

# March 1968

## DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE

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By KONSTANTY GEBERT

One of my favorite jokes tells of a Jewish banker in Imperial Austria-Hungary who, upon learning that his son has been sentenced to ten years in jail for “Socialist activities dangerous to the State,” refused to grant a long-negotiated loan to the Imperial government. A high official tried to placate him with assurances that the sentence would be commuted, but the banker replied: “That is not the point. I will not entrust my money to a State which is scared of my Yosele.” And although the events of March ’68 in Poland are no laughing matter, one is tempted, looking back on them, to adopt a similar attitude: whatever the “Yoseles” did then seems less important and less revealing than the State’s reaction to their protest. Even today, March ’68 remains a politically sensitive topic, about which a consensus has yet to emerge. This is not due to a lack of information about what happened, but rather to the fact that March ’68 still means different things to different people.

The facts are clear. The suppression of the Warsaw production of a classical patriotic play, *The Forefathers*, for its supposedly anti-Soviet fla-

vor, triggered student demonstrations. The 19th-century drama was, in fact, anti-Czarist; its suppression, and the justification given, shows how cavalier — and paranoid — government treatment of the arts and of free expression in general had become. Such government policies were the underlying cause of student unrest.

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Police crushed demonstrations, which had followed the suspension from the University of two student leaders, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer. They were accused of “espionage” — that is, of leaking information on repression to a foreign correspondent. In a bizarre turn of events worthy of Orwell, neither Michnik — *Solidarność* leader and, after 1989, founder and editor of “*Gazeta Wyborcza*” — nor Szlajfer — after 1989 a diplomat — were invited by President Lech Kaczyński, who considers them political enemies because of their youthful left-wing involvement, to the official ceremonies of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March events. Making them non-persons again, and at the anniversary of the events their fates had launched, generated widespread outrage. “For great merits there can only be great ingratitude,” wrote veteran

journalist Leopold Unger, himself a March émigré.

Back in 1968, police and “worker activists” proceeded to attack a protest meeting and Warsaw University went on strike. Other universities followed suit, and a wave of student protest swept the country. For most observers, student unrest seemed to fall straight out of the blue. It had, however, been preceded by simmering dissent in the academic community and in student organizations, where young people — nicknamed “revisionist toddlers” — criticized Party policies in the name of “true Socialism.” Many of them came from Communist and Jewish families, and that became of crucial importance in the campaign of repression which followed the student strikes.

From the early Sixties on, the political police had secretly been accumulating thousands of files on leading personalities in the Party and State administration, culture, science, the national economy and the media. The subjects’ religious origins fell under scrutiny, sometimes as far as two generations back, and any trace of “Jewish blood” was scrupulously noted. The campaign, which in time assumed nationwide proportions, was designed to single out candidates for blacklisting, and thus ensure the possibility of rapid advancement for “loyal comrades.” This was expected to happen within the context of a major political upheaval. A new nationalistic and authoritarian political faction, led by Minister of Internal Affairs Mieczysław Moczar, intended to take effective control of the party and oust the “vacillating” and “flabby” regime of Communist party leader Władysław Gomułka.

The student strikes and demonstrations gave Moczar his opportunity. Practically overnight, articles appeared in newspapers nationwide denounc-

ing the student movement as the creation of “Zionist, anti-Polish and anti-Socialist trouble-makers.” The witch hunt began. Student activists with Jewish surnames found themselves branded as members of a “Fifth Column,” which — said the newspapers — was plotting, with the aid of West German and Israeli intelligence, to bring Communist leaders of Jewish origin, compromised during the Stalinist period, back to power. The charge, however absurd, can be understood as a psychological projection of what the real plotters — the Moczar faction — were in fact doing.

The students were completely taken aback. In all their statements they had gone to great pains to explain that they were not working against the system, but simply trying to improve it; they expected that their demands would at least be heard. The gross falsification by officialdom of the nature and aims of the movement was a turning point in their political maturation. Activists realized that the press was lying and that foreclosed any meaningful dialogue. In any case, they were in jail before long.

In the first outburst of massive repressions since the Fifties, dozens were jailed, hundreds expelled, thousands interrogated, intimidated and harassed. That experience left its mark on an entire generation; twelve years later, the young intellectuals of March ’68 were among the driving forces of “Solidarność.” For them, March ’68 still represents the first stirrings of the mass social movement which, through the successive stages of the fledgling opposition of the Seventies, then “Solidarność” and the re-emergence of an independent civil society in the Eighties, fought to liberate Poland from Communist rule.

But the repression of the student movement

was only the first round. The Moczar faction's next move was a nationwide campaign of purges to eliminate the "Zionists" from national life. The offensive had a double thrust: to gratify the career aspirations of Moczar's "young wolves" and to shake and topple the Gomułka establishment. Until then, the aging leader appeared unaware of the real motives of the campaign and even cooperated with it, using the expression "Fifth Column" and demanding that "Polish citizens of Jewish origin choose between their loyalty to Poland or Israel." Now he was going to reap the benefits.

In factories, offices and institutions nationally, sometimes even without the prior knowledge of the management, "anti-Zionist" meetings were held. (In oral discourse, the term used was the more appropriate "odzydzanie," i.e. "getting rid of Jews" as in "getting rid of vermin"). When Poland's then Foreign Minister, the ex-Socialist Adam Rapacki, learned that such a meeting was to be held in his ministry, he resigned in disgust. (Other high officials, including President of the Council of State Edward Ochab, soon followed suit). People with Jewish-sounding names were called on to condemn "Zionism" and incriminate "Zionists" — and usually lost their jobs even if they did. Overnight they were fired, expelled from organizations, threatened with eviction from their state-owned apartments, publicly branded as enemies. Then they were "actively encouraged" to give up their Polish citizenship and emigrate. According to recently

released official data, at least twenty thousand did so in the first year of the campaign.

In an article published 20 years ago, Polish intellectual Jacek Kurczewski summed up the climate of the time this way: "In March, the weather was disgusting, the people were disgusting, and I am disgusted by the very memory of it." The campaign soon ceased being a sordid but limited political struggle and developed its own momentum of hate, drawing from the well-springs of traditional Polish anti-Semitism. In the minds of its participants, it became an almost apocalyptic struggle between Good and Evil. "The mechanism of Zionist propaganda," said the introduction to an officially published book on that subject, "is imbued with extremely chauvinistic, nationalistic and exterministic content... Herein resides Zionism's greatest menace, in its destructive force, in its demolishing of everything that Europe has created of beauty and of value for all

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humanity." Again, a projection. It was the "anti-Zionists" accomplishing just that.

But the remnants of Polish Jewry, forced to flee the land they considered also theirs, could not engage in psychological hair-splitting. For them, the campaign of hate was a throwback to the not very distant past of pogroms and genocide. Anti-Semitic trash flourished — including the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" — and, although physical harassment was rare, some Jews felt that their survival might be at stake. So they emigrated, taking with them memories of humiliation and

hate. What made the campaign even more painful — and absurd — was the fact that, with the exception of a relatively short period in the Fifties, Jews had always been free to emigrate, and practically all those who wanted to had already done so. Those expelled in '68 considered themselves Poles, and had contributed in no small measure to Polish scientific, cultural and social life. Most of them, after leaving Poland, chose to establish themselves not in Israel (only about 25% ultimately did), but in other countries, especially the USA, France and Scandinavia, where they tended to blend with the Polish rather than the Jewish diaspora.

For them, then, March '68 was a period of shame and hate, a disgrace to the country they loved, and which many, even now, consider their homeland. Banned until recently from returning, even as citizens of the countries which accepted them, they remained involved in the vicissitudes of Poland's tormented political life. The young generation founded emigré centers, published reviews, and became a crucial factor in organizing support for "Solidarność" before, and especially after Jaruzelski's coup.

But what of the overwhelming majority of Poles? Those who were not racially repressed, but witnessed the witchhunts and perhaps lost friends forced to flee? What did March '68 mean for them? Here the picture becomes more complex. Without public opinion polls, we must speculate and rely on impressionistic evidence but the question is too important to be ignored.

The Jews were not the only group who suffered mass repression, though they were the most visible one. The Polish intelligentsia as such was also singled out for public contempt, for it had bravely

supported the student movement and its demands for freedom of expression in culture, science, and the arts. It was by no means only Jews who were expelled from universities, nor did police truncheons discriminate between Aryan and non-Aryan heads. The purges followed a disturbingly familiar pattern, which in the past had victimized other groups singled out as "enemies of the State": members of the wartime non-Communist Resistance, peasants who refused to be collectivized, Catholics who took their faith seriously. Now it was the intelligentsia's turn. Catholic members of the Diet issued a courageous protest, and the Church itself protested against the brutal and unwarranted repression. Because of these memories 1968 is included in the series of symbolic dates — 1956, 1970, 1980 — that mark the turning points of recent Polish history. One of the monuments erected in 1980 shows these four dates chiseled in stone, under the protective wings of the crowned Polish eagle. Most Poles would leave it at that.

But the story was not that simple. None of the protests against the repression which followed the student demonstrations explicitly condemned anti-Semitism. Fear was not a factor — the act of protesting, in itself, was reason enough to expect repression. Rather, the failure to mention the Jewish question testified to a deep-rooted suspicion that there was a grain of truth in the authorities' wild allegations, that the Jews somehow deserved to be blamed. If this appears outrageous at first glance, one must remember that some Jews fired and expelled in '68, especially those in the military and the police, bore their share of responsibility for the Stalinist outrages of the Fifties. In the past they had participated in hate campaigns,

but on the side of the persecutors, and their downfall was seen by many as a case of delayed justice. That opinion, however, is morally untenable: not only because the accusers themselves shared in the guilt of past outrages, but because the only crime of the new victims was their Jewishness. In a wry Warsaw comment, they were “of Zionist extraction.”

Many Poles conveniently overlooked this fundamental difference. The hate campaign never really became popular — anything instigated by the authorities was inherently suspect — but it was not really condemned either. Most people saw the purges as yet another struggle between different varieties of Communists, not a subject of concern for those who never asked to be governed by these Communists in the first place. If anything, the much-publicized nationalism of Moczar’s faction elicited some grudging sympathy from a people long thwarted in its national aspirations.

But such an attitude ignored two crucial considerations. First, the vast majority of victims were probably not even Party members, and only a negligible number could in any way be held responsible for Poland’s political plight. Most were ordinary people who had the simple misfortune of bearing Jewish-sounding names. In a typical case, an obscure engineer named Judenberg was summarily fired from a menial job to fulfill the necessary quota of purged “Zionists”; he was later rehabilitated when he managed to prove his German — and not “Zionist” — extraction. People like him, along with their families, were made to suffer for

crimes committed by their persecutors.

Also, the very concept that non-involvement was possible betrays serious weaknesses. The purges were supposedly conducted in the interest of the Polish nation, and the silence of the Polish people translated into acquiescence. Two groups, however, have come to terms with this legacy. The March ’68 campaign broke the back of the traditional anti-Semitism of large segments of the Polish intelligentsia and of the Church. The soli-

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arity of the persecuted intellectuals and Jews along with the Church’s moral reflection on the roots of social evil created a new attitude. That development was responsible for heightened interest and sympathy for all things Jewish, facilitating Poland’s “Jewish revival” of the Seventies and Eighties. It became particularly important during the “Solidarność” period when all kinds of suppressed social attitudes — including residual anti-Semitism — came out into the

open. The leading exponents of “Solidarność” immediately condemned anti-Semitism, and although it added fuel to some pre-existing conflicts within the independent trade union, and continues to rear its head now and then in the opposition, anti-Semitism never became an issue in its own right due to the shock of ’68.

This moral factor was particularly evident in 1981 when the truth about March ’68 could finally be aired in public. Warsaw University organized a symposium on the subject, a commemorative plaque was unveiled, and *inter alia* the evil of anti-Semitism was condemned explicitly and without fudging.

At the opposite end of the social spectrum stands another group, with diametrically opposed perception of what happened then. A generation of apparatchiks that owed its rapid advancement to the purges, saw March '68 as "the great leap forward." From General Wojciech Jaruzelski — who in 1968 replaced General Marian Spychalski, a suspected Jew, as Minister of Defense, and who eventually became in the Eighties Poland's military dictator — down to many a provincial Party secretary or university lecturer, thousands of former loyal functionaries of the Party-State had skeletons in their closets. And though they no longer, after the fall of Communism and the political and generational changes which followed, played any significant role on the national stage, some of their legacy endures.

This was particularly true of the political police, which had emerged as the sole victor after Moczar's bid for power. The contender himself was crushed. At the height of the campaign the powerful Silesian Party boss, Edward Gierek, threw his support behind Gomułka and probably saved him, only to succeed him two years later. The political police, however, emerged more powerful than ever, and the mastermind of the "Jewish files," Captain Walichnowski, was as late as 1989 a general and the head of the Ministry of the Interior Academy for promising officers. The police and other anti-Semitic and unscrupulous apparatchiks became one of the country's decisive political forces: the country felt their fist in the military coup of December '81. Even when Communism was already dying, their political power was still felt when in 1988, in a spectacular public relations gesture, Jaruzelski's regime announced its decision to repudiate the legacy of

'68. Due to stonewalling by those whose political past would have been exposed, what was initially publicized as a political breakthrough became essentially a half-hearted overture toward Israel, and not a thorough reappraisal of the past. Jaruzelski himself was then above the fray, but others felt that their political legitimacy was at stake, and the authorities rushed Vice-Prime Minister Rakowski to a meeting of provincial apparatchiks to make an abject laudatory speech to quell their rising discontent. Anti-Semitism was finally officially condemned, and its ravages denounced, but the campaign's political mechanism remained untouched, and the assessments made of the situation then were reaffirmed.

Even the fall of Communism did not break the backbone of the generation of the victors of 1968. They could be seen, years later, in prominent positions in post-Communist President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's administration, but also in the ranks of the anti-Communist parties.

In retrospect, the immediate political impact of '68 may seem relatively minor. Unlike the other three dates chiseled in stone — 1956, 1970, and 1980 — it was not a political breakthrough, but had it not occurred, would Polish history have followed much the same course? Jacek Kuroń, the veteran opposition activist, thought differently. "Had there been no March '68, "Solidarność might have ended up anti-Semitic," he believed. He might well have been right. An old, pre-war and anti-Communist anti-Semite, years after 1968, had complained bitterly to me that "the Commies can ruin everything, even such a good thing as anti-Semitism." In fact, by making it their banner, the Communists had denied it to those whose hatred of Communism was even greater than of the Jews.

But what makes March '68 important still today is its continuing impact on the attitudes of those involved, the way it has shaped — and deformed — mentalities. There can be no retribution or compensation for the evils done. But for many reasons, a thorough reappraisal of that “time of disgust” remains, for many, a thing of the future. As late as 1989, for example, the mastermind of the “Jewish files,” Captain Tadeusz Walichnowski, now a general, headed the Interior Ministry’s academy for promising officers. Others could be seen, years later, in prominent positions in post-Communist President Aleksander Kwaśniewski’s administration, but also in the ranks of the anti-Communist parties.

After 1989, the condemnation of the '68 campaign became official and in fact accepted by most, if not all, of the Poles. Unsolved issues remained, however, the main one being how to compensate for the suffering of that “time of disgust.” Warsaw University officially condemned the purge, explicitly calling it anti-Semitic, and offered apologies to its victims; other Polish academic institutions acted similarly. Though many émigrés of 1968 wanted nothing from the country that had treated them so shamefully, others gladly seized the opportunity to reestablish a bond they still held dear. For them, regaining the Polish citizenship they had unfairly been stripped of became an expected symbolic gesture. They believed, quite rightly, that the cancellation of their citizenship had been illegal, and that it was up to Poland, not themselves, to take action to have it corrected. They expected Poland

to simply state that their citizenship had never expired. This, however, turned out to be impossible for a number of bureaucratic, but also political reasons: no uniform procedure could be adopted, as the legal circumstances under which they had been stripped of their citizenship apparently were not uniform. The best President Kwaśniewski,

who was the first to try and correct this injustice, could do was to set up a fast track for action for them. Their citizenship could be reconfirmed, legal circumstances permitting, or bestowed on them again; but the red tape was to be cut to a minimum. The final resolution of the problem had to await action by his successor, President Lech Kaczyński, and PM Donald Tusk, taken on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March events. Though bitter political enemies on all other issues, these two ex-Solidarność activists joined their efforts to make the stripping of the March émigrés of

their Polish citizenship finally annulled. Quite a few émigrés, however, did not wait to have their citizenship back before returning to Poland to visit or, occasionally, to work and permanently resettle there.

When Poland joined the EU in 2004, what had been primarily a moral issue became a practical one as well: a Polish passport opened the possibility of legal residence — and work — anywhere in the E.U., something that many young Jews in Israel and elsewhere in the non-European Diaspora noted with considerable interest. In Tel Aviv, but also in crisis-stricken Buenos Aires, queues started to form in front of Polish consular offices, which

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soon became swamped with hundreds of applications from '68 émigrés. Presidential promises notwithstanding, the procedure still was time-consuming — and also emotionally draining. “I’m doing this only for my children,” a middle-aged woman waiting for her turn in front of the consulate on Soutine Street in Tel Aviv said. “Myself, I would never set foot there again, but my children want to live in Paris.”

In Poland itself, the anti-Semitic legacy of March '68 endured too, and resurfaced when new political and religious Polish-Jewish conflicts appeared after 1989. It blended with the much older and more deep-rooted legacy of pre-war and post-war anti-Semitism, creating a poisonous climate among part of Polish public opinion. As a

result, anti-Semitic rhetoric reappeared, and made its mark on public debate.

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