

JEWS AND THE POLISH CRISIS

The "Jewish Question" has arisen in troubled Poland. That just demonstrates how universally significant the "Jewish Question" can be, even in a country where there are scarcely any Jews left.

There were sizeable Jewish migrations from the West to Poland, starting in the 13th century. The Polish nobility needed help in recovering from the Tartar devastations. Boleslav the Pious issued a model charter of liberties for the Jews in 1264. Casimir the Great extended the provisions of the charter in 1354, and became widely known, by his opponents, as "King of the Serfs and the Jews." He also may have been influenced by the fact that he had a Jewish mistress, Esther.

Conditions, never ideal, may have been a little better for the Jews in Poland than in countries to its West, until the Cossacks of the Ukraine rebelled in 1648, and the Russian Czar invaded Poland on their behalf a few years later. It is estimated that about a hundred thousand Jews were massacred between 1648 and 1658. And the pogroms continued. Nevertheless, over the centuries, Poland, in one or another of its contours, became a major center of Jewish population, and a heartland of Jewish culture and learning.

Only one out of ten Polish Jews survived Hitler. Most of the survivors went to Israel after the war. But there were still about 30 thousand Jews who remained -- until 1968. In that year of crisis in Poland, the ruling Communist Party launched a major anti-semitic campaign. Jews were expelled from the Party, from government, from cultural and economic life; and anti-semitic propaganda flourished. Most of the remaining Jews left for Israel.

Now, at a time of ferment in Poland when many workers, students and intellectuals are trying to restore some measure of dignity to Polish life, the anti-semitic campaign

of 1968 is being raised as a matter of symbolic importance. One group of 21 prominent writers, professors and professionals just published a joint letter which includes these paragraphs:

"The more fruitful will be the turning point through which we are now passing, the deeper our moral regeneration. One element in this must be the clarification of misrepresented and seemingly dead and gone events, which cast a shadow on the atmosphere of public life. To these belongs the problem of Polish-Jewish relations ... For at least 700 years the Jewish minority, which has made a lasting and valuable contribution to the national culture, has lived on this soil. Under the Nazi occupiers, this soil became the common grave of millions of Jewish citizens. Therefore the so-called 'Jewish question' cannot be regarded as concerning only the Jews, who are now very few in Poland ..."

"Anti-semitism is obviously a phenomenon which calls for condemnation whenever it appears but anti-semitism in Poland must evoke a specially sharp condemnation. The words 'March 1968' symbolize an exceptionally painful issue of recent times ... At that time, a public antisemitic campaign was organized from the top. The acknowledgement of this campaign would be at least a partial redress which is required by all who became victims of the hatred that was sown ... and individuals who were slandered are entitled to public rehabilitation ... The subject matter of March 1968 is an example of an event which as a political phenomenon belongs to the past, but it remains alive in its moral dimension."

Thus, the Polish Communist Party's anti-semitic campaign of 1968 is a symbolically critical item for those who want to purge Poland's soul today. And in the months ahead it may represent a point of tension between those Poles and the Russian government whose anti-semitic campaign proceeds unashamedly.