



# The Concept of De-assimilation: The Example of Jews in Poland

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## Abstract

After the 1968 emigration, very few Jews remained in Poland, and even more miniscule was the number of “Jewish Jews.” Since then the number has grown somewhat, and much of it is due to the process of de-assimilation; i.e., some people with Jewish ancestors raised in completely Polonized families began to recover, reclaim, and readapt their Jewish background. An analysis of this phenomenon is offered with a series of putative reasons for its occurrence. The individuals constituting the “products” of de-assimilation are the majority of Polish Jews today and form much of the current leadership. While individuals everywhere can strengthen their ties to the Jewish people and can experience *teshuvah* or another kind of “Judaization,” the process of de-assimilation does not seem to be reducible to those moves. It begins with no Jewish identity, and is highly dependent on the attitudes and cultural trends in the majority society. It does not remove the de-assimilationists from the majority culture. The phenomenon is general and deserves to be studied as a sociological mechanism working in other cases of assimilation to a majority culture. In the Jewish case, it is especially dramatic. Probably the first example can be found in the evolution of the Marrano communities settled in Holland. The presence of de-assimilation seems to differentiate some European, first of all East European, communities from the globally dominant American and Israeli ones. Probably this rather new concept is needed to describe a significant part of the world of the Jews of twenty-first century Europe.

**Keywords** Assimilation · De-assimilation · Polish Jews · Post-1989 Poland · Antisemitism · Jewish history

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## Introduction

The present paper basically presents a case study. At the same time, this case is considered to be an example of a general phenomenon. The current Jewish community of Poland is described and analyzed from the point of view of assimilation, or rather the reverse assimilation, herein called “de-assimilation.” The definition of de-assimilation is given in the section “[The Concept of De-assimilation](#),” including a discussion of its nature and of the term itself. The extent of assimilation of Polish Jews in the wake of World War II, the shock of the 1968 antisemitic campaign, and the resulting emigration of Polish Jews is indicated in the section “[Assimilation of Polish Jews in Post-World War II Poland](#).” Against this background, the de-assimilation process and its impact is described in the section “[The Process of De-assimilation](#).” An illustration provided by the comparison of names of Jewish leaders is given in the section “[An Illustration of the Extent of \(De\)Assimilation](#).” The putative reasons for de-assimilation are presented in the “[Reasons for De-assimilation](#)” section. In the “[Further Research](#)” section, further possible research problems are mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

Before describing the Polish case, it is useful to pose the problem of whether this specific de-assimilation story is representative. As explained in the next sections, the de-assimilation of Polish Jews in recent decades begins with no Jewish identity and, while it is an individual identity evolution, it has a supra-individual quality: Most members of the present-day Jewish community have appeared as a result of de-assimilation. So is it a special case or does it represent a more general trend in recent Jewish history, present in other nations, especially the post-Communist ones? No definitive answer can be given by the present author; contributions of researchers from other Jewish communities are needed. However, it seems that similar processes have been taking place in other countries, at least since 1989. In all East European states to the west of the former Soviet Union, small Jewish communities are reconstituted, and new generations of members and leaders seem to emerge as a result of the de-assimilation process, even though it is unclear whether this phenomenon exists elsewhere to the same extent as it does in Poland.

Similar processes, or at least processes similar in appearance, probably existed earlier and in other locations. The famous case is offered by the Spanish *conversos* (aka Marranos) who arrived in Holland in the seventeenth century. Recently, some of the Polish Jewish emigrants of 1968–1969 who went to Scandinavia or the USA experienced their own de-assimilation, distinct from those who remained in Poland. Those who went to Israel had yet another powerful experience.

How similar or different all those cases were with respect to the Polish case, considered here as paradigmatic, cannot be said without close analysis. Yet the concept of de-assimilation seems useful. It is related, but not reducible, to (religious) *teshuvah*, (re-)Judaization or identity strengthening. According to Konstanty Gebert,

<sup>1</sup> The sections “Assimilation of Polish Jews in Post-World War II Poland,” “The Process of De-assimilation,” and “Reasons for De-assimilation” are partly taken from the present author’s chapters in (Polish) books 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d. More autobiographical details can be found in those books than in the present paper. Also Krajewski (2009) contains a personal account.

in the 1990s journalists began to write about “a Jewish rebirth, or revitalisation, or renaissance. Clearly, something re-Jewish was going on there” (Gebert 2020, p. 66).<sup>2</sup> My proposal: rather than “re-something,” it was de-assimilation.

## Disclosure

To make the situation clear, it must be said that the author is himself very much a participant in and a “product” of de-assimilation. Therefore, a considerable part of the material is derived from personal experiences and contact with other Polish Jews, or rather “Polish Polish” Jews, to use the term from Krajewski (2005), that is, the individuals who not only have Polish Jewish ancestry but also actually live in Poland and are part and parcel of Polish life. In addition, some personal stories have been gathered by the present author in a series of interviews conducted to get a more comprehensive picture of the range of de-assimilation. Therefore, qualitative research was also employed in the preparation of the present study. Books and newspaper articles describing various cases have provided additional essential material. The books include Melchior (1990), Krajewski (2005), Tuszyńska (2005), Wiszniewicz (2008), Gebert (2008), Krajewski (2010), Reszke (2013a, 2013b), Wiszniewska (2014), Starnawski (2016), Grynberg (2017), Tuszyńska et al. (2018), Sobolewski (2021), Kurski (2022), Zubrzycki (2022), Grinzwieg-Jacobsson (2022), Synger (2023), and Tuszyńska (2023). Rarely do they ponder de-assimilation as such, but often the stories describe the process of regaining Jewish identity, traditions, and a sentiment of belonging in a way that fits the concept of de-assimilation as defined in this study.

## The Concept of De-assimilation

De-assimilation should be seen as the reverse of assimilation. Assimilation is a process of adaptation to another culture, often—and this is the only case that is under scrutiny in the present study—a dominant, majority culture. Culture involves many dimensions, including language, customs, world view, religion. Mere absorption of those elements constitutes acculturation. When we talk about assimilation we mean something stronger: a process of distancing oneself from one’s own culture, in our case a minority culture, gradually forgetting about it, and finally denying one’s roots. De-assimilation involves moving in the opposite direction. This means coming closer to the minority culture, learning about it, and affirming one’s roots in the ancestral group. This can be manifested in various ways: learning traditions,

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<sup>2</sup> The paper by Gebert (2020) gives an informed personal account of the recent story of a segment of the Polish Jewish community. A variety of accounts in English can be found in the Taube Foundation brochure (2015). The issue of de-assimilation is not sufficiently stressed in more comprehensive accounts of Jews in Poland in the last 50 years such as Polonsky (2012) or even the catalogue to the Polin museum core exhibition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Polonsky 2014), in which Krajewski (2014) is included.

language(s), finding attractive ingredients of the minority culture, identifying with the minority group, and trying to participate in its life and possibly its religion.

A word of caution. The very term “de-assimilation” is sometimes understood as another case of assimilation, or rather re-assimilation, a distancing of oneself from the majority culture, slowly forgetting it, and denying one’s connection to the dominant culture. Yet, this is not what is meant here. Regaining one’s ties to the minority culture typically does not involve abandoning the majority culture. It is not going back to the position of a member of a minority having limited competence in the dominant culture. In the case studied here it does not mean going back to a shtetl. This would hardly be possible, although perhaps it may occasionally happen that psychological rejection of the majority is so strong that one begins to behave as if, for instance, one’s linguistic competence has been lost.

Generally, de-assimilation consists in moving towards the roots without diminishing one’s ties to the dominant culture. The point of departure is assimilation accomplished. While those who assimilate to the majority want to belong, this may be hard to achieve for many reasons. It also requires time. It becomes natural only in the next generation or two. Then the dominant culture is taken for granted as one’s own. It is the ancestral minority culture that can constitute a challenge: how to make it mine? Taking steps in order to answer this question constitutes de-assimilation.

De-assimilation in various forms is happening among Poles of Jewish origin raised after World War II. It involves two major aspects: first, a large majority of those who function as Jews in the twenty-first century were raised without Jewish identity; secondly, for almost all of them the starting point was a virtual, and often total, lack of awareness of Jewish roots and the absence of Jewish life with which they could be confronted. Such a phenomenon is unprecedented in the history of Polish Jews. It seems to have begun after the 1968 antisemitic campaign or after the 1967 Six-Day War. It became publicly visible after 1989. On an individual level, the crisis of assimilation had occurred in interwar Poland. Yet the framework was different: Masses of Jewish Jews were around, and rarely, if ever, was no Jewish awareness the point of departure for the individuals regaining Jewish identification.

While the process opposite to assimilation has rarely been explored, one notable exception can be found in the Landau-Czajka 2006 book describing Jews in interwar Poland. She uses the term “*dysymilacja*” (dissimulation), defined (2006, 148) as the process in which “assimilated individuals who had considered themselves Polish, changed their national/ethnic identity (“*narodowość*”) to Jewish or went back to the previous Jewish identity.” She indicates how difficult it was for people who did not know the language and the customs to belong to the Jewish people; the move back was done primarily by the first generation of assimilationists, and anyway they associated mostly with Polonized Jews similar to themselves (Landau-Czajka 2006, 149–154). When Kamil Kijek quotes Landau-Czajka, he uses the term “de-assimilation,” or rather its Polish version “*dezasymlacja*” (Kijek 2017, 237).

The term “*dysymilacja*” was once used to describe the phenomenon studied in the present paper: In one inconsequential sentence, Marcin Mateńko wrote that the political changes after 1989 “activated the process of dissimulation among that community” (Mateńko 2010, 177). I find the term “dissimulation” rather unfortunate because it reminds one of the word “dissimulation,” which is the exact opposite of

what is happening with those de-assimilating Jews.<sup>3</sup> In addition, dissimilation means becoming dissimilar, and this seems to be too general in this case. The term “de-assimilation,” on the other hand, clearly points to assimilation, which is, after all, the starting point of de-assimilation. I believe that not only is the term “de-assimilation” better, but it is also good to have a special term for the identity evolution in Poland since the 1980s, as it has been happening against a background so different from the prewar situation that the same term can be misleading. De-assimilation begins with the deepest assimilation possible. It includes the “symbolic acculturation” (Kijek 2017, 239) in a much stronger way than was the case in prewar Poland. According to Kijek, no author of the autobiographies written for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in the late 1930s wrote “we Poles” even though many were strongly assimilated (248). In contrast, in the generation of Polish Jews de-assimilating after 1989, virtually everyone was saying “we Poles” at least in some contexts. In the title of Gudonis (2001a), the phrase “Deassimilation without Depolonization” is used. This is a quote from an interview with me (see his footnote 1, p. 12). Other points of that paper fully converge with my argument as well. He writes, for example, that “young assimilated Polish Jews want to live Jewish lives as Poles” (2) and that it is “by differentiating oneself from other Jews, that one strengthens one’s own sense of Jewishness” (11).

Assimilation is itself a vague concept. As aptly indicated by Todd Endelman (2017), it involves “four analytically distinct changes in Jewish behavior and status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: acculturation ..., integration ..., emancipation ..., and secularization.” The complex nature of assimilation, however, does not need to be considered here, because we assume that it is the total assimilation, including at least all four aspects, that forms the point of departure for the de-assimilation as defined in the present study.

The term “de-assimilation” has been used by me since the 1990s. The first documented use is at a 1997 conference in Strasbourg where I spoke on “Helping the Process of De-assimilation.” In 1999, in a bulletin devoted to Christian-Jewish dialogue issued by *SIDIC*, a short article “Jewish De-assimilation in Poland: A Personal Perspective” was published in English, French, and German (Krajewski 1999a, b, c). It seems to me to have been a new term, although it might have been used by someone else. The term “désassimilation” is used in the title of a book by Pierre Birnbaum (2004).<sup>4</sup> Despite the title, Birnbaum presents no general theory of de-assimilation. The story of several famous intellectuals—from Marx to Yerushalmi—illustrates the limits of assimilation in the West. The question whether it is typical for a larger category of assimilated Jews is not asked. The loss of their accepted position by Jews in the Western nation states in the interwar period is called their “désassimilation” (Birnbaum 2004, 370). Those described by Birnbaum were all clearly Jewish

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, in endnote 4 of Birnbaum (2004, 396), mentioning Volkov (1985), the title of her paper is rendered as “dissimilation,” which confirms my impression of the unfortunate character of the term.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps there are other publications using the term corresponding to “de-assimilation” in French and other languages.

even if also assimilated (and in the case of Marx, anti-Jewish), while in our case a mass phenomenon—even if numerically small—is studied and one that begins with virtually (and often literally) no Jewish awareness. I can still admit that there is a great similarity with regard to individual identity options and the associated emotions between Polish intellectuals to which I refer and the personalities studied by Birnbaum. And a more general question should be asked: To what extent is the story of Poles with Jewish roots after 1989 similar to that of the Westerners with Jewish roots several decades before? It is especially interesting to compare the Polish story with the evolution of the identities of German Jews a century earlier. Their story of unrequited love is well known because it involves many famous individuals. For example, Shulamit Volkov (2006) describes the “dissimilation” of German Jews, beginning in the late nineteenth century and intensifying in the beginning of the twentieth. Actually, the fact that she uses that term may be fortunate because it makes more clear the possibility that the story of German Jews in the first decades of the twentieth century is sufficiently different from that of Polish Jews in the last decades of that century and the beginning of the current millennium that it deserves another name. I do not want, however, to decide that they were or weren’t fundamentally similar.

Until my Polish articles (2019a, 2019b), no serious attempt seems to have been made to explore de-assimilation either as a general issue or a case, Polish or another, conceived as representing a general socio-psychological pattern. That is why I feel that I may propose an explanation of the concept. Rather than attempting a full discussion, I present its characteristic features.

Thus, as mentioned above, de-assimilation begins in the state of thorough assimilation and involves steps meant to come closer to the minority culture of the former generations, learning about their traditions and affirming one’s roots, or at least a part of them, in the ancestral group. More specific ingredients of the attracting minority culture can be accepted such as learning language(s), studying history, practicing religion, participating in institutions, teaching others, representing the minority within the majority. It must be stressed that in undergoing de-assimilation, one does not weaken one’s ties to the dominant culture. The question can be posed whether this is different from other more familiar phenomena such as reconnecting to a group or (re-)converting to a religion. My claim is that it is sufficiently distinct to deserve a special name. To make it clear, let us consider the paradigmatic case of Jews in Poland in the last half-century or so. The de-assimilation they, or rather we, have witnessed is not reducible to a mere strengthening of one’s ties to the Jewish people. The point of departure is different. While in many places in the world there are individuals who become more Jewishly conscious or active, here the point of departure is a total lack of Jewish identity or consciousness and, until the 1990s, complete absence of Jewish life in one’s general social environment. Also, Judaism was then so absent that assimilated Jews had no idea about the existence of Jewish holidays distinct from the Christian and state ones. Even those who knew something about Jews and their own link to them assumed that Jewishness was completely irrelevant to modern life. The process of de-assimilation was therefore deeper and often much harder than more usual identity modifications. It was not merely an expansion of one’s grasp of life but rather like steering one’s ship in the opposite direction.

What is more, the considerable effort needed to proceed with de-assimilation was strongly affected by the trends present in the majority society. Those trends could either make de-assimilation tougher or enhance it. The latter could occur because of the interest in things Jewish, positive attitudes to and support for Jewish renewal expressed by important opinion leaders of the Polish society (cf. “[Interest in Things Jewish](#)” section below). Furthermore, *teshuvah* or Judaization is basically an individual process, adding new members to the existing community. In contrast to this, in the case of the Polish Jewish de-assimilation, while it happens to individuals, it is more than a series of parallel individual cases which reinforce one another, and, in a most unexpected development, ultimately form the mainstream, belong to the kernel of Jewish life and organizations, and constitute their membership and leadership. Otherwise the Jewish institutions in Poland would not have survived.

To sum up, de-assimilation is characterized by (a) departing from an accomplished assimilation and no (or minimal and empty) minority identity, (b) getting closer to the ancestral culture, (c) learning about it, (d) affirming one’s roots in it, and also possibly (e) attempting to make it present in the surrounding society, (f) reacting to the cultural trends in the majority society, (g) becoming active in the mainstream of the minority life, and perhaps (h) going all the way and assuming a traditional minority lifestyle, such as religious practice. It may also happen that (i) the parallel individual moves sum up to a trend of great importance for the minority.

## Assimilation of Polish Jews in Post-World War II Poland

Assimilation is the point of departure for de-assimilation. The nature of those phenomena in Poland seems to be understood neither by Poles nor by Jews outside Poland. Only those who take part in Jewish life in contemporary Poland feel the depth of assimilation and the quality of de-assimilation. Hardly anyone knows the term, but they know the phenomenon from inside. In addition, a number of friends and a few researchers can understand the issue. Most people, both in Poland and outside, have a completely inadequate picture. They think that Polish Jews today are more or less like Jews before the war and the contemporary American Jews. Well, they do know that Polish Jews know Polish language and culture, but we are still often regarded as if we were newcomers and have been shaped by the family Jewish background with its beliefs, customs, rituals, and the realities we know about and to which we have always referred. In reality, we were completely separated from that background.

Assimilation is not a well-defined phenomenon, and the use of the term is ideologically loaded.<sup>5</sup> Yet, unlike de-assimilation, the story of assimilation, including Polonization, is rather well known to all who are seriously interested in the subject.<sup>6</sup> It began generations ago. The story of Frankists, the sect created by Jacob Frank in the eighteenth century, also influenced the Polish society in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion see Jagodzińska (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Endelman (2017).

It is now widely available due to *The Book of Jacob* by Olga Tokarczuk (2021). A much lesser-known illustration can be found in the letter to Fred Zinnemann, the director of the celebrated western movie *High Noon*. In 1940, his mother, in regard to an expected baby, wrote to him in America from Lvov (now Lviv), “I have written in each letter that I do not want the child to become Jewish. I think Dad will not be against this—I am so disappointed with regard to our race that I believe nobody who doesn’t need to should admit it” (Bochenek 2021, 369). The Holocaust period added a death and life dimension. This is well known, but to illustrate, the eminent Polish politician Bronisław Geremek, who was seven when the war began and a member of an Orthodox Jewish family, later dissociated himself completely from the past and told his son, “My life began in 1945.”<sup>7</sup>

An overwhelming majority of the members of Jewish organizations in twenty-first-century Poland, be they social, cultural, sport-related, or religious, were raised in mixed families, the Jewish members of which were completely assimilated. Some of the active members have no Jewish ancestors and have converted to Judaism since. Those who are involved in a religious manner have also converted if the Jewish origin was different from the maternal line. There was virtually no difference between those with Jewish roots and those without as far as the knowledge, competence, familiarity with the tradition, or often even identity was concerned. The individuals who have had a Jewish self-identification since birth are precious few. There are just a handful of Jews raised after the war who know Yiddish from home. The fate of this language, the mother tongue of a majority of Polish Jews before World War II, offers a good illustration of the phenomenon of assimilation.

After the war, among the survivors and returnees from the Soviet Union, there were still people who spoke Yiddish as their first language. Most of them emigrated, but even those who stayed in Poland rarely taught the language to their children. Since the 1950s it had been clear to everyone that children had to be raised using Polish. Even translators from Yiddish and Yiddish writers did not pass the language on to the next generation. To the youth, the Jewish culture also was not attractive. This was visible in the 1960s even for the activists of the TSKŻ (Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland), the main official Jewish organization allowed by the Communist government, even though it was based on Yiddish culture intermingled with Communist ideology. Its leaders attempted to attract the post-war generation, so they allowed them to have cultural activities in Polish. They involved dynamic rock bands in which non-Jewish colleagues participated. Polonization seemed inevitable. Even those among the youth who had a Jewish identity and participated in popular summer camps where Communist Yiddishkeit was taught were increasingly culturally Polish. The antisemitic campaign of 1967–1968 caused emigration of most Yiddish speakers, and since then no Yiddish has been spoken to babies in families in Poland. Curiously, the Yiddish theater existed all the time, but the audience had to use earphones with translation into Polish. Only since the 1990s has

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Marcin Geremek, *Gazeta wyborcza*, March 3, 2022; <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,28178014,syn-gerenka-ojciec-nigdy-sie-nie-spoznial-kiedys-przyszedlem.html> [accessed Aug 3, 2023].



academic interest in Yiddish been rising, and there is now a growing number of young scholars, often with no Jewish roots, who cultivate the language, translate, and take part in conferences.

In the 1960s, hardly anyone among Jews was religious. The political atmosphere was against religion, and the leaders of TSKŻ were Communists who had been fighting Judaism before the war. They also forbade the teaching of Hebrew, since for them it represented a reactionary ideology of either a religious or Zionist variety. Families maintaining ties to the religious traditions were emigrating, as did Zionist-minded ones, either in the 1940s or after 1956 when it became possible again. For Polish Jews, the whole period from 1944 to 1967 consisted of three trends: emerging from hiding and returning from the Soviet Union, emigrating, in several waves, to the West and Israel, and assimilating to the majority culture. Unlike before the war, ethnic Poles were the overwhelming majority, and all minority cultures were limited or marginalized. Communists, including the Jewish ones, wanted homogeneity, which to them meant a Polish and Socialist culture. There was less and less space for Jewish expression, but the Jews who did not want to leave Poland were generally accepting that situation. The final blow to Jewish life came in 1968 when the government orchestrated an antisemitic campaign which forced all Jews to consider emigration. Most “Jewish Jews” left, and alongside them many assimilated ones, including some who had had no idea about their roots. There were teenagers who learned that one of the parents was Jewish, and sometimes even both, only at the moment when the parents suddenly announced that they were going to emigrate. For instance, this had been the experience of Maciej Zaremba Bielawski, who eventually became a major journalist in Sweden and after 1989 re-established ties to Poland.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1968, the Jews in Poland have been mostly deeply assimilated and very often have intermarried with non-Jews. There were not many people sufficiently Jewish and determined enough to form a Jewish milieu that could preserve Jewishness. Contact with Jews abroad was difficult because of administrative restrictions, the internet did not exist, synagogues were marginal, and all Jewish institutions were on the decline. In the 1980s it seemed that the inevitable passing away of the Jews who had been born before World War II would signify the final end of Jewish life in Poland. The older Jews felt there would be no continuation; their children were mostly abroad or were living in Poland but had nothing to do with Jewish organizations. The next generation often felt the same. For example, Konstanty Gebert, later a well-known journalist and a committed Jew, said in an interview that the end of Jewish life was inevitable. The book (Niezabitowska 1986) in which the interview appeared had a telling title: “Remnants.” However, the story developed in an unexpected direction.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. his book (2018).

## The Process of De-assimilation

The phenomenon of returning to their roots appeared in the post-war-raised generation of Poles of Jewish origin in the late 1970s. Perhaps there had been earlier attempts, but even if so, they had no perceptible impact upon Polish life. At first just a handful of individuals (including the present writer) began to explore Jewish roots, and then when more seekers appeared, a movement could be talked about, but it was never larger than several dozen people in their twenties and thirties. Almost all began from scratch, having received no education regarding Jewish traditions. Even those who knew something about their families had no idea about Judaism, holidays, Jewish history, customs, and obligations. In this respect they were no different from their non-Jewish friends who were also interested in learning about Jews. The Warsaw group called itself the “Jewish Flying University,” adopting the name “Flying University” used in Poland for the clandestine educational network at the beginning of the twentieth century, with classes moving from one home to another. The initial meetings were more like group therapy sessions, and later the gatherings became a self-teaching seminar in Jewish studies with occasional visiting lecturers, Polish or foreign. Some of the active participants ultimately emigrated, others went another way, but some (including the present writer) became deeply involved in Jewish life. Still others are engaged in a search to clarify the Jewish past of Poland and its impact on the Polish public.

Interestingly, the first steps in the process of de-assimilation were directed towards the Jewish religious traditions. In the late 1980s, private activities, partly underground, became easier due to the liberalization of the regime. Assistance and resources were provided not only by American books, but also by a growing number of visitors. After 1989, all administrative restrictions disappeared, taboos were lifted, Jewish topics reappeared in public life, and it became easy to have contact with foreign Jews. Everyone who wanted could enter the de-assimilation boat. How many did? It is impossible to know that for sure. As of 2022, the membership of the largest formally religious Jewish community, that in Warsaw, is over 800. The membership of the B’nai B’rith Lodge “Polin,” (re-)established in 2007, is over 60, including quite a few who are not members of the *kehillah* because they feel that they are nonreligious, even though, of course, nobody in the religious community is asked to declare religious convictions. In both organizations, the overwhelming majority are there due to de-assimilation. This is probably also the case with many among those who feel Jewish but do not belong to any organization, either because of fear or because they see no institution fitting their self-definition. In the national census of 2011, 7508 Polish citizens indicated that they were Jewish; among them, 1636 considered themselves non-hyphenated Jews.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2021 census, 15,700 inhabitants of Poland declared Jewishness as their primary or secondary

<sup>9</sup> <http://mniejszosci.narodowe.mswia.gov.pl/mne/mniejszosci/wyniki-narodowego-spis/7096.Ludnosc-w-rodzaju-i-zlozonosci-identyfikacji-narodowo-etnicznych-w-2011-r.html> (accessed April 16, 2023).

identification.<sup>10</sup> Many Jewish leaders believe that the number of Poles with Jewish roots must amount to several tens of thousands. This estimate is based on anecdotal evidence: The new de-assimilated Jews keep appearing, and most often relatives of those newly active Jews are absent from any Jewish counting.

In the last 30 years we have been witnessing the gradual building of new Jewish institutions and revitalization of old ones. Thus, in addition to the individual de-assimilation, we have institutional growth that has produced a sort of “re-Judaization” of the social space. Jewish religious communities have become focal points. Many of their members are not strongly religious, but very few are as intensely anti-religious as had been the leading Jewish activists from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Since the 1990s, the leaders of Jewish organizations in Poland raised before the war have been gradually replaced by the next generations that emerged due to de-assimilation. However, almost no knowledge or competence necessary for a Jewish activist was received from the older generation. Their prewar Yiddishkeit seemed unsuitable in the modern, and especially post-Communist, world. American, and later also Israeli books, educators, and networks seemed incomparably more relevant. The old experts did not pass on their knowledge. For example, Michał Friedman was teaching Yiddish and Hebrew to the actors of the Jewish theater in Warsaw, yet his son Andrzej learned English, Russian, and French, but neither Hebrew nor Yiddish. It was only later as a professor of medicine that he developed close ties with Israel and became the president of the B’nai B’rith lodge in Poland. More typically, the children of Jewish leaders of the Communist period kept away from Jewish life. Family continuation was absent, and as a result, a complete generational discontinuity prevailed. The new leaders came from families with no involvement in Jewish institutional life. They, as well as almost all the membership, had to traverse their own path of de-assimilation.

In the first years after 1989, the Jewish community was joined mostly by those who had chosen de-assimilation earlier. Later there appeared more people who were only beginning their de-assimilation process. Young people were enthusiastically assuming responsibilities; they enjoyed freedom and the circumstances that prompted and assisted de-assimilation. They had educational opportunities and attractive occasions to learn in the West or Israel that had been unimaginable before 1989. New institutions, small but energetic, were formed: a youth group, the sport club Makkabi, an association of the Second Generation Survivors, that is, the children of the Holocaust survivors, then Reform synagogues and Jewish community centers inspired by the American ones. Some were short-lived while others have been successful. The support of American Jewish institutions and of individuals arriving with the idea of reviving Jewish life was crucial. Foundations were providing financial support and sent rabbis and educators who provided examples, ideas, and leadership. In the following decades Israelis also appeared. The role of foreign

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechnen/sp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-wstepne/wstepne-wyniki-narodowego-spisu-powszechnego-ludnosci-i-mieszkan-2021-w-zakresie-struktury-narodowo-etnicznej-oraz-zyjka-kontaktow-domowych,10,1.html> (accessed April 16, 2023).

input cannot be overstated. It helped the gradual process of empowerment of local Jewish activists, but this process is still far from completion.

The initiatives and institutions introduced by foreigners greatly enhanced de-assimilation. The summer camps in Rychwałd in southern Poland in the 1990s are legendary even for those de-assimilationists who never went there. They were organized by Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who represented the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. The same foundation established Jewish schools in Warsaw and Wrocław. Interestingly enough, children with no Jewish roots also attended, as their parents wanted a high-level, open-minded school with a good level of English and international connections. For those pupils whose parents wanted to enhance their Jewishness, the Jewish matters became relatively simple and natural, far more than they were for their parents. Yet only a small minority of Poles with Jewish ancestors have gone beyond the neurotic, uncertain, hesitant, or indifferent attitudes to their roots. Even if they know about their origins—and who knows how many are ignorant—they usually do not know what to do with this knowledge or whether it is worthwhile to do anything.

Alongside those unsure about what to do, there are quite a few opposite attitudes. Among active members of Jewish communities, converts with no Jewish forebears have appeared. Sometimes they suspect a Jewish ancestor but have no way to be sure. However, in the case of such individuals, we should not talk about de-assimilation; what they experience is Judaization. Often, but not always, they have Jewish spouses. Let us remember, however, that according to Jewish principles, conversion must result from one's conviction and must not be done for the sake of marriage. In such mixed marriages in contemporary Poland, however, the cultural background of both spouses is identical or very close. Certainly, the initial lack of knowledge of Jewish traditions is the same.

Today, almost the entire Jewish community is composed of people who have traveled the path of de-assimilation. Some started from no identity, some did have a certain Jewish awareness, but almost never any Jewish competence. Among the key leaders there are foreigners, primarily Americans. De-assimilation was not their experience. They have always been actively Jewish and also deeply American; in addition, they have become more or less Polonized.

There is one more category of immigrant Jews increasingly visible in the past few years. Ukrainian Jews have appeared within a million or two of the immigrant workers and students from Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. The Russian invasion added another million Ukrainians in 2022. A few of those Jewish immigrants, who must number many thousands, have decided to join Polish Jewish institutions. Unlike the Americans, as far as de-assimilation is concerned, they are similar to Polish Jews. The main difference is due to the Ukrainian situation of Jews: There are vastly more Jews and fewer taboos than in Poland. A Jewish presence was accepted more easily by the Ukrainian society than it was in Poland. In Soviet times they had their passports marked with Jewishness although one could choose the ethnicity of another parent, and despite the mass emigration to Israel, as of 2021 there were still many tens of thousands of Jews there. At the moment it is too early to say what the impact will be of the Russian invasion of Ukraine begun in February 2022. Much like their Polish peers, the Ukrainian Jewish newcomers are largely ignorant

of religious traditions. In addition, their cultural background is different, so their de-assimilation would involve some Polonization as well. Perhaps it can be seen as a variety of Polonization, but separate research would be necessary to validate that.

## An Illustration of the Extent of (De-)Assimilation

A perfect illustration of the scope of assimilation and the resulting de-assimilation is provided by comparing the first and last names of the leaders of post-war Jewish organizations. Giving children typically Polish, linguistically Slavic first names was common and constituted a sure sign of assimilation. The last names were sometimes retained, but often were changed either by keeping the false Polish-sounding names used during hiding in the course of the war or by changing the names shortly after the war according to the Communist party policy aimed at playing down the number of Jews among its activists.<sup>11</sup> It is worth stressing that before World War II, among Communist intelligentsia, Jews were numerous. They were mostly assimilated, especially those who became “professional revolutionaries,” that is, Communist party activists on the party payroll. They were Jewish but did not form a separate group, let alone lobby, in the Socialist circles.<sup>12</sup> Those who survived the Holocaust and the Soviet purges of 1937 became high-ranking officials in Poland. In post-war documents they occasionally mentioned Jewish origins, but after 1950 this practice mostly ceased (Bertram 2022, p. 98).

The focus on names is interesting because they can tell so much about identities that they alone reveal a picture which usually requires one to enter the life stories of the people involved. Thus, the name “Stanisław Krajewski” is most standardly Polish, but behind it there is a whole story: The surname was adopted by my grandfather, originally Stein, in the late 1920s when my father was a child; the change was due to the demands of conspiracy, typical for Communist activists of that period. He lived in Switzerland and was missing Poland. Hence, the last name includes “kraj” which means “(the) country.” My first name was chosen, after World War II, to make me feel as typically Polish as possible. My father’s and his parents’ first names were similarly Polish. In contrast to that, my mother always retained her first name Estera, a Polish and Yiddish version of Esther.

In 1991, the Association of the Child Survivors of the Holocaust (Stowarzyszenie Dzieci Holokaustu) was established in Poland. It is the most unusual Jewish organization, as a majority of its members are Catholic. It accepts all individuals who had been Jewish children during World War II and remained in Poland after the war, usually with no biological family. Many other children with the same wartime story and having been reclaimed by Jewish activists, often in dramatic circumstances, left Poland after the war.<sup>13</sup> About 100 initial members of the group, which would

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<sup>11</sup> Adoption of non-Jewish names is described as one of the methods of assimilation by Koźmińska-Frejlik (2022).

<sup>12</sup> This point is argued in Bertram (2022) and Krajewski (2023).

<sup>13</sup> Examples are shown in a recent book by Anna Bikont (2022).

later grow to several hundred, elected the board: Jakub Gutenbaum (as president), Zygmunt Barski, Elżbieta Ficowska, Halina Grubowska, Jerzy Grzybowski, Maria Leszczyńska, Zofia Zaks (Grubowska 1994, p. 166). It is hardly surprising that all but two of them have perfectly Polish names. The younger ones, like Ficowska, were raised as Poles with no knowledge of their biological ancestry. Professor Gutenbaum was a teenager during the war, so he was aware of the situation. Often the identity of those children was ambiguous.

While the child survivors had to recover their Jewishness despite their upbringing and their names, it seems that the leaders of the union of Jewish religious communities must have had a strong identity. The union, called the Religious Union of Mosaic Faith (Związek Religijny Wyznania Mojżeszowego, ZRWM), had existed since 1949, but it was marginalized by the Communist regime. After 1968 it was weak and almost disappearing. The elections were held in 1984. As a result, Mozes Finkelstein was elected the president, and the board consisted of Czesław Jakubowicz, Szymon Datner, Adam Flecker, Marian Akselrad, Abraham Blado, Franciszek Edelman, Michał Nadel, and Paweł Wildstein (*Kalendarz żydowski* 5746, 1985–1986, Warszawa, p. 179). They have Jewish surnames, but some of the first names are definitely Polish. Those first names were clearly felt more natural in the new era. Then in 1991 a new board was elected. Paweł Wildstein became president and the following became members: Ignacy Akerman, Szloma Brzoza, Samuel Farber, Mozes Finkelstein, Czesław Jakubowicz, Michał Nadel, Zygmunt Nissenbaum (living in Constanza, Switzerland), Leon Rubinstein (*Kalendarz żydowski* 5753, 1992–1993, Warszawa, p. 161). Their names are unmistakably Jewish, even if some are linguistically Polish such as “Brzoza,” meaning birch, but when coupled with the first name “Szloma,” it is conspicuously Jewish. They all received a basic, or at least minimal, religious education before the war.

In 1993, in the new political atmosphere, a new religious organization was formed, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities (Związek Gmin Wyznaniowych Żydowskich, ZGWŻ). Initially headed by Dr. Wildstein, who continued in his former role, it was significantly transformed in 1997, exactly when the new law on the relation of the Polish state to the Jewish community was passed in the parliament (Sejm). A new board was elected: Jerzy Kichler (president), Szlomo Brzoza, Tadeusz Jakubowicz, Piotr Kadlčik, Stanisław Krajewski, Feliks Lipman, Michał Nadel, Leszek Piszewski, and Jakub Szadaj (*Kalendarz żydowski* 5759, 1998–1999, Warszawa, 103–4). Half of them represented the post-war generation and mostly had Polish-sounding names.<sup>14</sup> In the twenty-first century, the transition to the de-assimilated generations was naturally completed. Thus, in 2013, the board, being the executive body chosen by a much larger council elected by the delegates of all the communities (*kehillot*), consisted of Piotr Kadlčik (president), Simcha Keller, Henryk Kozłowski, Tomasz Krakowski, Michał Samet, and Andrzej Zozula (*Kalendarz żydowski* 5774, 2013–2014, Warszawa, p. 96). All have Polish names, and the one who does not, Simcha Keller, renamed himself to replace his totally Polish name (Krzysztof Skowroński). None of them received any Jewish education in childhood.

<sup>14</sup> The name “Kadlčik” is actually Czech, but this is irrelevant here.

All went through de-assimilation. They are all male, but in the last two decades the presence of women on the boards of Jewish institutions has become a matter of course. The successive heads of the board of ZGWŻ were as follows: at the beginning, Dr. Paweł Wildstein (1993–1997), educated as a Jew before World War II, later a colonel in the Polish army; he had a clearly Jewish (or German) surname but was using a Polish first name; then, Jerzy Kichler (1997–2003) of the post-war generation, engineer, an early product of de-assimilation, and similarly, the next ones, Piotr Kadłcik (2003–2014) and Lesław Piszewski (2014–2019). Since 2019, women have become presidents of the union, both with very Polish-sounding names, first briefly Monika Krawczyk, and then Klara Kołodziejska (since September 2019). Similarly, when we look at the Religious Committee of the Union, we find the names that could be present in any Polish organization: Baruch Ciesielski, Paweł Grabiec, Monika Piotrowska, Karolina Szykier-Koszucka, Tomasz Krakowski, Michał Samet, and Paweł Lewandowski. The first one has a Hebrew first name, but it has been adopted, as it is not the name he was using as a young person. “Krakowski” is to some extent a Jewish surname, because it refers to the large city of Cracow, but it sounds very much Polish, and few people would be able to detect its Jewishness.

The review of the names of activists in other Jewish organizations would reveal similar patterns. This provides support for my general thesis: Present-day Polish Jewish institutions exist due to de-assimilation. What is more, Jews in today’s Poland exist as Jews due to de-assimilation.

## **Reasons for De-assimilation**

Several factors that enabled, helped, and enhanced de-assimilation can be detected. The focus is on Poland after 1968, when the last wave of emigration occurred, and especially on free Poland after the political changes in 1989. The eight reasons indicated below hardly form an exhaustive list.

### **Antisemitism**

The first reason is antisemitism. Most Jews who were living in Poland in the 1960s thought that antisemitism would not be important, and at least that there would be no serious threat to their children who had no Jewish links and often no awareness of Jewish origins. True, often enough such an ignorant student was coming back from school and telling an antisemitic joke or boasting, “We were chasing that kike to beat him up.” This forced the embarrassed parents to explain the situation to the child. Still, they hoped the encounters with antisemitism would be marginal in their lives. After all, the official declarations of the Communist rulers were against all sorts of racism. To all such Jewishly linked families, the March 1968 “events” were a shock. The antisemitic campaign forced all of them to ponder the issue of emigration. About 15,000 did leave within 2 years. Those who did not had to live in a much less safe world. They usually had networks of non-Jewish friends, and anyway most had mixed families. Since 1970, Jewish topics had been mostly taboo,

and antisemitism was not expressed in the public arena, although occasionally virulently antisemitic attitudes appeared, for example, in the activities of the association “Grunwald,” which was connected to the fascist wing of the Communist party. At the same time, the steadily growing anti-Communist opposition often expressed opposition to antisemitism. The picture became rather many-sided during the initial 1980–1981 “Solidarność” [Solidarity] movement. Among millions involved, both anti-Jewish and pro-Jewish attitudes were present.

Young Poles with Jewish roots had to take into account the antisemitic danger and the division of public opinion. Intellectual leaders of Solidarity and the underground opposition of the 1980s were clearly denouncing antisemitism. In fact, some of them were themselves assimilated Jews. Eventually the situation pushed some of the young Poles with Jewish roots to enter the path of de-assimilation, or at least to feel more connected to other Jews, and learn about what being Jewish could possibly mean. Also, after 1989, when antisemitism met with opposition, the very existence of the controversy helped many to become more Jewish. A teenager raised in Sweden who moved to Poland found out that “the polarization of Polish society with respect to attitudes towards Jews compelled him to promote his Jewish consciousness into an active secular Jewish identity” (Gudonis 2001b, pp. 140–141).

### The Collapse of Communist Beliefs

The second reason was more essential than it could seem now, especially from the Western perspective: it was the collapse of the Communist ideology that was present in the homes of many Jews who had not left in any of the post-war waves of emigration from 1945 to 1968, precisely because they believed in that ideology and its anti-Zionist and anti-Western message. The 1968 antisemitic campaign meant the end of those beliefs. This provoked a serious identity crisis because their political involvement had a quasi-religious character. Some of those Communist party members began to express their disenchantment, saying, “It turned out that Communism was no better than Fascism.” Many emigrated, still others revived their youthful identifications. For example, colonels dismissed from the army began to attend synagogue services. This was their return related to de-assimilation. Their children, if in Poland, were shaped by the general atmosphere of the country rather than the involvements of their parents, who, as mentioned above, were not transmitting anything Jewish to the next generation. Children raised after the war were formed by the state schools, the official media, the anti-government ones, like the widely popular US-sponsored radio broadcasts by “Free Europe” (Radio Wolna Europa), cultural events, oppositional underground activities and publications, and, last but not least, the Roman Catholic church.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Church had a moral authority hard to imagine in today’s Poland. It provided the only large network partly independent of the government and welcomed all sort of anti-Communist activists, including the disenfranchised Communists and children of Communists, all of them without direct Church affiliation. In particular, many atheist authors published in the Catholic intellectual monthlies, like *Więź* and *Znak*, and the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. They included the



liberal poet and moral authority Antoni Słonimski, the former fanatic Communist poet turned anti-Communist Wiktor Woroszyński, and the leading young dissident Adam Michnik, who had to publish under other names. They all had Jewish roots but did not consider themselves Jewish and had no connections to Jewish institutions.<sup>15</sup> The Catholic periodicals presented open-minded religious thinkers such as French personalists, for instance, Jacques Maritain, as well as Simone Weil or Teilhard de Chardin, and others, not excluding such Jewish religious philosophers as Martin Buber or Emmanuel Levinas. The result was that the Church, Catholicism, and religion in general became respectful among intelligentsia far beyond the ranks of believers. After 1978, the Polish Pope John Paul II became an additional asset. He was admired by a majority of anti-Communist intellectuals, Jews included. What is more, Christianity became attractive. The feeling was that the fight for freedom and human rights was common to the dissidents and the oppressed Church.<sup>16</sup> In the 1980s, a number of Poles from completely secular, assimilated Jewish families asked for baptism. Their story deserves a separate study (see “[Further Research](#)” section).

The impact of the respectability of Catholicism among even Jewish intelligentsia had an unexpected positive consequence for de-assimilation. The readers of articles on theology, both those who did it out of curiosity and the newly converted Jews, read about the Bible and Israel as the chosen people. Even though the approach was Christian, the gate to Judaism could be perceived much more easily than it had been in their earlier lives. As stated by the daughter of a high-ranking Communist politician, who against her father became an active Catholic, “Having had my Christian experiences I can guess what’s the essence of Judaism.”<sup>17</sup> The actual passage to Jewish religious practice was made by only a few, but some connection to the tradition became much easier.

### Interest in Things Jewish

Since the 1970s, the Catholic interest in Judaism has developed in a new way due to the deep change in the official attitude towards Jews proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, its 1965 Declaration *Nostra aetate*. The reception of the new teaching in Poland was slow<sup>18</sup> and far from universal, but it reached the Catholic intellectual circles and ultimately has been widely felt. More generally, since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in Poland in Jewish history, culture, religion, and traditions. The resulting change in atmosphere has had far-reaching consequences for de-assimilation. Poles of Jewish background could feel that

<sup>15</sup> Słonimski was Catholic from birth, but was considered Jewish anyway, which says more about Poland itself than about him.

<sup>16</sup> This was expressed explicitly by Adam Michnik in his book (1977) in which the alliance was proclaimed of the “laic left wing” political opposition with the Church hierarchy.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication during an interview in 2022. The translation here and below is mine.

<sup>18</sup> See Krajewski (2016) for a summary. The meetings of Polish Jews with the Polish pope, described in Krajewski (2020), were enhancing the acceptance of the new teaching by Catholics as well as de-assimilation of Jews.

their attraction to things Jewish fit a general cultural trend. To be sure, it was not a dominant trend in Poland, but it was clearly visible in the intellectual circles important for the assimilated Jews.

The change in the official Catholic teaching was not the only source of the interest in things Jewish. In the 1970s, the post-war baby boom generation began to influence the general scene. Part of the novelty was the Polish variety of the worldwide countercultural revolt. It included interest in minority cultures and could lead to exploring the Jewish—or rather imagined Jewish—one. In Poland, a need to express protest and rejection of the antisemitic campaign of 1968 also played a role. Another element was even more essential, and also specifically Polish. The rejection of the dull, uniform, and stifling reality of the Communist Poland led to mythologizing prewar Poland, its complexity, and colorful richness, and Jews (who else?) served as the best symbol of that pluralistic, better Poland. The Polish Nobel Prize writer Olga Tokarczuk, referring to the 1980s, said “I believe that many people of my generation experienced a similar obsessive interest in things Jewish. As if we were haunted by a half-conscious realization that something was wrong, something was missing around us” (interview for the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* of January 24, 2015).

The earliest visible activity in this vein was organized in the early 1970s by the young adults belonging to the Warsaw Catholic Intelligentsia Club. Annual “weeks of Jewish culture” consisted of cleaning the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, a Catholic mass, and a lecture by an expert or a Jewish personality. Together with the members of the club, their friends participated, including Jews—mostly, to be sure, assimilated ones. Much later in 1988, the Cracow Festival of Jewish Culture appeared, breaking the taboo. It was focusing on music. Soon American and later Israeli top-level performers joined, and the festival has become a major annual event maintaining very high standards. The interest in all aspects of Jewish culture was growing in free Poland in the 1990s. Many other festivals were organized, some good, some rather kitschy, and sometimes unintentionally supporting anti-Jewish stereotypes. At any rate, concerts, lectures, performances, exhibitions, and movie shows abounded. Since 1998, each January 17, the Day of Judaism in the Polish Roman Catholic Church has been celebrated; it also involves many cultural events, not only religious ones. In addition, museums have been created, including Polin, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in Warsaw in 2014 and which has received the highest international museum awards. Last but not least, memorial museums, beginning with the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial, have expanded their impact and included full-fledged Jewish exhibitions.

The high visibility of Jewish motives in the cultural life of Poland was by itself a powerful factor enhancing de-assimilation. The positive message about Jews and Judaism was refreshing for the people distanced from the Jewish traditions and deeply influenced by the pervasive anti-Jewish stereotypes according to which Jews are suspect and Jewish religion is anachronistic. The stereotypes created feelings of shame and fear about one’s Jewish roots, and so if the Jewish culture becomes appreciated by outstanding Polish personalities, it becomes

easier to overcome these negative feelings. At least one can easily learn about the Jews, which can form a first step to de-assimilation.

### **Need for Jews**

The sympathetic interest in the Jewish heritage produced a need for Jews. Cultural and Church events referring to Jews are more authentic if they can include Polish Jews who are sufficiently representative and competent as Jews and, at the same time, speak the present-day Polish language and share the cultural framework of the audience. The demand was growing; the supply was extremely limited. The number of Jews, of any variety, was less than one thousandth of that of Catholics. Precious few were those who would be able and willing to play the role of the token Jews without feeling inadequate. To be “genuine” one has to acquire enough traditional knowledge and live a Jewish life. In the case of deeply assimilated Jews this, could come only through de-assimilation.

Foreign Jews, preferably of some Polish origin, which of course is very common, can also participate, and in some sense things are easier for everyone. Those Jews who speak broken Polish are clearly “them,” obviously different from the audience. However, the Polish Polish Jews introduce an additional element that is appreciated by some and resented by others; they are as competent and involved in Polish life as everyone else, being both “them” and “us.” The potential participants from among the assimilated Jews felt a powerful stimulus to de-assimilate once they felt ready to answer the invitation of philo-Semites and to disregard the rejection by antisemites. My experience is that the more open and public the Jewish involvement, the less threat posed by antisemitism. Moreover, dialogue encounters, both political and inter-religious, strengthen Jewish identity. At the same time, the feeling of belonging to Poland is not weakened, in accordance with the concept of de-assimilation promoted in the present study.

### **Academic Jewish Studies**

University Jewish studies have been steadily expanding since 1989. This has led to high international recognition of some research centers, including the Holocaust studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and Jewish history at the University of Wrocław. Of course, the studies are open to all, and among top researchers, many are not Jewish. For example, among the best Yiddish language scholars there are young women, it seems, with no Jewish roots. The growing importance and high level of Jewish studies provides an important supportive context of de-assimilation.

Young people who have decided to de-assimilate can easily learn at the best universities. They can also become more directly immersed in Jewish life and in Torah study as a result of various educational opportunities that have been opened in Jewish institutions. A few young Poles with Jewish roots choose to learn primarily in synagogue classes. In addition, internet resources are unlimited. All these elements provide a field of possibilities unimaginable to the pioneers of de-assimilation

in the 1970s and 1980s. They appreciated each contact with anyone familiar with the Jewish tradition, each visitor, and each book. One was remarkably helpful—the three volumes of *The Jewish Catalogue: a Do-It-Yourself Kit* (Strassfeld et al. 1973–1976–1980). While it was created within the havurah movement and was aimed at estranged American Jews, its countercultural style and its fusion of tradition and modernity, Hasidism and yoga, was illuminating and inspiring for the Polish de-assimilationists in the pre-internet era.

### Contact with the World

It is obvious that since 1989, contact with the world has been easy. This was new for all Poles who for decades had been meeting so many administrative and financial obstacles when attempting to connect with citizens of other countries. The change also meant the ease of Jewish links, which became increasingly natural. The meetings of committed foreign Jews made everyone aware of the Jewish life to which we could aspire. This was a great help in de-assimilation for all who decided to go ahead. The contact made it easier to overcome the neurotic perception of Jewish identity typical for many Jews in post-war Poland and especially acute in the wake of March 1968 “events.” One psychologist recalled that during her visit in America, it was fairly easy to state, “I am Jewish,” but back in Poland, to say the same in Polish would not be possible. The American experience, however, could be decisive in the process that would eventually lead to the Polish declaration.

Contact with American Jews has been essential, but contact with Israel has been increasingly vital. Whether tourist or family or professional, connections greatly help de-assimilation for those who consider it. A direct influence can be seen in the case of the young Poles with Jewish roots who have participated in organized group visits called Taglit. Many, though not all, have developed a much stronger identity, which was the original aim of the program. To feel connection with Israel is relatively easy, as it does not demand anything specific in terms of involvement. To some Taglit participants, born in the 1980s or later, this feeling is the way Jewishness is expressed. This was almost never the case with former generations of de-assimilationists. Israel was felt to be far away even for those who had families there. This has changed, and close relations have been built. For young people it is natural, but for older ones it was possible only after some initial progress on the path of de-assimilation.

To some Poles assuming a Jewish identity, the State of Israel is less important than the Land of Israel. For them, Judaism is the pillar of their new identity. Passionate religious engagement, however, is rare. Another rare occurrence is the existence among de-assimilationists of “Diaspora patriots” who feel a fundamental distance vis-à-vis Israel with its nationalism and right-wing politics. The approach of ignoring Israel can occasionally be found among young left-wing Polish Jews who are building their identity upon the de-assimilation of their parents.

## Remembering the Holocaust

The legacy of the Shoah has special significance in Poland even though the catastrophe constitutes a major point of reference for Jews worldwide. In Poland it is tangible, as places of mass murder can be found everywhere. Commemorations of the victims and the wartime dramas, like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, remain a fundamental dimension of Jewish life in Poland, and often they take place on the very sites of murder. During the Holocaust each Polish Jew has lost a part of the family, often an overwhelming majority. All categories of Jews join in remembrance.

The personal connection to the Shoah can also support de-assimilation. For many Poles with Jewish roots, the obligation to remember is their main connection to Jewish history. They feel that it is the memory of the Holocaust that makes it necessary to maintain some Jewish presence in Poland. Their attitude is fittingly expressed by the famous 614th commandment formulated by Emil Fackenheim: survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish, in order not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.

Keeping the memory is not enough, however, for de-assimilation. In Poland, in virtually every town there are non-Jewish guardians of memory who cultivate the remembrance of former Jewish presence and its tragic end. Their activities are important for Polish Jews and should be recognized by Jews everywhere, but they cannot replace Jewish presence. This can be done only by Jews, in some sense of the term, who are sufficiently committed. To refer only to the past, however, is not enough. The horror of the Shoah can be a stimulus, but de-assimilation involves a future-oriented approach. Only some Jewish Poles are ready for that.

It must be stressed that de-assimilation is by no means universal. It is only the potential for this evolution that is present in all Poles with Jewish roots. Neither anti-semitism nor messages received at home are sufficient for decisive steps on the path of de-assimilation. To illustrate this, consider a middle-aged member of the Orthodox synagogue in Warsaw who wears Hasidic garb and lives a rather traditional life. He was, however, raised as a Catholic, knew nothing about the family's roots, and as a teenager belonged to a far right antisemitic group. In addition, his twin brother remains Catholic.

## Need to Belong

Finally, there exists a general, psychological factor enhancing de-assimilation. The modern world changes fast, nobody knows to what destination it goes, and at the same time individualism is the highest value, as is the right to choose, and therefore, the need to choose. This leads to "fluidity," lack of roots, frailty of natural communities, and lack of stability.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there appears a need for a stable belonging, and strong identity. This can lead one to aggressive groups promoting racism and nationalism, and to a religious or political cult. One may also be attracted to non-aggressive groups demanding serious criteria of belonging. In both cases, small

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<sup>19</sup> The "liquid modernity" is described, for example, by Bauman in (2000) and his other works.

communities are sought but preferably those that function within a larger framework. Thus, one can be attracted by soccer team fans or by a milieu of vegans eating only local products. Now, it seems that to some Poles with Jewish ancestry this need to belong can be fulfilled by a Jewish involvement.

Belonging to a synagogue, activity in a Jewish organization, sending a child to Jewish school are all such acts in present-day Poland which require determination, as they are anything but obvious. Moreover, they are possible only as a result of some amount of de-assimilation. If motivated by the longing for belonging, which can occur without being fully conscious, such de-assimilation serves the purpose. Through a specific little group it links with an ancient tradition, with the people present everywhere, with the group seen as highly important, even if frequently attacked, and it opens the way to contacting a significant number of interesting and influential individuals. While in Poland Jews form a very small minority, their presence looms large. To some, the satisfaction felt in joining the community can explain, truly or not, the fact that “I always had a vague feeling of being different, I could never identify with the dominant trends.”

## Further Research

De-assimilation, in the sense defined in the present paper, seems to be rare in the course of history. Possible examples include the Spanish *conversos* mentioned in the Introduction. The Zionists before World War II going from Europe to the Land of Israel, then called Palestine, were undergoing a kind of de-assimilation, but it was of a different character. Closer to Poland, some Soviet Jews had been becoming more Jewish since the 1970s. Because numbers were incomparably larger than in East European countries, the process could look different from that in Poland. Of course, the Judaization of Russian Jews immigrating to Israel since the 1990s has been very different, as it has consisted mostly of an adaptation to the Israeli society. Finally, the developments in Central East European states after 1989 seem to parallel those in Poland. Only a detailed study of each case can reveal whether the situation has indeed been similar.

Other general questions include the following: Must de-assimilation be always partial, that is, without abandonment of the culture to which people had assimilated (like the lack of de-Polonization in the present case)? Is it especially intense in the case of Jews? Is it always triggered by a dramatic event (like the March 1968 anti-semitism or 1989 political transformation)?

Coming back to the Polish case, it would be of interest to compare de-assimilation of Polish Jews in Poland with their peers who emigrated in 1968–1969. It would also be good to try to calculate how rare (or not) de-assimilation is among those eligible.<sup>20</sup> This is extremely difficult because of the paradoxical nature of total

<sup>20</sup> Starnawski (2016) describes them up to emigration. Wiszniewicz (2008), Tuszyńska et al. (2018), Grinzwieg Jacobsson (2022), and Sochanska (2022) cover their later lives as well. No scholarly comparison between emigrants and those Polish Jews who stayed in Poland has been made so far.

assimilation which is the point of departure. If truly successful, there is no way to find out and take into account one's Jewishness, and if someone can be put on a list of assimilated Jews, this means that the assimilation is less than total, or else de-assimilation has already begun.

As explained above, contemporary Polish Jews have non-Jewish family members. Some among those Poles of Jewish origin are Catholic from childhood; a number of others became Catholic as adults. Almost all of the latter group decided to ask for baptism in the 1980s when the Catholic Church enjoyed high moral authority in Poland, and young dissidents of Jewish background were taking part in the same oppositional activities as those from Catholic families. Their further attitudes differed widely. Some became disappointed and left the Church in the 1990s, others stayed but felt uncomfortable in the increasingly triumphalist Church of the 1990s, plagued by the sexual abuse scandals in the 2000s, and still others continued to identify with the Church despite everything, as their spiritual development was inseparable from the Catholic circles. In fact, there exists a tiny but remarkable subgroup of those who have de-assimilated to some extent by way of becoming active as Christians. That is, they became more Jewish *because* they became Catholic. They have not become Jewish in any standard sense, but they did begin to understand the message of Judaism and realized the Hebrew roots of the Church, having been exposed to Christian teachings. One such person, Jan Grosfeld, a child of Jewish Communists, has been a leader of the revivalist Roman Catholic Neocatechumenate movement in Poland. He remarked, "It was in the Church that I was becoming a mensch."<sup>21</sup> He has written considerably on the need to preserve the Hebrew roots or a Jewish dimension of the Church (Grosfeld 2018), which is anyway a general position of that movement. There are also cases of the movement out of the Church as a result of the exploration of one's Jewish roots. The best-known example, Romuald Waszkinel or Jakub Weksler, a priest who was over 30 when he learned that he had been a Jewish baby given during the war to foster parents, eventually settled in Israel and slowly moved all the way up to Jewish religious involvement.<sup>22</sup> The category of Catholics with Jewish roots is not uniform and deserves a separate study.

More questions can be posed in the investigation of the concept of de-assimilation and in the realm of the Polish Jews' story as well as other case studies. For example, what is the role of leaders? Who, if anyone, creates patterns that influence others? What is the role of books and other cultural creations? The phenomenon of de-assimilation is numerically limited, yet interesting enough to be studied. It is also providing, at least in the Jewish case, a reason for the hope that assimilation is not necessarily the final stage.

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<sup>21</sup> In an interview conducted by the present author in 2022. He said he became "człowiek" in the sense of a mature human being, which can be rendered by the Yiddish term "mensch."

<sup>22</sup> His story is told in some interviews and films; a book-length account by Rosiak (2013) does not include the last phase of Weksler's life involving full acceptance of Judaism.

## Declarations

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