Chapter 23

The Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Warsaw after the Holocaust: A Case Study of a Building and Its Residents

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In 1948, with the Polish capital still in ruins after its wartime destruction, a handful of Jewish families began moving into a once-elegant apartment building at 16 Ujazdowskie Avenue in the heart of Warsaw. Three years earlier, the parents were among the remnants of Polish Jewry who emerged from forests and hiding places, were freed from Nazi camps, or returned from wartime exile in the Soviet Union. Now, as ten families of Jewish background moved into the building’s apartments in 1948 and the following two years, the parents brought with them nine infants born in the war’s early aftermath and two Jewish children who were adopted after surviving in hiding in L’viv. Eight other children were born just before or during the war in Poland, the Soviet Union and France. By the time the last family moved there in 1950, Jewish residents lived in ten of the building’s twenty-three apartments.

The families’ common address resulted from the social, political, and professional ties that connected one neighbor to another. Parents in all ten families worked for publishing institutions of the postwar Polish government, and in five of those families, they were founding editors and directors of the postwar Polish communist party’s ideological publishing house, Książka i Wiedza [Book and Knowledge]. The neighbors shared bonds of political passion and publishing work, friendship and casual acquaintance, and a common Jewish background that led to an understanding of where they had come from and what they had lost during wartime.

1 The postwar communist party’s ideological publishing house was known as Książka [Book] until the fall of 1948, when it absorbed the Polish Socialist Party publishing house, Wiedza [Knowledge], to become Książka i Wiedza [Book and Knowledge]. That change followed the dissolution and absorption of the Polish Socialist Party into Poland’s communist party, called the Polish Workers’ Party, to form the Polish United Workers’ Party. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the communist party’s publishing house as Książka i Wiedza regardless of time period.
The Jewish parents at 16 Ujazdowskie Avenue were entirely secular, nearly all of them radically so. Although they did not hide their Jewish roots from their children, they distanced themselves from that identity in postwar Poland. Yet the spaces they shared within the walls of their apartment building reflected the ties that continued to connect them with other Jewish families. The common setting of their homes, schools, social circles, and workplaces preserved the presence of the Jewish past in everyday life.

The building's Jewish families were not typical of Poland's Jewish population before or after the Holocaust, since nearly half of the parents were Communists. Nor were their networks exclusively Jewish. The connections that brought together the Jewish families at 16 Ujazdowskie Avenue included some of their non-Jewish neighbors, among them one who was involved in Communist underground circles that provided help to Jews during the Holocaust. But their ideology amplified the secularizing influences that shaped postwar Polish Jewry more broadly. The families' histories underscore the paths by which Polonizing Jews sought entrance into nineteenth- and twentieth-century Polish society as well as the ambiguous fate of those aspirations. Despite the drastically reduced size of the Polish Jewish population after the Holocaust, the early postwar pogroms, and the antisemitic politics that prompted periodic Jewish emigration waves, remnants of Polish Jewry continued to live, work and raise their children in Poland. Their gradual integration into Polish society over the course of the postwar generations coexisted with the antisemitism and emigration that underscored the limits of integration and the informal nature of communities that was central to the reconstruction of Jewish life in Poland after the Holocaust.

If, as Jacob Katz argued, the greater role that the distant past played in traditional Jewish life deepened the dislocations of modernity, then the rupture with the past in Warsaw after the Holocaust was even deeper, and the changes more rapid, than during the more gradual transformations over the course of prewar modern European Jewish history. When we look at postwar Polish Jewry not as a negligible population entirely cut off from prewar Jewish life, but rather as one that underwent accelerated transformations as a result of the Holocaust—in size, communal and cultural identifications, language and other factors—then we can begin to place the postwar period into a broader Jewish historical context.

In postwar Poland, as in Western and Central Europe in previous periods, the transformation for many Jews from shared spaces associated with observance and institutions, to informal spaces as a boundary of community—whether literal (e.g., workplaces or an apartment house) or figurative (e.g., social