STANISŁAW KRAJEWSKI
Poland and the Jews: Reflections of a Polish Jewish
(Krakow: Austeria, 2005); 245 pp.

‘Poland is not some half-real remnant bound to the dead. We are as real and as future-oriented as other Jewish communities around the world.’ If a single statement captures the key message of Stanislaw Krajewski’s Poland and the Jews, it is this. ‘Most’ Polish Jews, Krajewski tells us, are ‘angry’ at foreigners who would look at Polish Jewry only through the lens of the Holocaust. Although he himself is sensitive to why foreigners would ‘see the Jewish absence more clearly than they see us’ (103), this book can be understood as a reaction to one of the Holocaust’s often underappreciated effects, namely how foreigners, and particularly foreign Jews, have come to view Poland and Polish Jewry. Krajewski’s basic mission is to reveal for outsiders the complexity of Jewish life in an area of the world often reduced to a post-Holocaust void.

But more profound challenges await the reader, as Krajewski recognizes that what Jews think of Poland is merely one symptom of a broader problem of ‘Shoah-centric’ thinking with further-reaching consequences. He suggests that certain topics of central relevance to Jews have become taboo due to both fear of antisemitism and Jewish discomfort with their own identities (140). He urges Jews to push past these in the pursuit of a larger truth.

Krajewski was trained as a mathematician and is currently on faculty in the department of philosophy at Warsaw University, where he teaches logic and philosophy of religion. A member of Solidarity during its birth and underground periods, he is also a founding member and was co-chair of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews, as well as the American Jewish Committee’s Polish representative and a member of the International Coalition of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial. His first book, in Polish, was Jews, Judaism, Poland (Warsaw, 1997), and his most recent one is titled 54 Commentaries on the Torah for Even the Least Religious Among Us (published by Austeria, in Krakow, 2004).

The volume under our consideration—a collection of his previously published works—is part of a growing genre: books about Jewish life in Poland in the present day, written by Jews who grew up and live there today. Other recent books include Henryk Halkowski’s Życie Żydowskie (Jewish Life) and Konstanty Gebert’s forthcoming Living in the Land of Ashes. These authors are, as Krajewski notes, both observers and participants, and thus offer a refreshing response to outsider incursions that erase much life and complexity, reducing Jewish Poland to a ‘beautiful, dying thing.’ Their publications in or translations into English—along with their tone—indicate a desire to edify outsiders looking in. For Krajewski’s particular project, with the challenging nature of the subject matter and the still more controversial stands he takes on some issues, he is uniquely qualified. His professional engagement in interfaith dialogue (as well, perhaps, as his scientific training) allows him to raise exceedingly fraught and complex issues with extraordinary equanimity.

In the foreword, Krajewski sets out his purpose, to provide ‘a picture of contemporary Poland’s Jewish dimension’ (p. 9). His choice of ‘dimension’ rather than
the normative ‘community’ suggests the many ways that Jewishness makes itself felt—and influential—in Poland today, as well as the slipperiness of the very category. Despite its fluid boundaries, he constructs a portrait by cataloguing significant issues with segmented (if often overlapping) entries containing condensed histories of key periods and themes: Auschwitz, communism, Solidarity, the Church, Catholic-Jewish dialogue, and so on. While he addresses them each methodically, one issue with no separate entry infuses them all: Jewish Polish identity.

The centrality of identity can be seen in the book’s ambiguous subtitle (*Reflections of a Polish Polish Jew*), and Krajewski’s introductory narration of his own ‘de-assimilation’. Until his twenties he was a ‘completely assimilated, non-Jewish Jew’—a key category he says is ‘crucial for any attempt to understand the post-war Polish-Jewish condition’ (163). His updated self-description is no less significant: A *Polish Polish Jew*. The uninitiated could be forgiven for asking what other kinds of Polish Jews there are, and Krajewski supplies part of the answer in short order (p. 9), unpacking the phrase to mean ‘I am a Polish Jew from Poland, or a Polish Jew who is a Pole.’

This, however, demands further disassembly, since the two sides of his equation are not identical. His first phrase (‘a Polish Jew from Poland’) indicates that the fact of his birth, citizenship, and inhabitancy in Poland makes him different from the far more numerous ‘Polish Jews’ the world over for whom this label is a claim to lineage. But the second clause (‘a Polish Jew who is a Pole’) indicates not a demographic fact, but an assertion: Krajewski is a Jew who embraces ‘Polishness’ as his own. He is not a Jew as distinct from a Pole; he is culturally a Pole who happens also to be Jewish.

If this is hard for many Jews to accept after the Holocaust—which was for many a wake-up call about the impossibility of such identities—it is Krajewski’s intention to offer them a broader view. But to do so means dismantling the ‘cult of the Holocaust’ and the taboos it has imposed on the Jewish imagination.

But if foreign Jews balk at Poland’s varieties of identity (whose other sub-groups Krajewski labels ‘marginally Jewish Jews,’ ‘non-halakhic Jews,’ or ‘Catholics of Jewish origin’ (p. 164), they will have an exquisitely difficult time accepting his views on communism as a moral challenge for Jews, the need for the presence of the Church at Auschwitz, and other perspectives that require deep grounding in the Polish context to even begin to make sense.

One passage worth noting is his description of how a democratic opposition group, led by Catholic priests, publicly commemorated the 1983 anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising by singing ‘patriotic Polish and Catholic songs’. While Krajewski acknowledges the difficulty this might pose for readers, he stresses that ‘the songs were [not] meant to make the victims “posthumously Catholic’; but rather meant simply ‘to honour the dead and to proclaim values which threatened any totalitarian regime’ (p. 155).

This ability to accept as genuine a ritual recognizing Jewish martyrdom in a Polish, Catholic idiom is what makes Krajewski ideally suited for interfaith dialogue. Indeed, his is one of the few usages I have seen of ‘philosemitism’ that takes it at face value (i.e., as the opposite of antisemitism); most wield it as a kind of insult, with built-in suspicion of its own possibility. It is not just a matter of empathy and sensitivity (he is possessed of both in large measure). Rather, he illustrates how a ‘Polish Polish Jew’ is a product of the challenges of living among and grappling with profound—yet familiar—
difference on the very ground where difference came closest to being annihilated. And it is the possession of this ambivalent wisdom that positions Poland, perhaps ironically, at the forefront of interfaith dialogue and reconciliation today. As outsiders, free to kibitz from the sidelines or even ignore post-Holocaust Europe, we may avoid certain compromises. But we make others—a lack of understanding, a stunting of moral growth—instead.

Lest one be tempted to write him off as wearing rose-coloured glasses, Krajewski acknowledges that ‘virtually all Polish Jews feel that antisemitism is widespread and that the sensitivity of Poles to Jewish concerns is low’. Indeed, it is worth nothing that on this issue his painstakingly constructed language of identity-complexity falters. While elsewhere he calls the binary terminology of ‘Poles and Jews’ ‘mistaken’ and makes a point of using phrases such as ‘us Poles’ (p. 185) to indicate a shared sense of ‘belonging, familiarity, connection, value, and meaning’ (p. 203), on the subject of antisemitism we see that even for him, ‘Poles’ and ‘Jews’ become once again mutually exclusive (197).

My criticisms of the book are generally minor, more so in light of its strengths. The nature of the volume as a collection of previously published essays means that some repetition of topics is to be expected, and for those already familiar with the issues, this can be particularly tiresome. Conversely, despite its non-specialist orientation, there are moments where too much knowledge is presumed; for example, a footnote could have been added to explain the character and significance of Żegota, the only war-time association in Europe in which Jews and non-Jews worked together to save Jewish lives (p. 82). One also needs to forgive the occasional typographical errors, misspellings, and punctuation problems, along with some non-standard transliterations from Yiddish (Ichus instead of Yikhes, Mashiah instead of Moshiekh) (p. 24).

The one substantive oversight (and here I betray my own, particular predilections) might be that in a closely observed picture of Poland’s Jewish dimension there is only a single page (the penultimate one in the book, in a section called ‘Other Initiatives’) that touches on what may be its most visible manifestation, namely public Jewish heritage projects. Referring to one such initiative, Kraków’s annual Jewish Culture Festival, Krajewski notes, ‘the unique atmosphere created…enables contacts and the background for dialogue as almost nothing else in contemporary Poland.’ He thus closes his book in contradiction to its opening, where he states, ‘true Polish-Jewish contacts belong to the past’ (p. 9). The growing (and often grassroots) heritage endeavours, often involving non-Jewish Poles as purveyors and foreign Jews as consumers, are opening new arenas of encounter and synergy worthy of consideration equal to—or perhaps greater than—more traditional, institutional modes of intercultural dialogue. Not incidentally, Krajewski’s book (along with other ‘new genre’ books) are published by Austeria, the imprint that is the most recent ‘non-Jewish Jewish’ cultural endeavour to spring from the café/restaurant/cabaret of the same name in Kraków’s historical Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, a key site of much Polish–Jewish exchange today.

Krajewski’s book is a consideration of dialogue and reconciliation that understands these to be incredibly difficult processes in the course of which trust must be developed and serious mistakes will be made. Indeed, he wonders ‘which is harder: to make teshuvah [repentence] or to sincerely accept someone else’s teshuvah?’ But he reveals an overall optimism and a true appreciation for what has been changed, while remaining unafraid to set the bar ever higher for what should, ideally, be achieved. Just as
he is willing to push the Church to go further in its self-scrutiny, he calls on Jews to ‘purge [Judaism] of attitudes that promulgate hatred’ (p. 202) and educate ourselves about new developments in Christianity (and the Polish Catholic Church in particular) rather than giving in to habitual presumptions of its nefariousness regarding Jews and Judaism.

To close, I think it is worth revisiting the book’s title to consider one additional group of ‘Polish Jews’ that Krajewski de facto differentiates himself from. They may, in fact, constitute a key (if not large) group of potential readers: ‘no-longer Polish’ Polish Jews. By this I mean the mostly American and Israeli Jews, born in Poland but forced to find refuge elsewhere in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s. The question of which ‘Polishness’ they lost—only the citizenship, or also their sense of belonging—and the stories they told and tell their children and communities, is a central source of both the bleak perspective on Poland against which Krajewski is writing and some of the more informed participants in its reconsideration.

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