

TO THE EDITOR

I have read with great interest the exchange of views between David Engel and Richard C. Lukas concerning historiographical approaches to Polish-Jewish relations (Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Slavic Review*). I support Engel's argument that a more extensive familiarity with related sources would have been helpful in Lukas's analysis. I also agree with Lukas that the Holocaust influences, at least to a certain degree, the writing of Jewish historians. No one can be perfectly impartial. Both Jews and Poles (as well as those who accept their views) perceive and write within their own consensus. It is a special gift of intellectual integrity and personal courage that enables one to transcend and transgress these limits. Such integrity has been displayed recently not by professional historians but by a literature professor and by a journalist. I refer to Jan Blonski of the Jagellonian University and Jerzy Turowicz, editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Both admitted that anti-Semitism was part and parcel of Polish society in interwar Poland and that it affected Polish behavior and particularly Polish attitudes toward Jews during the Holocaust.

In my opinion, only by breaking the barriers of our national and cultural milieu would it be possible to agree upon that painful past "as it really was."

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TO THE EDITOR

As Polish Jews exit the stage of history fewer witnesses and less testimony to their life in Poland before World War II are available. Consequently, many untrue or even bizarre notions about their past are rapidly gaining ground. Particularly popular in the United States is the general myth that in Poland there was total segregation of Poles and Jews. An important outgrowth of this myth is contained in Richard C. Lukas's statement (Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Slavic Review*) that in Poland "few Jews understood, let alone spoke Polish."

I shall not address myself to the myth of total segregation; I am not a sociologist. Lukas's assertion that "few Jews understood, let alone spoke Polish," however, should not be allowed to stand unopposed. It is not only patently false, but also tendentious and potentially damaging to future Polish-Jewish relations.

I regret that Lukas does not indicate what he means by "few." 1 percent? 10 percent? Surely not 25 percent or 30 percent? In the absence of an estimate in such a sweeping statement, I have to translate "few" as "exceptional," "sporadic," "sometimes."

I willingly forgo dwelling at length on the obvious, namely that in Poland there were Jews who were Polish writers, poets, actors, publishers, lawyers, scholars, and scientists. In short, there existed a whole group of Jewish luminaries in Polish culture and this group was representative of a much larger class of Polish-Jewish intelligentsia. Perhaps, according to Lukas, all these people would still be "few."

That a Jewish press in the Polish language existed in Poland is clear to anyone familiar with such newspapers as *Chwila*, *Nowy Dziennik*, or *Nasz Przegląd*. These papers made a profit. Who read them, subscribed to them, made them profitable if not large numbers of Polish Jews? There existed in Poland a fully accredited system of Polish-language high schools leading to the state-approved *matura*. The only concession to Jewishness was that Hebrew was taught as a foreign language in addition to the required Latin and French or German. Religion was taught in Polish. These schools met the stringent requirements of the Polish Ministry of Education and boasted a large number of distinguished faculty (including the renowned physicist Leopold Infeld and the historian Filip Friedmann) mainly because careers in Polish universities were, with few exceptions, practically closed to Jews.

Lukas quotes a rabbi, Joseph Friedenson, who told him "that as a student in a yeshiva in Lublin, he was one of the few students who knew Polish. He spent most of his time interpreting for his Jewish and Polish schoolmates." I am not certain how to interpret the rabbi's words. What schoolmates? Did he interpret for Polish students in the yeshiva or for Jewish students who at-

tended Polish schools without any Polish? Never mind: Lukas has a witness; I too will produce a witness from the same town of Lublin in the same 1930s. My witness is Jerzy Krzyżanowski, professor at Ohio State University, scholar, and Polish writer. In a conversation on 21 February 1988 he told me he remembered participating with boys from the Polish-language Jewish high school in an obligatory military class. True, in Krzyżanowski's class at Stefan Batory Men's High School (private, conservative, exclusive) there were "only" five Jewish students out of twenty. But that was in addition to a similar ratio of Jews to Poles in other men's high schools and in addition to the Polish-language Jewish High School for Men of the type I described above attended only by Jews. If we consider that the Jewish high school graduated a whole class of Jewish students each year and that in other Lublin high schools for men around a quarter of graduates were Jews—Krzyżanowski's estimate (he knew nothing, he said, about women's schools)—then Lukas's "few" are multiplying fast.

No matter. There is a superior witness whose authority, integrity, and honesty cannot be challenged. Polish literature, this mirror of life and customs, tireless chronicler, and at times severe critic, of everything Polish, belies Lukas's statement. Hardly a writer of the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries has not introduced Jewish characters into his or her works. These characters speak Polish in the manner in which Jews spoke Polish in Poland, according to their position, geographic area, and education. To doubt the words of Adam Mickiewicz, Eliza Orzeszkowa, Maria Konopnicka, Gabriela Zapolska, Bolesław Prus, Stefan Żeromski, Władysław Reymont, Stanisław Wyspiański, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Zofia Nałkowska, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and to maintain that Polish Jews are the figment of artistic imagination, and their speech pure fantasy, is tantamount to a rejection of generations of solid, painstaking scholarship. We know, in almost every instance, upon whom these characters were based in life—from Jankiel in *Pan Tadeusz* to Rachela, the innkeeper's daughter, in Wyspiański's *Wesele*. We have easily accessible, annotated editions of Polish classics, such as the *Biblioteka Narodowa* series, where one can inform oneself endlessly, in great detail, about prototypes. These characters do not stand alone. They are portrayed against the background of their Jewish homes and their Jewish communities. Polish authors grew up hearing this speech, and some of them, like Orzeszkowa, made a study of it. Even though this Polish-Jewish life does not exist any more, it will be forever present in Polish literature.

Polish folklore and oral anecdotal material also abound in tales about Jews who usually manage to make a reasonable or skeptical point in the face of some folly of the Polish gentry. This material, particularly popular in the eastern borderlands (*Kresy*) is present in older as well as in more recent memoirs of Polish gentry. (Two of the last chroniclers of gentry life, Waclaw Lędnicki and Michał K. Pawlikowski, were both very fond of it.) These anecdotes are so well known to Poles that here again I hesitate to dwell on them. None of the anecdotal material known to me ever makes the slightest reference to linguistic difficulties between Poles and Jews. Quite apart from folklore and literature, I am intrigued, in view of the history of Jews in Poland, to know how Lukas imagines Jewish tailors, shoemakers, bookbinders, furriers, watchmakers, "manor" Jews on estates, or innkeepers functioned throughout centuries in these traditionally Jewish occupations without Polish.

Lukas's assertion that "those Jews who had some knowledge of Polish often spoke it so poorly they could not pass for Poles during the German occupation" implies that they spoke Polish without fluency and is based upon his feeble understanding of conditions in Poland and under the German occupation. In Poland, as everywhere in the world, "proper" literary Polish was spoken by educated people. Jewish masses in Poland did not speak proper Polish. Neither did the Górali [mountaineers], the Silesians, peasants, or the urban proletariat. Need I remind Poles of Wiech (the pseudonym of Stefan Wiechecki), for many decades Poland's premiere humorist, and the hilarious Warsaw slang of Mr. Piecyk? Mr. Piecyk did not die in the gas chamber because of what Lukas, referring to the Jews, calls "linguistic deficiency." The language of simple Jews, like the language of other groups and strata, had its characteristic features familiar to Poles and easily recognizable. Germans, of course, were not qualified to judge anyone's Polish. If this brand of Polish, usually combined with certain mannerisms and with what in Poland

passed for “Semitic” appearance spelled death, this fact had absolutely nothing to do with “linguistic deficiency” but was solely the result of the ubiquitous presence of blackmailers and informers roaming the Generalgouvernement eager to denounce Jews. As the war progressed and only a few Jews remained in hiding, these same blackmailers and informers almost always turned against other Poles. Virtually all persons in the Polish underground who were caught by the Gestapo were denounced by Poles. The popular saying that “Germans could never catch anyone by themselves” was coined by Poles about Poles, not about Jews.

In Wiech’s stories, written before the war, Jews and Poles speak two versions of the same Warsaw slang. Through this type of Polish, moderately sprinkled with Yiddish, a small number of these Yiddish words (*shiksa* or *meshuge*) entered colloquial Polish. Although most of these words are of Hebrew origin, they were borrowed from Yiddish and not directly from Hebrew. In deference to the speakers of this Polish who perished in the Holocaust, this language is never used in contemporary Polish satire, not even in descriptions of society before the war.

Lukas’s assurance that “virtually every Pole or Jew I interviewed or from whom I received depositions . . . told me that few Jews knew the Polish language” is absurd. I can only counter with a personal observation. In all my life I have never met a Polish Jew who did not know Polish. And no Pole of my acquaintance has ever shared Lukas’s opinion.

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DAVID ENGEL REPLIES TO RICHARD C. LUKAS

Richard Lukas’s response to my criticism of his treatment of Polish-Jewish relations in his book, *The Forgotten Holocaust* (*Slavic Review*, Fall/Winter 1987) calls for some further remarks.

Lukas cannot dodge criticism by arguing that his book was mainly about something other than Polish-Jewish relations or that certain issues on which he expressed definite opinions have “nothing to do” with his subject (“Response,” *Slavic Review*, pp. 581, 583). In the preface to his book (p. ix) he states explicitly that he intends to focus “on how the Poles responded to the German occupation and how they, as co-victims of the Holocaust, got along with Jews during this tragic era.” About a third of his text and notes is about Polish-Jewish relations, as is his entire conclusion.

In order to produce such an extensive statement on Polish-Jewish relations, Lukas ought to be an expert on the subject. My critique showed that he is not. He has mastered neither the existing secondary literature nor anything approaching the entire range of available primary sources.

In his response Lukas contends that “most Jewish scholarship is available in English” and that therefore he need not read Hebrew and Yiddish in order to discuss Polish-Jewish relations expertly (p. 582). His assertion about the availability of most Jewish scholarship in English is simply not true and merely demonstrates his ignorance of the literature of the field.¹ His comment also ignores the existence of large bodies of primary documentation in these languages. Finally, I wonder if Lukas would assert that one could write a serious scholarly book on, say, British-Soviet relations without a knowledge of both English and Russian or on Turkish-Armenian relations without knowing the languages of both these peoples.

Lukas implies that the essential materials in the Schwarzbart archive in Israel are available in London (p. 582). He is misinformed. There are, among other items, eighty-nine files of docu-

1. As Lukas chose to quote from Cantor and Schneider’s primer on historical methodology for undergraduates, I refer him to the same authors’ comments on the inadvisability of reading both primary and secondary sources in translation. N. F. Cantor and R. I. Schneider, *How to Study History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), 101–102. See also their comments on the necessity of mastering the literature of a given field on 95, 179.