, given the coordination between the Roosevelt administration and Hollywood, it was relatively easy for American Jews to ignore the Poles’ tremendous suffering during the war.

Although the Polish government had no part in planning or carrying out the Final Solution, American Jewry and Americans in general have come to refer to the Nazi camps on Polish territory as “Polish death camps.” One must ask if a camp had been built in Hungary, would we call it a “Hungarian death camp?” Just as this description makes no sense, neither does the reference to “Polish death camps.” It implies Polish involvement in Nazi Germany’s scheme to murder the Jews and Poland’s general national complicity in carrying it out. It reflects the American image of the brute Pole engendered by nationalism and realpolitik.

American Jewry is not alone in making this serious mistake. Worldwide print media coverage of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II made at least seventy such blunders. While this might be due to a number of death camps built in Poland, the end result is that people have come to see the Poles as responsible in part for those killing centers. Seventy-five years since the end of the war, this gross error signifies a major gap between reality and perceptions of it. As we shall discuss in chapter 20, the Polish populist far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) has exploited this accumulated misplaced guilt to create an enemy with which it must wage war.

**American Jewry’s Micro-Lens onto Poland**

Until the wonderful Polish welcome of Ukrainian refugees in 2022, American Jews have tended to describe Poles as an immoral and savage people. They have focused on the tumultuous period of 1918–1968. Consequently, they have ignored more than eight hundred years of coexistence and its interethnic dynamics. They have pointed to the extreme antisemitism in Poland during the interwar period and ignored the freedom Polish Jewry had in the same period to develop Jewish nationalism and a Jewish print media. Concentrating on the Holocaust, American Jews referred incessantly to Poles who denounced Jews to the Nazis and disregarded the Poles who hid and saved Jewish lives. They remembered the Polish underground Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK), which often treated the Jews in their ranks poorly and did not help the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto enough during their dire time of need. At the same time, they do not remember the AK’s own lack of weaponry and the Polish fighters’ desperate circumstances under both the Nazi and Soviet occupations. While they knew about Poles taking over Jewish homes and then refusing to give them back to the few surviving owners at the end of the war, they discounted the original displacement of the general population and the systematic destruction they faced. American Jews fixated on Kielce while neglecting Soviet imperialism. All these events occurred. Yet how we understand these complex experiences is dependent on the collective memories and broader myths handed down by the respective culture in question. Human defense mechanisms lead us to see only that which pertains to our own group. Such tactical instinct has negatively impacted Polish-Jewish relations.

This American Jewish conceptualization of Poland has been entrenched through generations of family lore, political debate, textbooks, the media, literature, and movies. We see it most clearly today in organized Holocaust tourism, which emphasizes Poland as a land of oppression, particularly for Jews. So passionate has American Jewry’s disgust with the Poles been, it has often eclipsed its hatred of present-day Germans. A despised people throughout history, Jews are not immune to hating Others.

I encountered this perception when speaking with a Jewish educator. A beloved teacher of Holocaust and Israel studies, she is someone I admire as a leader in Jewish education. However, her reaction in 2005 to my young children visiting Poland astounded me. She questioned our decision and saw no reason to step foot on *that land*. To her, it was a place filled only with death. Her walls were up and she had no desire to challenge their foundation. While frustrating, it is not surprising. She echoed the American Jewish establishment’s myth. Polish Jewish leader Konstanty Gebert noted, in my November 2007 interview with him, that while academics may be breaking out from stereotypical thinking, most American Jews remain imprisoned by it.

In a survey regarding beliefs held about Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, Robert Cherry demonstrates that Jewish teachers responded with the most negative judgments of any group. Cherry concludes that “Jewish non-historians have a substantially harsher assessment of the Polish people and the Catholic Church than Jewish historians and museum researchers have. . . . In particular this suggests that Jewish non-historians who teach Holocaust-related courses generally hold negative stereotypes that are inconsistent with the historical record.” My personal encounter with this Jewish educator gave me pause. Her anti-Polish bias revealed, she is one of many Jewish teachers consciously or subconsciously guiding our children and young adults to embrace a grim caricature of Poland and Polish people. She does not do so out of any ill intent. Rather, she is simply teaching what she learned without questioning those myths.

Though historians might reassess historic events, in the end it is up to those who actually disseminate history to inform themselves more broadly and to bring a more nuanced view to the American Jewish community. It is up to rabbis, curriculum writers, teachers, authors, film producers, parents, and even friends. Yet Jewish leaders in the United States have found it difficult to move beyond the skewed view they themselves were taught.

Despite American Jews’ experience of pronounced and prolonged antisemitism in the United States, and despite knowing that people of color have been physically, economically, educationally, and emotionally suppressed and exploited in this country, American Jews continue to see Poland just below Germany in terms of a nation’s mistreatment of the Other. I hold that this stereotype resists disintegration because American Jews rarely have firsthand experience of any of the good that both existed in the past and that has emerged in contemporary Polish society. How will American Jews interpret the Poles’ aid to Ukrainian refugees vis-a-vis the Polish-Jewish experience? We must wait to see if it redresses our attitudes or is construed to confirm them?

**A Central Aspect of Jewish Myth : Victimization**

A nation’s myth reflects how its members understand themselves vis-a-vis Others and world events. It is undeniable that from ancient times, Jews have profoundly suffered as victims of oppression. The Israelites, the ancient Jews, were overrun, outmaneuvered, dispersed, and often murdered. During the Roman sacking of Jerusalem in 70 ce, thousands of Jews were slaughtered or sent into slavery. Those remaining were cut off from their religious center. Scattered to the winds, Jews regrouped, reviewed, and reworked their religious mode of expression. Although settlement outside of the Land of Israel proved to be an arena for collective creativity, Jews’ rights and freedoms were always dependent on the host nation. The diaspora prospered when secular leaders embraced Jewish settlement for the economic welfare that Jews brought to society; danger dawned when those same services were no longer needed. When victimized in one place, the Jewish people moved to find more hospitable locales in which they would be welcomed for their economic contributions. And so, the cycle continued and with it the entrenched grounding Jewish myth of victimization.

As a people, Jews recall their oppression and resilience through holiday liturgy and ritual. Every year, Jews evoke their past to explain to Jewish youth their collective responsibility to group continuation. On the holiday of Purim, they recollect Haman’s ancient scheme to rid Shushan of its Jews by reading the scroll of Esther. Around the Passover seder table, Jews remember Israel’s enslavement and redemption from Egypt. The Chanukah celebration commemorates a Greek king’s dominion over the Jews and their eventual revolution. In telling and retelling these stories, Jews emphasize their roles as underdog and ultimate victor. It is the knowledge that Jews have withstood and overcome oppression that bonds Jew to Jew.

This sense of responsibility to the past by securing the future is inherent in Jews’ ritual practice. We learn that all generations of Jews should identify as slaves in Egypt because, had we been living then, we too would have been enslaved. Together all generations of Jews—past, present, and future—have stood at the base of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Accordingly, the Holocaust happened to *all Jews*. American Jews growing up from the 1950s onward learned to identify personally with the victims of Hitler’s Holocaust. Dedication to the State of Israel is still couched in Holocaust references; practicing Judaism is considered a means of toppling Hitler. The message is that Jewish people will survive despite all efforts to obliterate us.

Explanations for Jewish victimization have changed over time. The biblical narrator blames the Israelites themselves for their victim status, linking it directly to the nation’s disregard for God’s commandments. The book of Judges, the second section of the Hebrew Bible, clearly describes this relationship : when Israel follows God’s ways, the nation prospers; when Israel sins against God, the nation suffers.

This justification of national trauma, however, does not resonate with most Jews today. A shift began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and German Jewry’s particular expression of it in the Haskalah movement. As Jews emerged from the ghetto during the Enlightenment to encounter secularism, many of them shed their traditional outlook. At the same time, socialism’s growing popularity among a swath of mostly poor and young Eastern European Jews also influenced them to discard Old World interpretations of national trauma.

This deviation away from God’s centrality and toward a modern secularized critical approach to the past took on seismic proportions during the post-Holocaust era. Did God really push millions of Jews into gas chambers and mass graves because they did not follow God’s commandments? To understand the Jewish people’s suffering, secular Jews narrowed their focus to the violent and overwhelming enemy. As such, most post-Holocaust Jewish writing denied power to the so-called dangerous Jews within and ttargeted blame onto the Others who hated them, whether due to Jewish religious beliefs, cultural isolation, economic roles, or growing political leverage. The fault for Jewish oppression lies in the Others’ inability to fully accept Jews, their differences, and their collective economic-political progress. Modern Jewry replaced one black-and-white belief system with another rigid conviction.

Jews protect our role as a fundamentally suffering people. When we argue against Others, who apply the term *holocaust* to any experience outside of that faced by the Jews during World War II, Jews underscore their unique suffering. I do not suggest embracing a loose definition of *holocaust*. I am merely questioning what we fear will happen if other groups appropriate this terminology. Will a broader use of *holocaust* erase our specific communal past horrors, making them inconsequential? Are we afraid of becoming less significant if we are not defined by our suffering? Do we need antisemitism to preserve our Jewish identity? Victimhood has been essential to Jewish distinctiveness. Questioning its role challenges individuals, families, and communities to reflect on what it means to be Jewish. Subordinating our victimhood might very well help us to understand our relation to the Other more clearly.

**Recognizing Poles as Victims**

American Jews know little about the role that victimization plays in the Polish psyche. Oppression performs just as vital a part within the Polish national myth as it does within Jewish communal understanding. Indeed, the Poles’ sense of persecution rivals that held by Jews, and at times it directly conflicts with the Jewish perception of the past.

The Polish people suffered through three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in 1772, 1793, and 1795, losing control of their land until they regained sovereignty in 1918. Not only was their country torn into three segments, with the people divided by new foreign governing powers, but Polish culture and education also came under assault. Once the glory of Eastern Europe, the Poles were felled and emasculated. After losing two insurrections against Russian rule (in 1830–1831 and 1863–1864), the Polish people were punished by their Russian overlord who took away their language rights, cultural freedoms, and employment possibilities. They were taxed steeply and politically disenfranchised. Although Poland briefly regained its independence in 1918, Polish freedom ended again with the Nazi-Soviet 1939 bifurcation of the country.

Unfortunately, most Jews forget, or never learned of, the horrors that the Poles endured under the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Germany brutally occupied Poland from 1939 to 1945. Hitler’s henchmen slaughtered thousands of Polish intellectuals, religious leaders, and political activists. The Nazi oppressors built and managed concentration camps and death camps on Polish soil, killing millions of Jews, Poles, and other minorities, including the Romani. According to the Auschwitz Museum, roughly seventy-five thousand Gentile Poles perished in Auschwitz. During the same time, the Allies closed their eyes to Russian anti-Polish aggression, brutality, and murder. The 1945 Yalta agreement cemented this Entente offering of Poland as recompense for Soviet Russia’s own grand military sacrifice.

Postwar Poland met another phase of oppression. The Red Army occupied the country, giving the Polish people no choice but to accept their new conqueror; only the communist minority welcomed the situation. In the new Polish People’s Republic, the Soviets controlled education and culture. Historians were free to promote only the party’s perspective of the past. Those who challenged the party could not publish their work. Concurrently, Cold War politics reverberated through all relations involving the East and West. Even dialogue among academicians soured, misunderstandings and rumors abounded, and negative perceptions of the Other deepened.

Few are aware that immediately following World War II, the All-Polish Anti-Racist League (Ogolnopolska Liga do Walki z Rasizmem) was founded in Poland. Its mission was to review Jewish-Polish relations prior to and during the war. However, it was soon shut down by the communist authorities. Its work conflicted with the government’s desire to portray the Polish people as the most victimized group in Europe.

Jakub Berman, a leading—and Jewish—member of Poland’s 1946 communist regime, manipulated the numbers of Polish dead to establish an equivalence between Polish and Jewish wartime suffering. Thus, we have come to *know* that three million Polish Christians were killed during the war alongside three million Polish Jews. In his book *Bloodlands*, Timothy Snyder contends that by adjusting the then accepted figure of 4.8 million Polish citizens’ deaths to six million, Berman elevated Polish misery to that experienced by Jews. Such statistics play a large role in the politics of memory. That its villages, towns, cities, and infrastructure were almost completely destroyed only increased Poland’s status as Europe’s most abject country.

Cold War geopolitics furthered this presentation of Poles as second only to the Jews in terms of misery. Denied access to any inflammatory documentation from the period, Polish historians only studied the “facts” to which the Polish communist government gave them access. The Polish People’s Republic presented its experience during World War II as that of total innocence versus pure Nazi evil. Very soon, memory of the Jews’ particular experience was masked in all Soviet bloc countries including the republic’s. The history that young Poles learned in school was only that which the party approved.

School textbooks stated that six million Poles died during the war. That three million of those murdered were Jews living in Poland no longer had relevance. Memorials set up by the communist government at death camps identified the victims simply as Poles, instead of as *Jewish* and *Christian* and *Romani* Poles, even though it was the Jewish population in Poland which had teetered on the edge of annihilation. New generations of Poles did not learn to differentiate between the Nazi treatment of Jews and the Nazi treatment of Poles. All were Poles, and all Poles had been dealt with monstrously. Although most Poles who experienced the Nazi occupation directly had witnessed the Jews being singled out for ghettoization and mass murder, the fact that Poles suffered terribly and continued to suffer for decades under Soviet imperialism trained most Poles’ attention on their own circumstances. They had little room for the Jews’ suffering when they suffered themselves.

Only well after Stalin’s death in 1953 were the Polish people permitted to examine national minorities within the Second Republic, the country’s views of minorities, and the relationship Poles had with the Jews during World War II. And then only through the lens of Polish heroism. The first book on this subject came out in 1966. Written by Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin, and constructed in part to dispel international slander against Polish society, *This is My Homeland : Poles Helping Jews 1939-1945* (*Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej*) tells the story of Polish aid to the Jews while marginalizing Polish harm to Jews and their Polish rescuers*.* Recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust museum, as Righteous Among the Nations, Władysław Bartoszewski was the deputy of the Jewish section of the Home Army and aided the establishment of Żegota (Council for Aid to Jews). Despite having experienced intense Polish opposition to his mission, he avoids highlighting its debilitating effect on Jews and their Polish rescuers. Instead, he focuses on the important work that Polish rescuers accomplished through an accepted Polish communist narrative.

The degree to which the authorities censored manuscripts before permitting their publication depended on the leadership and public policy of the moment. Jerzy Tomaszewski and Henry Zieliński had great difficulty in the late 1970s and early 1980s printing and distributing their work on Poland’s ethnic minorities. Zieliński’s *Polish History 1914-1939* (*Historia Polski 1914-1939*) includes sections dealing with Polish violence against Jews in 1918 Lviv as well as several other passages regarding Jews in Poland. The censor refused to pass the book for publication. A dispute ensued. Zieliński was murdered in March 1981. It took his wife two more years of arguing with the censor before his manuscript could be published. For years, the censors had also denied Tomaszewski’s first book on this topic, *Commonwealth of Nations* (*Rzeczpospolita wielu narodówa*), which was finally printed in 1985. His second title, *A Homeland Not Only for Poles* (*Ojczyna nie tylko Polaków*), was well received, but by the time the books were printed a political policy shift had occurred. Removed from bookstore shelves, all copies were sequestered in the publisher’s cellar, not to be sold for years. The Polish communist government’s censorship of historiography greatly affected what Poles did and did not learn about Jewish life in their country, including the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations.

Due to such censorship, American Jewry refused the concept of the “righteous Pole,” assessing it as an overall deception, a fiction. In fact, rarely has the American Jewish establishment accepted that there were many Poles who, despite the threat to their own lives and those of family members, stood up against political and religious leaders to help Jews. When the 1969 British version of Władysław Bartoszewski’s and Zofia Lewin’s earlier work appeared, now titled *Righteous Among Nations : How Poles Helped the Jews*, American Jews received it with great skepticism. Although both authors had co-founded the underground organization ŻEGOTA, the Council for Aid to Jews, in 1942, and both had acted heroically to save Polish Jews during World War II, American Jewry was unwilling to accept their testimony. That the book reached publication just after an anti-Zionist campaign forced more than fifteen thousand Polish Jews to emigrate from the country likely played a role in its reception. To American Jews, such stories only underscored the belief that Poles were loath to recognize their own antisemitism. Just as Polish Americans may have gravitated to this positive presentation of Poles aiding Jews, American Jews were more likely to dismiss it as a ploy by Poles to manipulate American perceptions.

**US Antisemitism Impacts American Jews’ Call to Aid European Jewry**

As for the American Jewish response to the Holocaust, many American Jews stated after the war that they did not know what was happening to the Jews until it was too late. It is true that the US State Department’s policy suppressed news of the Holocaust and frustrated any possible American rescue attempts. Included in this agenda was Hollywood’s agreement *not* to create films focused on the Jews’ perilous situation. However, by November 1942 news of Hitler’s Final Solution had become public knowledge. Yet, even before that time, news had been secretly couriered to American Jewish leaders. In January 1943, the same month the Nazis began the final liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, the Jewish National Council in Poland addressed American Jewish organizations, such as the American World Congress of Jews and the American Joint Distribution Committee as follows: “Brothers! The remnants of the Jews in Poland live in the knowledge that in the darkest hour of our history you did not help us. Say something. This is our *final* appeal to you” (emphasis mine). Having requested weapons for self-defense, money for aid, and contacts in a neutral country, they received little acknowledgement. Though some Jewish leaders, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise, tried to convince President Roosevelt that more needed to be done to help European Jews, most did not get involved. There existed within the US government, and surprisingly amidst American Jewry itself, an ambivalence toward rescuing European Jews.

One profound government impediment to action on behalf of Jews remained the strict immigration policy in force since 1930. Unwilling to fight the prewar isolationist and xenophobic sentiments in both Congress and the general population, President Roosevelt continued Hoover’s restrictive policy into the war. After knowing about Nazi plans to exterminate all Jews in lands Germany controlled, Congress would not even allow a vote on bills sponsored by both Republicans and Democrats to permit temporary admission of all possible victims of German persecution. While Roosevelt’s War Refugee Board did manage to save some two hundred thousand European Jews, the fact that it was created only in January 1944 and was impeded by US bureaucracy points to lost opportunities and a US ambivalence regarding rescue.

Most Jewish leaders did not argue against this closed-door immigration strategy. Too many feared that an influx of unsponsored Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe would further promote the antisemitism which had increased dramatically in the US since the 1930s. During the war, American Catholics and Protestants filled their media, sermons, and textbooks with caustic antisemitism. Secular organizations debuted, such as We, the Mothers, and the Silver Shirts, which blamed the Jews for the war. Members of Congress expressed their hatred of Jews openly : Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo referred to a certain class of Jews in New York as “kikes” acting to “cram” the Fair Employment Practices Commission “down the throats of the American people.” Congressman Jacob Thorkelson of Montana propagated the conspiracy theory advanced popularly since the 1920s that international Jewish financiers were supporting communists’ bid for world domination.

A 1943 government report demonstrates that the middle class, especially those in Pennsylvania, Detroit, Cleveland, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles extolled vitriolic hatred against the Jews. Anonymous groups widely distributed antisemitic leaflets in factories and government buildings. The Massachusetts governor’s investigation found the Boston police culpable of ignoring years of Irish and German Catholic gang violence against Jewish youths. Despite efforts made to raise tolerance, antisemitism also existed in the armed services. Even spokesmen and writers argued against the perceived overrepresentation of Jews in professions such as dentistry and psychology. Before knowing the full extent of Nazi atrocities, the labor movement, which included many Jewish leaders, actively lobbied the government against issuing more visas to refugees so as to prevent competition. Initially, the government locked the gates.

Surrounded by a rampantly vocal antisemitic populace, too few people, even Jews, were willing to stand up and call for America to allow refugees entry. Jewish communal organizations could not agree on what approach to take. The fact remained that many Jews in America still busied themselves with assimilating into American culture. Too anxious about their own status, they could not see fit to make way for a large wave of Jewish immigrants. Those who did have the courage to speak against the system were often dismissed as radical elements within the community and fired from their leadership positions.

Closer to the war’s end, more American Jews felt guilty for their communal inaction on behalf of their besieged counterparts. After much infighting among leaders of America’s Jewish organizations, the establishment united in 1944 to aid survivors in Europe. Much of this response translated into strong support for the creation of the State of Israel. Initially, after the war, American Jewish leaders continued to accept the closed-door immigration policy. Still insecure themselves as Jews in the US, and fearing job scarcity as soldiers returned to civilian life, they focused on the reconstruction of Jewish life on the European continent and settlement of survivors in British-controlled Palestine.

Only after President Truman himself not only grew incensed over Britain’s own closed-door policy in Palestine, but also advised Congress to create provisions to permit some European refugees into the United States, did Jewish groups support a change in immigration laws. Beginning in November 1946, the American Jewish Committee led a campaign to lobby Congress to adopt the Displaced Persons Act. Approved in 1948, this legislation permitted 205 000 refugees to enter the United States. By 1950, Congress passed new legislation that eliminated all antisemitic barriers to immigration, making it far easier for Jewish refugees to enter the country.

**Myth Reconstruction**

How did American Jews’ relative inaction on behalf of their fellow Jews in Europe play out in Polish-Jewish relations? Danusha Goska argues that postwar American Jews required a scapegoat, and they chose the Poles. She quotes Eli Wiesel’s painful recognition that, due to their failure to act, American Jews held some culpability for the enormity of the Holocaust: “[I]f our brothers had shown more compassion, more initiative, more daring . . . if a million Jews had demonstrated in front of the White House . . . if Jewish notables had started a hunger strike . . . who knows, the enemy might have desisted.” Instead of accepting responsibility for their inaction, the American Jewish establishment directed its condemnation onto a viable “culprit”—the Pole. As we have seen, American pop culture had already condemned the Pole as a savage, uneducated brute prone to violence and dangerous nationalism. Thus, American Jews turned to the Polish to find their oppressor.

Placing guilt on Poland made sense given emerging postwar geopolitics. To blame only Germany would conflict with America’s new foreign policy, which assigned tremendous importance to supporting a reorganized West Germany. Instead, the Soviet Union and its satellites, including the Polish People’s Republic, became the West’s new enemy. The American initiative to promote Europe’s recovery, known as the Marshall Plan, echoed this new worldview. While the plan gathered and divided extensive resources to rebuild Western Europe, it provided no support for Soviet satellites. Eva Hoffman laments that

instead of being modified by time and change, the bleak images of Poland were calcified by the Cold War. The Iron Curtain was a force of and for reductiveness. The countries behind that divide became relegated, even more strongly than before, to a category of Otherness, a realm of leaden, monolithic oppression.

American Jewry followed this international political direction in its self-assessment of inaction on behalf of fellow Jews during the Holocaust. To escape blame and self-loathing, American Jewry denounced the Poles for what appeared to be their apathy toward Jewish victimization. By condemning the Poles, American Jews succeeded in ignoring their own unspoken shame and dishonor. Consciously or subconsciously, American Jews were desperate to place this shame anywhere but on themselves. That the Soviet system swallowed Poland created just the landing pad for it.

As we have seen, like all religions, nations, and countries, both the Poles and the Jews have created narratives they teach to new generations in order to ensure group continuity. This mythmaking is a natural part of understanding communal identity and one’s place in the world. Ironically, both Poles and Jews have withstood an inordinate amount of physical violence, political dismemberment, and social ostracism. To make sense of it all, each group has promoted their respective party lines.

Just as Poles continued to learn about only the positive behaviors of their fellow nationals towards Jews, American Jewry continued to view Poles only within their negative framework. Such defensive myths and stereotypes of the Other tend to have some kernel of truth, which allows for their inception and persistence. Stereotypes do not provide us with the full truth; instead, they bar us from it. Thus, the challenge in addressing the current cliche about Poles that so many American Jews hold is to distinguish between *all* Poles and *some* Poles, as well as to expose various contextual influences, both external and internal.

Here is my challenge : let us dig more deeply into what postcommunist historians, both Polish and American, both Christian and Jewish, have revealed about Polish-Jewish relations. Let us be bold and courageous, willing to read more carefully. It is through this more *intentional* work that we will reevaluate and reconstruct our internalized myths. To begin, it is imperative that we first gain a broad contextual understanding of Poland’s past, which includes reviewing the complicated realities experienced by both the Poles and Jews who inhabited the land.

In the following chapter we start our exploration of the Polish-Jewish past by viewing Poles and Jews as separate entities within medieval political, economic, and religious structures, as well as their consequent impact on one another. What societal power dynamics prevailed between rulers and those ruled and those scrambling for scraps of control? Though they existed centuries ago, these dynamics have influenced Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Chapter 2**

**Polish Feudalism and Its Middleman Minority**

For centuries, the Polish Crown, landed nobility, and Catholic Church contended for control over land, levies, and laborers. Extensive power and tremendous wealth awaited the victor after each bout. The sixteenth century marked the rise of the nobility (*szlachta*)—which included rich landowning magnates, as well as impoverished and landless gentry. At that point the szlachta accounted for 5-6% of the total population.

Due to the elite szlachta’s role in voting for a king, many royal suitors (typically foreigners) courted its ranks with promised privileges. Such bribes expanded the nobility’s legal rights. By the end of the fifteenth century, the nobility directed the monarch to establish a central representative political body, the Sejm, with two legislative chambers. It filled the lower house with noble representation from provincial parliaments. Civil changes required full Sejm approval, while all royal appointments required Sejm ratification. The szlachta had gained governmental control. In this chapter we will explore the feudal Polish-Lithuanian landscape and the Jewish middleman minority’s role in it.

**Poland’s Feudal Estate Structure**

Similar to other medieval European polities, Poland’s agrarian feudal system supported a landscape divided into societal and economic strata, known as estates. Social status distinguished people, relegating ethnic origin to a relatively minor role. No matter whether one was Ruthenian, Belorussian, Lithuanian, or Polish, family lineage, landholdings, and assets determined noble status. Alongside the nobility, there were several other estates : the Christian clergy, the townspeople known as burghers, and the peasantry. One could rarely progress upward into another social stratum.

With its increased political power, the nobility secured dominance over the peasantry and townspeople. It persuaded the king to strip the peasantry of its largely free status. In the early fifteenth century the Crown imposed a form of neo-serfdom on that majority population. This shift restricted peasants’ rights to leave their lord’s estate without permission. In addition, it forced peasants not only to make payments to nobles in both money and kind, but also to provide increased *corvée*—the unpaid labor that peasants owed their respective lords—to at least three days per week.

Near the turn of the sixteenth century, Christian townspeople also came under szlachta assault. Known as burghers, these merchants and artisans tended to be non-Polish in ethnicity. While the predominant group was of German origin, Dutch and Italians also figured prominently in the burgher estate, with Armenians and Scots to a lesser degree. They took up residence in Poland for the same economic opportunities as did the Jews. By barring them from purchasing land or holding either Church or state office, the szlachta prohibited the burghers’ social and political advancement. The szlachta continued its practical self-serving approach to the law in 1539, when the Sejmgave all jurisdiction over those towns on noble estates to their owners, denying burgher residents a basic freedom—the protection of the royal courts. Additionally, the nobility extorted monopolistic entitlements from the Crown, thus stealing manufacturing and processing rights from the burghers. Furthermore, the elite landholding nobility, known as magnates, shifted their own tax burden onto the burghers. In times of war, the nobility forced burghers to supply, without monetary compensation, housing for troops and military matériel. By the mid-sixteenth century the szlachtawas firmly in control—at the expense of the peasantry and burghers.

**The Jewish Presence in Poland**

An extremely modest Jewish presence in Poland began in the tenth century when Jewish merchants settled there due to the important trade routes traversing the land. While some early Jewish migrants came from the eastern land of Khazaria, a short-lived nomadic polity, some Jewish traders also entered early on through Poland’s western frontiers. Later, with rising persecution and expulsions of Jewish communities in Western Europe, large numbers of Jews migrated to find tolerance and refuge in Poland.

By the mid-eleventh century Jews were sufficiently ensconced in the Polish state that they headed the Polish effort to manufacture coins. The liberties granted to Jews by Duke Bolesław the Pious of Wielopolska in the 1264 Statute of Kalisz established the Jews’ first legal foundation in Poland. In 1334, King Kazimierz the Great extended the statute throughout Poland and expanded Jewish privileges. With the reconfirmation of both rulings throughout the centuries, the Jews gained and maintained their legal position in Poland.

Within Poland’s stratified milieu, the Jews were separated into their own distinct estate, with specific rights, obligations, and privileges. Unlike their situation in other parts of Europe at the time, Jews who settled in Poland’s royal cities had the right to travel freely, as well as to engage in a variety of business ventures and artisan activities. Polish kings encouraged and enabled Jews not only to build synagogues and to hire Jewish clergy, but also to set up their own institutional leaderships—kahals*.* These Jewish councils dealt with internal Jewish communal affairs. Employing Jewish law (halakha), a kahal legislated over those cases involving only Jews. Additionally, a kahalset limits on economic competition within the community, reviewed individual and communal relations with non-Jews, collected taxes, oversaw Jewish education, and provided for both the sick and the impoverished. Just as royal charters permitted Christian municipalities their legal autonomy, so too did both royal charters and noble private town owners grant the Jews internal self-rule through the kahalsystem. Indeed, the Jews’ kahal system approximated the burghers’ own communal autonomous structure, which included self-regulating tribunals.

By the mid-sixteenth century, Jewish religious autonomy had reached its peak in the government-sanctioned Council of the Four Lands(Vaad Arba Aratzot). A Jewish institution unique to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it acted on a semi-national level to promote Jewish communal autonomy. While European countries had long permitted Jewish communal autonomy through the singular kahal, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth accepted a far more dynamic, extensive, and cooperative system. Each local kahal focused on its own administrative, judicial, legislative, and educational functions, whereas the Vaad Arba Aratzot concentrated on relations with the government, tax collection from Jews, and adjudication of difficult matters among the commonrwealth’s Jews. Through it, the Jewish community acted toward its own goals more broadly and profoundly than any other individual kahal in Western Europe. Indeed, while other countries, such as England, France, and the German principalities persecuted and expelled Jews, Poland welcomed them and established a legal format by which they could live full Jewish lives.

Although the Kingdom of Poland provided an array of communal freedoms to the Jewish people, it determinedly limited Jews’ individual social and political advancement. The nobility designed a self-preserving social system by eliminating the threat of Others’ encroachment. Just as the szlachta impeded those within the burgher estate from advancing into the nobility, it also erected similar barriers against Jewish infringement. For example, the szlachta blocked both Jews and burghers from jobs in the civil service. As owning land was a direct path into the nobility, the szlachta also denied land acquisition to burghers, Jews, and peasants. It is important to note that this was not a specific anti-Jewish policy. Rather it was a protective measure put in place by rulers to keep all “foreigners” from challenging the elite’s authority. However, by the early 1700s, this rule was challenged and often circumvented.

From the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Poland’s leaders embraced the Jews for their economic connections. The country lacked financial relationships beyond its borders, and Jewish merchants ably created the links the country needed. Thus, when ousted by Western polities, Jews migrated to Polish territory. There they settled in Polish royal towns under the immediate jurisdiction of royal governors (voivodes), connecting them directly to the king. Until the mid-sixteenth century the king enjoyed tremendous authority over both the country, as well as the Jews. The Jews in turn contributed greatly to the ruling class’s prosperity through trade, taxation, crafts, and moneylending.

**Poland’s Middleman Minority**

Stemming from the Christian conviction that dealing in money and trade is a sin, ethnic Poles viewed commerce and moneylending as beneath them. Instead, owning and nurturing land was the pride of the ruling elite : kings, noblemen, and men of the Church. All relationships to the land commanded respect. Even peasants and serfs castigated those who did not till the soil.

While both Jews and Poles have viewed the economic role Jews played in Poland and their designated place in Polish society as distinct, it correlated to that void other outsider groups filled in different countries. According to Yuri Slezkine,

“There was nothing particularly unusual about the social and economic position of the Jews in medieval and early modern Europe. Many agrarian societies contained groups of permanent strangers who performed tasks that the natives were unable or unwilling to perform.” By migrating from their countries of origin to various European lands, and preserving a strict separation from their respective host societies, many outsider groups achieved positions of economic importance. They are referred to as middleman minorities. Some examples include the Armenians, who collected taxes for the Ottomans and the Parsis of Mumbai and Gujarat, who filled artisan roles and moved into brokering, moneylending, shipbuilding, and international commerce. By specializing in bringing goods and services to the surrounding agricultural or pastoral populations, they made a niche for themselves within their host societies. Like the Jews, these groups took on the role of middleman minority.

Sociologist Edna Bonacich attributes the following traits to middleman minorities:

a resistance to out-marriage, residential self-segregation, the establishment of language and cultural schools for their children, the maintenance of distinctive cultural traits (including, often, a distinctive religion), and a tendency to avoid involvement in local politics except in affairs that directly affect their group. They form highly organized communities which resist assimilation.

If one accepts Bonacich’s model, feudal Poland’s Jewish population was the quintessence of the middleman minority form.

Poland’s need for the Jew to act as a middleman minority increased when sixteenth-century laws prohibited the nobility’s participation in industry and commerce under penalty of losing legal rights and privileges. Society had cast such activity well below the nobleman’s status. Viewing agriculture as their only proper occupation, nobles and serfs alike shared the common belief that Jews’ engagement in commerce was a necessary evil. Likewise, they also criticized the burghers’ commercial enterprises.

**The Jewish Middleman Minority Threatens Burghers**

From the outset, Jewish migration to Poland threatened burgher prosperity. Jews sought business opportunities in those fields they had experience in, but which were already occupied by Poland’s burghers. The early Jewish incursion into moneylending and trade, coupled with their later entry into craftwork, created great turmoil for the kingdom’s burghers. As it did for all middleman minorities, communal solidarity, thrift, and low economic expectations allowed Jews to produce products at lower consumer costs than their burgher counterparts. While the king and nobility appreciated the competitive pricing that the Jews brought, the burghers were resentful about their shrinking profits. Not only did Jews compete with them, but they also eventually displaced a great many established burgher artisans and merchants. According to Bonacich, this specific competition between Jew and burgher equates to a typical encounter between a middleman minority and those business groups which predated the middleman’s immigration.

Burghers attempted to salvage their economic monopolies against the Jews’ incursion by requesting that the Crown set economic restrictions on Jewish competition. However, despite legislation barring Jews from membership in the various artisan guilds, they succeeded in producing their cheaper wares while remaining a source of angst for the city burghers. At the height of the conflict, burghers in many royal cities lobbied the king to go one step further by expelling the Jews.

The nobility’s own demand for the Jews’ business acumen only increased during the following centuries with Poland’s eastern expansion. Some claim that so much did the nobleman believe he required the Jews’ services that the szlachta safeguarded Jews to the detriment of the lower sectors of society. Such protection came not only in rights granted by the nobility to the Jews to compete with the burghers in trade and craft, but also in the nobility’s condemnation of sporadic violence against Jews. While burghers argued for the Jews’ expulsion, the szlachtararely acted or spoke in such extreme terms against them.

**The Kresy**

In the late fourteenth century, Poland entered into a dynastic relationship with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania through the marriage of Grand Duke Jogaila and the young Jadwiga, Poland’s only successor to its throne. Jogaila accepted Western Christianity and took the baptismal name of Władysław II Jageiłło. The Lithuanian court and nobility began a long process of Polonization by immediately accepting Roman Catholicism. This loose union provided both territories protective provisos in case enemies should invade either country. On 07/01/1569, leaders solidified this relationship between the two states through the Declaration of the Union of Lublin, thereby formally creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, also known as the First Republic of Poland (1569-1795).

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the largest country in Europe at that time, with enormous power and natural resources. It consisted of 7.5 million people, with three million residing in Poland itself. The szlachtareferred to the great swath of land added to the core of Greater Poland as the *kresy*. These borderlands included the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as those lands it had previously conquered, which we know today as Ukraine and Belarus. The kresy played the important role as the physical buffer against neighboring aggression. It acted as the gateway to the commonwealth for invading armies of Tatars and Turks. Dominance over that territory was vital for maintaining the country’s security.

By way of establishing Poland’s control in the kresy,the king offered this vast eastern territory to the wealthiest of the noblemen, the magnates. As compensation for their military service defending the Crown, this szlachta elite was granted the right to organize and develop their huge expanses of land. Known as a *latifundium*,each vast, though not necessarily contiguous territory, consisted of hundreds of villages and towns, with tens of thousands of inhabitants, representing hundreds of thousands of złoty in annual income and expenditures. Complexes dotted the territory. At the heart of each stood a manor, around which whirred several farming industries including cattle, poultry, fish, field crops, and timber. Most manors also had their own means to produce and sell liquor, grind grain, and mine salt.

This sixteenth-century expansion into the kresy created a power shift. Together, kresy magnates provided immense wealth for the commonwealth. The magnate gained more land and thus more influence : on his property a magnate was sole lawmaker, lead manager, commander of his private army, and ultimate judge. Those few who achieved such status believed that they deserved to live like royalty. As such, each magnate family constructed multiple dwellings of massive proportions throughout their acquired lands. They furnished these extravagant residences at great expense, with exceptional art, lavish furniture, imported cloth, crystal tableware, and a full staff of butlers, maids, cooks, and soldiers. To sustain such excessive lifestyles, these aristocrat-magnates concerned themselves with accessing the cash flow needed to maintain it.

The new kresy territories were filled with limitless possibilities for generating the magnate’s required funds. All house owners and renters on private lands belonging to a magnate had to pay the proprietor property taxes. Householders paid for the ability to fish in the owner’s pond, as well as to graze their livestock in his meadows. Magnates also saved money by requiring those living on their property to supply a specified amount of free materials or labor (corvée). This system furnished magnates with free hay-cutting and baling and grain harvesting; proprietors also had to transport to market the owner’s fish, honey, and grain. Magnates also enjoyed income through legalized monopolies. Serfs and residents of private towns were obliged to only purchase goods produced or sold by the magnate who owned the town or from his lessees. Holding villagers and townsmen responsible for acquiring their goods from magnate-owned industries, the owner received a steady income from his liquor and beer production, mills, and mines.

Magnates employed managers and middlemen to oversee their huge territories, villages, towns, farms, and industries. Some magnates participated directly in their own business ventures, but more focused on the honorable duties of defense and politics. While landownership denoted honor, society viewed involvement with its management (revenue collection, property maintenance, and creating profit through agricultural industries) as less reputable. At the same time, the middle gentry—those from less affluent noble lineages—were skilled in agriculture and less trained as the Jews in commerce and industry. Thus, the magnate most often turned to the middleman minority, the Jews, to fill this important economic role.

**Kresy Jews : The Epitome of the Middleman Minority**

When they first migrated to Poland, Jews settled primarily in Polish royal cities, such as Kraków, Lublin, and Poznań. Due to intensifying burgher resentment of the Jews’ economic competition, Jews readily answered the magnates’sixteenth-century call to pioneer the eastern kresy. The szlachta’s appeal for Jews to create communities in the kresy was a remedy for both magnate and Jew, as the latter was known to have both business acumen and available cash to lease rights to real estate, agriculture, and industry.

So much did the magnates believe they needed Jewish assistance in creating their towns that many were willing to subsidize Jewish settlement. They attracted Jews to kresy migration by less expensive costs of living, economic freedoms, special privileges, and broad communal rights. Jews were permitted to become lessees of towns, villages, and manors. Along with paying the magnate for the right to lease the land, the Jewish lessee also bought the right to collect and keep all taxes due from the residents on that land. Jews also leased the rights to various latifundium industries, such as liquor production, timber harvesting, and salt mining. This placed Jews in a very strong economic position within the eastern borderland.

Even Jews with little money enjoyed better economic opportunities in the kresy*.* Having obtained royal privileges to host annual fairs and market days, as well as to produce and sell liquor, every magnate needed people to develop his small private towns into market towns. The Polish elite required managers to run the markets and industries, as well as tradespeople and craftsmen to provide goods and services for the peasants. Thus, in exchange for the promise of legal residence, Jews moved far away from the royal cities, far from burgher resentment and influence, to pioneer the kresy. Jews were encouraged to take on trade and crafts, becoming apothecaries, bakers, blacksmiths, candlemakers, doctors, furriers, goldsmiths, haberdashers, launderers, moneylenders, musicians, parchment makers, shoemakers, soap-makers, storekeepers, tailors, and tar makers. Although Jews had greater legal rights in royal cities due to the royal charters, their economic outlook was much better in the kresy. The Jewish population in eastern Poland grew quite large as eastward movement coupled with prolific procreation. By the mid-seventeenth century, Jews numbered between 200 000 to 220 000.

Traditionally, Jews refer to the private noble-owned town as a shtetl. Frenetic Jewish economic activity was central to defining a shtetl. A civilization specific unto itself, the shtetlwas inhabited not only by Jews, but also Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Tartars, Armenians, Lutherans, and Eastern Orthodox. Here Christian townspeople typically engaged in economic relationships with Jewish townspeople. Contemporary historians underscore the unique quality of each shtetl. Population size did not define it. A shtetl could be large, with thousands of inhabitants, or quite small, with not even one hundred. Their commonality rested on having grown from Polish magnate privately owned towns, which fostered intense economic engagement between the Jewish and Christian populations. A locale was considered a shtetl if the majority of its trading and urban estate was Jewish, if it was based on the Polish lease-holding economy, with an established trade, a marketplace, and a liquor trade all run predominantly by Jews, who themselves were organized into a traditional Jewish community. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern suggests that “the shtetl for us is a place, but perhaps we need to re-conceptualize it also as an action, a whir of activity.”

The town was the epicenter of economic activity for the surrounding villages. There, Jews and burghers organized weekly markets and fairs in which peasants could sell their products and all parties could exchange goods. Merchants sold wares brought from outside the immediate area and artisans promoted their trades. While the magnate did not get money directly from such town activities, he did receive it indirectly. When peasants or townsmen earned money, they used it to purchase items from the latifundium’s industries. Although the magnate most likely leased out such business rights, in the future he would procure more rent for it if it was known as a successful industry.

Jews provided not only needed services for the kresy population, but also taxes for the town owner. Jews typically lived in the largest houses in the shtetls, which translated to high property taxes. By 1539, the Crown relinquished its jurisdiction over Jews in private towns, allowing the nobility not only to judge them in cases which involved non-Jews, but also to profit from them as well. Those Jews living on land owned and controlled by the nobility were no longer obliged to the king. Rather, their loyalty, as well as their tax revenue, went straight to the noble landowner.

**Economic Crisis Effects Jews’ Privileges**

The economic privileges granted to Jews in the kresy came under assault in the mid-seventeenth century due to the acute poverty incurred by the nobility itself. Years of fierce Ukrainian uprisings had displaced many middle and petty gentry from landownership, causing extreme economic decline. Concurrently, the rich got richer as magnates took over land that the displaced could no longer afford. While about 90% of the commonwealth was owned by the nobility, only 25% of noblemen had land. At the same time, there existed a sense of kinship within the nobility. Whether magnate or petty nobleman, the szlachta was one united estate. As such, magnates responded to those nobility suffering economically by reassessing land lease rights and allowing only those of noble lineage to lease land.

This enormous shift affected kresy Jews in that magnates now barred them from leasing real estate and agricultural land. However, they sustained the Jews’ rights to participate in the *arenda* system, the leasing of latifundium industries. The magnates continued to sell Jews leases, usually from one to three years in duration, for the right to produce and sell liquor, flour, and salt, manage taverns, collect both property taxes and tolls, organize fairs, trade in grain, export wood, manage salt mines, operate tanning, fulling, grain, and timber mills, control fishing ponds, store grain in warehouses, sell tobacco, produce and sell dairy products, and run very small stores. Through legal contract, the noble landlord was assured an income, while Jews typically took the monetary risk and responsibility of securing the funds in the specific enterprises. Arenda provided the magnate with the necessary cash flow to pay for his lavish lifestyle, while supplying Jewish arendators with business opportunities.

The Jews in the Polish borderlands became so involved in this business system that the word *arendator* (*arendarz*) was often employed as a synonym for *Jew*.As many as 15% of urban Jewish heads of households, and 80% of rural, were occupied in some aspect of arenda. Usually, after an individual or group of Jews leased most of the industrial rights and monopolies in a given area, sub-arendators, often also Jews, would lease components of these rights from the general arendators.

This economic structure provided the nobleman with his much-needed funds. In return for the lessee’s business, the nobleman protected his arendators when necessary. For if an arendator was unable to collect the revenues leased, the magnate would be incapable of securing a higher price for that lease in the next contract. In toll farming, for example, a lessee would hire his own large staff to collect tolls from those passing through noble property. The staff had extensive legal autonomy and often charged excessive fees and used force to collect payment from those attempting to evade it. In the end, the Jewish lessee usually profited and strove to continue this arrangement. As with all middleman minorities, the Jewish arendator subcontracted to family or community members, who in turn hired family or fellow Jews. Thus, Jews became the face of not only toll farming, but of all other such economic ventures which supported the Polish nobility.

Arenda was not unique to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, by the sixteenth century Poland was the only country in Europe which permitted Jews to participate in thatsystem. Given both the magnates’ and general nobility’s economic need for the Jews’ services, the latter secured a confident position within Polish feudal kresy society. This economic relationship allowed Jews to flourish in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland. This was a time when the commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania was described as “heaven for the Jews, paradise for the nobles, [and] hell for the serfs.”

**Economic and Religious Conflicts in the Kresy : The Cossacks**

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, agriculture flourished, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became the breadbasket of Europe. To secure its harvest, magnates required people to work the land. Most Jews were involved in nonagricultural work. Though some Poles—peasant, burgher, and nobleman alike—moved eastward to benefit from this agricultural wealth, they remained a minority in the kresy. When the Polish magnates took over the land, native Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian peasants were already tilling its soil. But they were relatively few in number. Realizing the drastic shortage of available labor to work the magnates’ expansive land portions, the nobility steadily stripped the kresy peasantry of any personal freedoms to ensure the lords’ access to them. Simply put, Polish magnates reproduced Poland’s feudal system in the kresy, subjugating peasants to the lord’s rule. The szlachta not only decided on the type and number of levies to be imposed in the form of services, but also forced the peasants to purchase their alcohol and goods from the magnate’s industries. Working the soil for almost no personal gain, the serfs resented not only the nobility’s rule over them, but also the systemic use of violence to maintain their forced servitude.

While the commonwealth’s nobility pressed the kresy’s peasants into serfdom, the Polish Catholic clergy hindered them spiritually. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Counter-Reformation had succeeded in this cause, bringing the majority of Poles, including the szlachta and burghers, into the service of the Church. In turn, the Church’s power increased. The numbers of Catholic clergy tripled, followed by a rise in church construction. A symbiosis developed between the Catholic Church and Polish culture. Mary, mother of Jesus, multitasked as Mary, queen of Poland. As the Church’s authority increased, it—and, in effect, the commonwealth—perceived those who did not accept its religious truth as a possible threat.

Upon the establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Lithuania’s predominantly Eastern Orthodox population (also referred to as Greek Orthodox) confronted the Catholic Church’s demand for religious dominance. One significant difference between the Churches lies in religious authority. While the Eastern Orthodox look toward both Constantinople and Moscow, Catholics focus on Rome and the pope. In 1595-1596, the Catholic Church proposed what it viewed as a conciliatory agreement, the Union of Brest. The Eastern Orthodox community would surrender its allegiance to Constantinople, while maintaining its own separate liturgy. The many Orthodox who accepted this proposal became known derogatorily as Uniates.

Those skeptics who viewed this “compromise” as a masked attempt to co-opt the peasants’ religious faith, referred to themselves as Disuniates. The Union of Brest created a deep fissure between the two. In the end, Catholics did not accept Uniates as equals, but rather treated them as second-class Catholics, whose own offspring rebelled by returning to Orthodoxy or by assimilating into mainstream Catholicism.

The Cossacks, a group of Eastern Orthodox Catholics, refused the Union of Brest. A corps of Eastern Slavs, the Cossacks dwelled in the sparsely populated and desolate area of southern Ukraine. Similar to North America’s early western frontier, this territory was a choice destination for those evading the law’s reach. Through banditry, the Cossacks earned both a living and a dynamic reputation. Not only did Poland’s king and various magnates hire Cossacks as mercenaries to protect Polish interests, but neighboring enemies also purchased Cossack military service to wage war against the commonwealth. Cossacks attracted a variety of players into their ranks, such as the lesser gentry who had been squeezed off their lands by the magnate incursion, burghers living in Ukraine whose many rights and privileges the magnates had erased in pursuit of their own economic desires, as well as Ukrainian peasants fleeing the magnates’ imposition of serfdom. Over time, the Cossacks attained popular support in the kresy given the Polish nobility’s abuse of serf and burgher alike.

Cossacks pledged their allegiance to their own brotherhood. King Sigismund II Augustus (1548–1569) attempted to create among them a sense of devotion to the commonwealth by registering some Cossacks into the republic’s army. Receiving the rights of petty noblemen, units of registered Cossacks attained the status of free warriors. They crossed into the noble estate, a feat near impossible for most. Riding either to protect the Polish frontier or to serve as troops in Poland’s numerous wars, registered Cossacks garnered economic and social privileges equal to those of the petty nobility.

This hard-earned legal status, however, fell victim to the king’s whims. He could take it away at any time by removing an individual Cossack from military service. When dropped, in an instant that person reverted to his original lower social and legal ranking, with all previously gained freedoms forfeited.

Near the mid-1600s, the nobility recognized the Cossacks’ growing strength and feared it. At the same time, Cossack leaders requested that *all* Cossacks attain societal and economic equality with the szlachta. From the gentry’s point of view, this scandalous idea threatened their fundamental standing. The government responded by sharply reducing the number of registered Cossacks. One estimate holds that whereas in 1621 forty thousand free Cossacks served Poland, by 1630 there were roughly only eight thousand. This dramatic shift in prestige and privilege for tens of thousands caused intense discontent within the Cossack community.

Not only did this shift generate a conflict over ultimate societal rights and status, but it was also complicated by religious factors. Mostly Eastern Orthodox, the Cossacks refused to recognize the Union of Brest, which gave Poland’s Roman Catholic Church authority over the Orthodox community. In 1596, the Cossacks launched the first of many rebellions against Catholic influence.

The son of a petty nobleman, Boghdan Khmelnytsky entered the Cossack community in 1647. After Khmelnytsky ran into trouble with the law, he fled and joined the Cossacks. Khmelnytsky encouraged the Cossacks to turn against the overbearing aristocratic Polish magnates. Due to their own economic and religious resentments, the Cossacks embraced his call for political independence and waged Khmelnytsky’s violent 1648 “Deluge.”

The first Cossack written chronicle of the Khmelnytsky uprising, known as the *Eyewitness Chronicle* (*Samovydets Chronicle*, which an unidentified author penned about twenty-five years after the events described), illustrates the Poles’ degrading treatment of the Cossacks:

The origin and cause of the Khmelnytsky War is solely the Polish persecution of the Orthodox and oppression of the Cossacks. Then the latter’s freedoms were taken away and they were forced to do corvée labor, to which they were unaccustomed, and turned into household servants at the castles of the castle chiefs, who also used them to groom horses, stoke fires in the stove, groom dogs, sweep the yards, and perform other unbearable tasks.

Reeling from their official return either to serfdom or the status of burgher with many obligations to the nobility, Cossacks rebelled against the commonwealth.

**Myth Reconstruction**

Jews mourn the Khmelnytsky massacre as a violent outburst specifically targeted against them, and as a forerunner of both late imperial Russian pogroms and the Holocaust. My American Jewish educator, who vehemently disapproved of my family’s trip to Poland, pointed directly to Boghdan Khmelnytsky’s 1648-1654 massacres of thousands of Polish Jews as cause to detest Poland. The confidence with which she held up Khmelnytsky as a prime example of Polish hatred for Jews challenged me. Did he prove this educator’s point that Poland’s history is embedded in such Jew-hatred that the Polish people cannot possibly free themselves from it?

Due to this educator’s emphasis on the Khmelnytsky massacres as a major example of Jewish suffering in Poland, one would assume that Khmelnytsky, as a Pole, massacred the Jews and only the Jews in the name of Poland. Though Boghdan Khmelnytsky was raised within the petty Polish nobility, he fought for Ukraine’s secession from Poland. His troops employed the terrifying Cossack methods of warfare, including rape, pillage, and murder. His rebellion targeted the Polish nobility, as well as Polish priests who not only led the gentry spiritually, but who at times also sought violent recriminations against Ukrainian Disuniates. The fact is that Khmelnytsky rebelled against Polish rule, ordering his followers to slaughter a considerable number of Polish nobles, Catholic priests, and Uniates.

Understanding the economic role Jews played as a middleman minority to the Polish establishment helps clarify the Cossacks’ targeting of Jews. The economic reality demonstrates that Jews had been encouraged to pioneer the kresy. They achieved a higher standard of living and greater social status than the Ukrainian serfs in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Even more damning was the fact that early Jewish lessees of towns and villages had not only access to free serf labor, but also control of the keys to open the churches. Additionally, Jews acted as the nobility’s tax collector. It was the Jew who physically reached into Ukrainian serfs’ pockets to take what little money they had. Though it was at the behest of the Polish magnate, it was the Jew who enforced the law and simultaneously benefited from it. In the kresy, the Jew was the face of the nobility’s suppression of Orthodoxy, the burgher, and the peasant.

In unpacking these complex relationships and conflicts, it is worthwhile to note that kresy burghers fled to join the Cossack camp out of anger with the Polish magnates who had usurped freedoms granted earlier by the king, such as tax exemptions and trading rights. The magnates replaced the burghers’ guilds and bypassed their institutions to deal directly with foreign merchants. The Jews facilitated this arrangement. Before peasants had accounted for the Cossack majority, the burghers had filled their ranks. It is no wonder that the burghers turned against the szlachta and against the Jews who helped the szlachta to retain economic and thus political power. It was the Jew who had been a bone of contention for the burgher in the eastern borderland and against whom his fellow townsmen in Western Poland were still fighting.

However, according to Zenon E. Kohut, my American Jewish educator’s presentation of Khmelnytsky falls completely within the Jewish historic myth:

Jewish commentators . . . frequently have presented the massacres as a uniquely anti-Jewish phenomenon, paying little attention to the complex social, religious, and national context, and have mitigated or ignored the violence perpetrated against non-Jewish Poles and Ukrainian Uniates.

Additionally, there has been a changing view among historians regarding the numbers of Jewish deaths caused by Khmelnytsky. Linda Gordon employs Israel Friedlander’s 1915 scholarship to point to the hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives taken in the Deluge. Antony Polonsky accepts more recent research, which holds that roughly fourteen thousand Jews were murdered in the rebellion and that additional Jewish victims were killed during the subsequent Swedish and Muscovite wars. This does not change the grave effect Khmelnytsky had on the Jewish population in the eastern borderlands; indeed, Khmelnytsky’s troops killed a much greater percentage of Poland’s Jews than Polish Christians, given that the overall Jewish community was much smaller than its Polish Christian counterpart.

When looking for a quick yet informed grasp of either a topic or a personage of Jewish interest, I often turn to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* for an overview. The problem is that this popular resource presents past events only through the lens of how events affected the Jews. Under the heading “Chmielnicki [Khmelnytsky], Bogdan,” it states that the Cossacks massacred thousands of Jews, but no mention is made of Polish or Uniate deaths. While it presents Jews as defenders of towns, it does not clarify that they worked together with armed Poles to secure those towns’ safety. In this scholarly resource, the Jews’ collective memories are raised while the Poles’ remain buried.

Indeed, collective memory gives rise to a loose and wobbly understanding of the past. In contrast to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the original Cossack chronicle of the war describes the rise of Ukraine, but rarely mentions the Jews. That the Cossack’s own chronicler highlights the Polish problem as the cause of the uprising emphasizes the need for a broader, more nuanced image than that held by the Judeocentric perspective. Viewing the past through this wider lens points to Khmelnytsky’s own desertion of Poland and to his urging people to rise against the commonwealth. It points to the role of the Polish nobility and clergy in subjugating the very people Khmelnytsky united. It shows the interconnectedness of Jews within this overarching system of economic use and abuse. The Khmelnytsky bloodbaths are not justified. However, a grasp of their context presents a better understanding of the past. In the end, it has been the simplistic Judeocentric understanding that American Jews teach, learn, remember, and pass down to future generations. The lack of a broader context is the difficulty.

During my early research in Poland, I interviewed Dr. Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, a professor at Jagiellonian University who researches genocide and its consequences, as well as majority-minority relations. Explaining the impetus behind my work, I raised my Jewish educator’s challenge : that Khmelnytsky proves Poland as a land that disdained the Jews and did not welcome them. A perplexed look came over her face. Gently, and without condemnation, she led me through the historical past that research and documents explain. I remember this as a salient moment. My face reddened with embarrassment, not only for not knowing this part of the story, but more importantly because I had not once thought to question either the context or the Polish perspective surrounding it. In this moment I realized everything I knew regarding Polish-Jewish relations had to be reassessed.

To untangle oneself from an ingrained myth is quite challenging, for a group’s definitional myth does not speak through one event. Rather, it pronounces itself time and again, and in every generation until it is reconstructed. Participating in myth reconstruction is especially difficult at the beginning of the process, when that myth resonates for the mainstream. To be resolute in understanding the past is thus to challenge the mainstream, not just once due to one misunderstood event, but manifold times to correct misconceptions of Self and Other.

In this chapter we have reviewed the political, social, economic, and religious landscape within Polish feudal society. We have discussed the important role the Jews played as a middleman minority for both the Crown in the West and the Polish magnates in the East. Especially in the kresy, Jews greatly benefitted economically, to the burghers’ detriment. Jews also benefitted communally through the autonomy granted to the Va’ad Arba Aratzot. In discussing the kresy’s interreligious dynamics, I demonstrated how Bogdan Khmelnytsky’s Deluge released burgher and peasant Cossack rage against the Catholic Church, the Polish nobility, and the latter’s Jewish support system. After recognizing my own narrowly skewed understanding of the Deluge, I found the past by looking through a broader lens.

The following chapter goes deeper into Poland’s relative tolerance of the Jewish minority. With the onset of the Enlightenment, we see how global forces impacted Poland and Polish-Jewish relations. By exploring the conflicts between Polish Enlightenment thinkers and Polish conservatives, the next chapter establishes the persistence of Poland’s liberal past. It also, however, discusses the limits of tolerance.