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THE ATTITUDE OF POLES TOWARDS THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS MINORITY IN TERMS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Nowadays, the reality that we live in is changing extremely fast. For a short time, we have been a member of the European Union, where many different cultures coexist and cooperate with each other and we should follow that rule as well. We start building our democracy from a scratch and get familiar with it again. For that reason this is the perfect moment to create tolerance in ourselves and make allowance to "the others"- other nationalities, cultures, and above all, other religions - especially in Łódź - in the city where the factors such as diversity of cultures, nationality, and religion, are highly visible.

The specialists claim that we are just at the beginning of our journey to tolerance and putting down all forms of religious discrimination. Taking a closer look at the attitude of Poles towards the Jewish religious minority, one could freely point out many paradoxical situations. Here are few of them.

Most of us are doubtful about Jews although hardly anyone has had any chance to meet them. During the 1980s, OBOP (one of the biggest research agencies in Poland) have been surveying the attitude of Poles to other nationalities. The surveys show that the attitude of Poles towards Jews, at that time, was indifferent

(69%). Antipathy was declared by 21% of interviewees and sympathy only by 10%. In the last decade, our attitude towards Jews has deteriorated greatly. First of all, the number of people who were indifferent to Jews considerably decreased and the number of people declaring antipathy increased. At the end of the XXth century, only 23% of Poles defined their attitude towards Jews as positive and 46% as negative. Probably those figures are caused by democracy (sic!) which gives us more freedom to express the negative feelings that have already existed in public opinion.

CBOS (The Public Opinion Research Center) have asked Poles if they had ever had any personal experience with Jews. Surprisingly, almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of the respondents denied having any contacts with Jews. 11% of interviewees did not know whether they had met any Jews and only 25% admitted that they had had experience with Jews.

The fact remains that anti-Semitism in Poland is a phenomenon, which is defined by some observers as "Polish anti-Semitism without Jews".

Another paradox is that there are few people who remember Jewish society which has been present in our history

since our state started to exist. In the IInd century AD, the stripping of Jews of their statehood caused "the great dispersion" and, at the same time, their settlement in Europe. At the end of the Middle Ages, frequent religious and economic persecution forced the Jews to leave countries of the Western Europe. In Poland, the Jews settled because of the encouragement of Polish sovereigns. For instance the Prince of Great Poland, Boleslaw the Pious, granted the Jews a privilege concerned the prince's jurisdiction over the Jews, their economic activity and their relations with Christians. For many centuries the number of Jews in Poland increased. At the beginning of the 20th century the Jewish community numbered about 3 000 000 (10,5% of Poland's population). The Second World War and the tragedy of Holocaust caused the extermination of Jewish society of Poland. It is estimated that nowadays there are only few thousand Jews living in Poland. Despite the catastrophe caused by the war there are still many traces providing us with the fact that Jews were present in many Polish cities and villages.

In spite of that fact only 42% of Poles remember Jewish society in pre-war Poland, 18% claim that the Jews did not live in their town before war and 1/3 of interviewees do not know anything about that fact because they are not interested in it. On the contrary, among those interviewees who claim that there were Jews living in their town before war, only half of them know that there are some memento left after the Jews.

In the *Second Report on Poland*¹ prepared by ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance), legal

instruments which are used in Poland to combat intolerance of religious minorities are estimated positively. Poland has ratified many of international legal instruments, for instance *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1965), *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966), *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (1981). Also Polish law, especially *Constitution* (1997) grants equal freedom to every citizen. There are other legal instruments relating to religion, for instance *Law Regarding the Guarantees of Freedom of Conscience and Belief* (1989) and some articles in *Criminal Code* (1998), *Labour Code* (1996). Although there are many regulations that prohibit any forms of discrimination of religious minorities, we have been still exposed to many of them that happen almost every day. CBOS asked Poles if they could find any forms of discriminations of Jews around them. 55% of interviewees have come across verbal aggression (calling someone "Jew" in negative meaning), 32% point out visual aggression (David's Star on the gallows, insulting graffiti e.g. "Jude raus"), 17% describe "Auschwitzlüge" ("Holocaust denial" - denying the facts relating to extermination of Jews during The Second World War). Furthermore, 13% of respondents have seen anti-Semitic writings (books, brochures and magazines). Only 1-5% of respondents have not been in contact with any form of aggression.

Polish and international law rises in defence of anyone who is discriminated because of their religion. Anyone who is

¹ *Second Report on Poland* adopted on 10 December 1999, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance

willing to fight with anti-Semitism will be supported by Polish and international law. However, according to ECRI's *Report...* many institutions (especially the police and the prosecutor's offices) do not react appropriately to crimes that are motivated by racism and anti-Semitism. In Poland, there is a lack of public awareness and interests in the problems regarding Poles' attitude towards Jewish religious minority – especially anti-Semitism. But it should be noted that some organizations, especially in the non-governmental sector, have recently started to focus more on such issues. There are a few events in Łódź that should be noticed. In March 2000 the local *Gazeta Wyborcza* office in Łódź initiated 'Colourful Tolerance', a campaign that encourages Łódź residents to paint over racist and antisemitic graffiti in the streets of this city. This campaign has been taking place every year since 2000. Another example is the Festival of Dialogue Between Four Cultures which promotes Łódź as the unique city where the dialogue between four nations proved

to be possible. Also the activity of The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation helps to provide the knowledge about the Jewish religious minority. The foundation organizes events, meetings and Hebrew courses which everybody may attend.

The issue of the attitude of Poles towards the Jewish religious minority and anti-Semitism still remains a sensitive one. Remembering the past we should promote education and awareness of the issues of intolerance of Jews.

Badania opinii publicznej wykorzystane w pracy:

Czy Polacy lubią inne narody?, komunikat z badań, 2003, CBOS, Warszawa.

Mniejszości wyznaniowe w Polsce w świadomości społecznej, 1999, OBOP, Warszawa.

Polacy – Żydzi, komunikat z badań, 2000, CBOS, Warszawa.

Stosunek do Niemców i Żydów w badaniach OBOP, 1989, OBOP, Warszawa.

Sympatia i niechęć do innych narodów, komunikat z badań, 2003, CBOS, Warszawa.