

The indelible stain of hate

Donald Snyder | Mar. 6, 2014

A majority of respondents in a recent Polish national survey believe there's a Jewish conspiracy to control international banking and the media. Yet, 90 percent of Poles say they've never met a Jew.

The study, recently published as a report titled "Attitudes Toward Jews in Poland," was conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice at Warsaw University and compares anti-Semitism in 2009 and 2013. Its findings were presented to the Polish Sejm, or parliament, on Jan. 9 by Michal Bilewicz, the center's director. Bilewicz, an assistant professor on the faculty of psychology at the University of Warsaw, is co-author of the report.

Belief in a Jewish conspiracy flourished in Poland between the two world wars, spearheaded by ultra-nationalists. In the 1930s, Jewish students and intellectuals were beaten. Stores owned by Jews were vandalized. Government legislation restricted Jewish access to universities and some professions. Jewish students were segregated at Warsaw University.

One finding is that the belief in a Jewish conspiracy remains high — 63 percent in 2013 — and relatively unchanged from 2009 when 65 percent of respondents held this belief.

The study also found an increase in more traditional forms of anti-Semitism, such as blaming Jews for the murder of Jesus Christ and the belief that Christian blood is used in Jewish rituals. Belief in these ideas increased from 15 percent in 2009 to 23 percent in 2013.

Poland's archly conservative Roman Catholic church has historically been blamed for generating this traditional form of anti-Semitism. Bilewicz's study, however, finds that anti-Semitism is equally common among believers and those who are not religious. Church attendance has declined slightly between 2009 and 2013.

Others, like cultural anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, believe the Catholic church continues to breed anti-Semitism. Tokarska-Bakir, a professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences, has been investigating the persistence of blood libel beliefs. Hard core anti-Semites believe Jews kidnap Christian children to use their blood for rituals. She said in an email that the blood libel remains an important element of the region's anti-Semitism. It's also her contention that since the re-introduction of Catholic religious classes in the nation's public schools with the fall of Communism in 1989, students are exposed to lessons that are permeated with anti-Semitism.

Rafal Pankowski, who teaches political science at the Collegium Civitas, a private college in Warsaw, charges that Radio Maryja, a far-right Catholic movement, is "the single most important voice in the Roman Catholic church." Radio Maryja openly agitates against the allegedly corrupting influence of western Europe and the subversive role of Jews and Freemasons. Pankowski added, "The majority of the Polish bishops today are supporting Radio Maryja."

In an email, Bilewicz said that most members of the Polish parliament praised the study and many suggested education measures to fight prejudice. The only skeptical voice, he said, was that of Dorota Arciszewska-

Mielewczyk, a center-right Law and Justice Party member, who suggested that Polish Jews are represented by the Knesset rather than the Polish parliament.

In a phone interview, Arciszewska-Mielewczyk told NCR through an interpreter, that her remarks were taken out of context. She said she had expressed her hope that representatives from the Knesset would come to Poland and join the campaign to stop calling the Nazi camps in Poland "Polish concentration camps." She said that a Jewish group that was present when the center's report was delivered had a "negative and allergic reaction" and claimed they had nothing to do with the Knesset." She said she then asked for clarifications about the Knesset as representing the Jewish nation in the world.

Her remarks about the Knesset reveal a belief that the Israeli national legislature represents all Jews in the world. And her comments about "Polish death camps," according to Bilewicz, were similar to those of right wing politicians who share an obsession about the innocent character of the Polish nation during the Holocaust.

Another of the study's findings is that the Lublin and Lodz provinces in southeastern Poland are the most anti-Semitic regions of the country. This is where the largest Jewish communities existed before the war, and where the ruins of many synagogues still stand. But today there are no Jews left.

"It's worse there than in the western parts of Poland," Bilewicz told me in a telephone interview. He said hundreds of cemeteries in the region have been desecrated.

According to Bilewicz, the high level of anti-Semitism in this part of Poland explains why the legacy of the former Jewish presence has been so badly neglected. It's anti-Semitism without Jews. "We know that it is based on a very deep anti-Semitism that is so embedded in people's minds that they don't consider it problematic," he said.

Before the Holocaust there were 3.2 million Jews in Poland, compared with an estimated 10,000 Jews today.

"Many anti-Semites hate Jews whether they are here or not," said Zusanna Radzik, a devout Catholic who supervises the School of Dialogue, a program intended to recapture the lost history of the Jewish presence in Poland. According to Radzik, the biggest news in the center's survey was the increase in traditional anti-Semitism. She believes it's always existed, but that Poles now feel more comfortable expressing it.

Despite these high levels of anti-Semitism, there are signs of hope.

The official opening of the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews is scheduled for October this year. The City of Warsaw and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage financed its construction. The museum's exhibits show the Jewish contributions to Polish life during the more than 1,000 years that Jews have lived in Poland. Workshops for students are already under way.

Radzik's School of Dialogue also seeks to recover Poland's Jewish past. It deploys educators throughout Poland to make students aware of the places in their towns where Jews once lived and worked and where there were synagogues and mikvehs. The school also teaches young Poles about Judaism.

The school operates under the auspices of the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, a Polish non-profit organization that fights anti-Semitism and works to foster better relations between Poles and Jews.

The opening of a new Jewish Community Center in Warsaw last October was another step toward the revival of Jewish life in Poland.

[Donald Snyder is a freelance writer who worked at NBC for 27 years as a news producer. He retired from the network in 2003.]

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