

Chad Alan Goldberg

Geneviève Zubrzycki. *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland's Jewish Revival*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 288 pp. ISBN 9780691237237.

*Chad Alan Goldberg, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA.
cagoldberg@wisc.edu.*

Geneviève Zubrzycki, a distinguished comparative-historical and cultural sociologist who studies national identity, religion, and collective memory, has written a fascinating and insightful book, based on a decade of participant observation and interviews in multiple Polish cities and towns, about an astonishing Jewish revival in Poland since the early 2000s. This revival takes various forms: the organizing of Jewish festivals in cities and towns throughout Poland since the mid-2000s, the “popularity of klezmer music,” the “proliferation of Judaica bookstores and Jewish-style restaurants,” the creation of “new museums, memorials, and memory spaces,” the development of “Jewish and Holocaust studies programs in universities,” the publication of books and articles on Jewish topics, and even a “modest but steady number of conversions to Judaism” (p. 8). What makes this Jewish revival “sociologically puzzling” is that it is not driven by Jews (p. 11). To be sure, Poland was home to more than three million Jews before the Second World War, making it then the largest Jewish population in Europe, but “ninety percent of Polish Jewry was exterminated in the Holocaust” (p. 11). While an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 Poles today have some Jewish ancestry (p. 12), only about 10,000 self-identified Jews currently live in Poland. Consequently, Poland’s Jewish revival is “enacted almost entirely by non-Jews” who have taken an ardent interest in Jewish culture and history (p. 11). Zubrzycki therefore describes the revival as an expression of philosemitism: “curiosity and desire to learn about Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish history; to uncover and preserve the remnants of Jewish life; and to memorialize the death of millions of Jews (Polish and non-Polish) murdered on Polish soil” (p. 10). How, Zubrzycki asks, can we understand the meaning of this peculiar Jewish revival “primarily driven by non-Jewish social actors” (p. 13)? And how can we make sense of the seeming contradiction in Poland between right-wing populism, antisemitism, and denial of the involvement of ethnic Poles in crimes against Polish Jews (documented by the historian Jan Tomasz Gross [2001]), on the one hand, and the country’s Jewish revival, on the other hand?

To answer these questions, Zubrzycki situates Poland’s Jewish revival in the context of the country’s current conflict over national identity. “One faction” in Polish society, she writes, “favors a traditional vision of Polish identity crystallized around Catholicism, conservative family values, and a national narrative emphasizing Polish martyrdom and heroism”; in contrast, another faction “promotes progressive values and secularism and questions key tenets of Polish national mythology” (p. 1). Zubrzycki’s central thesis is that “both anti- and philosemitism” are “part of

a single struggle to define what constitutes Polishness" (p. 2). The Jews may have lived historically in what Karl Marx (1973:858) called "the pores of Polish society," but as Marx (1978:32) said about the Jewish God, Jews are the intermediary through which others recognize themselves in a roundabout fashion; or, as the Israeli philosopher Yirmiyahu Yovel (1998:xi) put it, Jews provide others "with a mirror . . . in which to see a reflection of their own identity problems." In the contemporary Polish context, conservatives engage in what the Polish historian Adam Michnik called "magical antisemitism," labeling ideological dissenters as "Jews" and thereby turning them into ethnic outsiders (pp. 19–25). In contrast, progressives engage in "magical philosemitism" (p. 25): they strive to resurrect Poland's Jews in order to challenge "the narrow ethnocultural association of Polishness with Catholicism" and "articulate a civic and secular definition of national identity" (p. 2). "Poland's current ethnic and religious homogeneity," Zubrzycki reminds the reader, is "the result of relatively recent and very violent historical events and political processes" that "the socialist state and the Catholic Church" subsequently "naturalized in the postwar period" (pp. 13–14). A "key motivation" behind the Jewish revival is to "recover what has been lost and erased so as to recreate Poland's multicultural past and thereby build and promote a plural, secular society in and against an ethnically and religiously homogeneous nation-state. . . . Although the diversity that characterized Poland for most of its history is unlikely to return, progressive nationalists see the recognition of this legacy as a platform from which to build a more open society" (pp. 13–14). In short, Polish philosemitism operates as a kind of "aspirational multiculturalism" (p. 13) in which "Poland's Jewish past holds the key to an imagined cosmopolitan future" (p. 14).

Zubrzycki's argument dovetails in some respects with the historian David Nirenberg's influential 2013 book *Anti-Judaism*, but her book is more interesting in how it goes beyond Nirenberg's thesis. What Nirenberg showed with impressive erudition is that gentiles have repeatedly invoked Jews and Jewishness in a wide variety of cultures from antiquity to the present to "make sense of and criticize their world" (pp. 2–3). As Nirenberg documents in extensive detail, the discourse of "judaizing" taken up by contemporary Poles began with Paul the Apostle and periodically reappeared in Christian Europe, most notably in polemics among the early church fathers and again during the Reformation. But if Nirenberg surveys the many instances in the history of Western thought in which Jewishness is made the sign of everything wrong in the world, his work is less helpful for understanding the invocation of Jews as a signifier of admirable or worthy qualities that have regrettably been lost. This is how Zubrzycki extends his thesis. She shows how antisemitism and philosemitism are related to each other and how both discourses instrumentalize Jewishness for gentiles' purposes.

Resurrecting the Jew is divided into two parts. Part 1, "The Great Mnemonic Awakening," examines efforts to find and call attention to traces of former Jewish presence, nostalgia about vanished Jews, and the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Polish memory activists mark the former sites of ghetto walls and demolished synagogues, wear yellow paper daffodils to commemorate the 1943 Warsaw

Ghetto Uprising, erect photographs of Polish Jews and organize Jewish cultural festivals in what used to be the Jewish Quarter of their cities, paint murals celebrating Poland's Jewish past, or cast new *mezuzot* (cases containing parchments inscribed with Jewish religious texts) from the "holes and scars left by the removal of *mezuzot* from the doorframes of former Jewish homes" (p. 48). These practices visually weaken and dilute Catholic hegemony in the urban landscape, "much as the Catholic cross in the public sphere weakened the socialist state's claim of monolithic unity" (p. 57). In another instance of memory activism, the artist Rafał Betlejewski painted the words "I miss you, Jew" under a bridge in Warsaw in 2009. While this act spurred "discussions in the public sphere about collective memory, amnesia, and antisemitism," Zubrzycki finds that the discussions were typically "sanitized," "sentimental," and left unnamed the perpetrators and acts responsible for the disappearance of Polish Jews (pp. 83–84, 86). A chapter about the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews provides a similarly mixed assessment. The museum shows that Poland is not just a Jewish graveyard but a place where Jews dwelled in large numbers and flourished for centuries. In this way, it challenges "the dominant mythology of Poland's intrinsic religious and ethnonational homogeneity" (p. 106). However, it ironically reinforces (in unintended ways) the distinction between Polish Jews and ethnic Poles, "risks turning into a romantic view of Poland's multicultural past," and "does not require the audience to reflect upon difficult issues" (p. 106).

Part 2, "Recovering Jewishness for a Better Polish Future," analyzes both the performance of Jewish culture by non-Jewish Poles and the renewal of Jewish life in contemporary Poland. Zubrzycki explains why a multicultural Poland is imagined through Jews rather than other ethnonational groups (pp. 118, 150–156). In addition, this part of the book includes a thoughtful and nuanced reflection about whether the performance of Jewish culture by non-Jewish Poles is cultural appropriation, that is, "the process through which members of a dominant group not only adopt but also exploit, dilute, trivialize, or even degrade and desecrate elements of a subordinated group's culture" (p. 141). Zubrzycki persuasively argues that "the sheer variety of practices requires more refined conceptual tools to differentiate the various registers of engagement of non-Jewish Poles with Poland's Jewish past and Jewish culture" (p. 143). She also provides an insightful account of the "new Jews" in Poland who have discovered Jewish ancestors in their family trees (a lineage that was often suppressed and hidden) and decide to "recover Jewish identity" (p. 161). This process is complicated by conflicts over different models of and visions for Jewish life and community, tensions arising from the efforts of non-Polish (mostly American) Jews to teach Polish Jews "how to be Jewish" (p. 169), and controversy over Jewish authenticity and unofficial "hierarchies of Jewishness" (p. 170). The experiences of young Polish Jews whom Zubrzycki accompanied during a ten-day trip to Israel are revealing. Ironically, these experiences sometimes made the participants feel more Polish than Jewish.

The book's conclusion, while sympathetic to the progressive agenda that underlies Polish philosemitism, calls attention to the risks it poses for ethnic Poles ("a naïve, complacent" cosmopolitanism that could "curb critical self-examination")

and for Jews (“in order for a multicultural, diverse Poland to exist, the Jew must remain irremediably Other”) (pp. 195–197). As a comparative sociologist, Zubrzycki also aims to draw broader conclusions. “While Poland’s Jewish turn is distinctive,” she writes, “it has lessons and implications well beyond Poland. This study shows how a symbolic category—in this case the Jew, or Jewishness—can serve as a foil against which an exclusive national identity is constructed, as well as the means through which an inclusive, expanded national identity can be articulated” (p. 197). Zubrzycki is concerned about the “continued Othering of Jews” because she worries that distinction implies hierarchy (p. 196). But othering is not only something done to Jews; difference is also something that Jews have valued and asserted. When the American nurse Kitty Fremont tells the Palestinian Jew Ari Ben Canaan in the 1960 film *Exodus* that people are really all the same and the differences between them are made up, he rebuts her: “People are different. They have a right to be different.” Zubrzycki recognizes this, too; she wishes to avoid “making Jews disappear into a civic narrative of ‘Polish citizens’ that erases them from the national landscape altogether.” How, she asks, “can Polish Jews and Jewishness be normalized as distinct, yet Polish, without being instrumentalized?” (p. 196). This dilemma in some form or other has long preoccupied Jewish thinkers in the Diaspora, many of whom have worked to define a pluralistic vision of national identity in which Jews can be accepted as insiders without disappearing entirely. This is “the problem of the Jew,” as the American sociologist Robert Park noted in 1944, but it is not only a Jewish problem; it is also “the problem of Democracy.”

REFERENCES

- Gross, Jan Tomasz. 2001. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. New York: Vintage Books.
- Marx, Karl. 1978. “On the Jewish Question.” Pp. 26–52 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. New York: Norton.
- Nirenberg, David. 2013. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. New York: Norton.
- Park, Robert Ezra. 1944. Review of *Jews in a Gentile World*, by Isacque Graeber and Steuart Hendersson Britt. *American Sociological Review* 9(6):710–711.
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu. 1998. *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.