

FEATURE STORIES

30 Years of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University

From the Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland to the Institute of Jewish Studies

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This academic year we are celebrating 30 years of Jewish studies at the Jagiellonian University. To recognize the history of Jewish studies in Kraków and some of its achievements, we organized two conferences dedicated to our founders, Prof. Józef Gierowski (Nov. 23-24, 2016) and Prof. Chone Shmeruk (May 24, 2017; [see p. 48](#)). Other celebratory events include presentations by our graduates and meetings of the alumni. Here I would like to touch on some history and describe the current situation.

The Beginnings of Jewish Studies

Efforts at the Jagiellonian University to arouse student and academic interest in Jewish studies began at about the same time as the initial steps at Polish-Jewish understanding were taking place on the international stage, such as conferences at Columbia and Oxford universities and the creation of *Polin: Journal of Polish-*

Jewish Studies. In 1980 Prof. Jacek Majchrowski, now mayor of Kraków, organized a conference on the Bible in world religions, inviting Rabbi Dr. Izaak Lewin. In the 1983/84 academic year Prof. Jerzy Wyrozumski, Prof. Jan Małecki, Dr Tomasz Gąsowski, and Dr Andrzej Link-Lenczowski started a series of open lectures on the history of Polish Jews at the Institute of History. Professor Józef Gierowski later recalled that “the numbers of those interested exceeded our wildest expectations.”

At the beginning of the 1980s Prof. Gierowski, then rector of the Jagiellonian University, conducted discussions with representatives of academic centers abroad in an attempt to match foreign models and experiences to Polish reality. An event which brought a veritable avalanche of consequences was the visit in 1984 of Prof. Chone Shmeruk and students from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to the Jagiellonian University.

Professor Gierowski recalled his meeting with them. “With several colleagues I welcomed the whole Israeli group at a meeting in Collegium Maius. We got on famously. Shmeruk possessed so much warmth and sincerity that quickly the formality of the meeting turned into an informal direct exchange of views.” Shmeruk’s visit and his remarks about the creation of the Centre for Research into the History and Culture of Polish Jews at the Hebrew University “gave direction to our future undertakings.”

The young Israeli academics remember it as a breakthrough in their academic careers. According to David Assaf, today a professor and head of the Institute for Studies into Polish Jewry and Polish-Israeli Relations at the University of Tel Aviv, the meeting “was one of the formative experiences in my life. Since then, tens of thousands of Israelis have been to Poland. But at the time, relations between the two

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countries were in their early stages, and this was the first real contact between Israeli and Polish scholars since the Holocaust. The encounter with Poland (then still under Jaruzelski’s martial regime) and its Jewish sites made an incredibly strong impression on me, a young Israeli who had grown up in a traditional home, with Yiddish-speaking parents originally from Poland, but whose ears were not tuned to anything that carried the flavor of *Galut* [the Jewish diaspora].”

The aforementioned conference in Oxford, also in



Department of Jewish Studies on Batorego Street 12, Kraków, 1986-2010

1984, with the participation of Jagiellonian University professors Jan Błoński, Józef Gierowski, and Jacek Majchrowski, contributed to the decision of the university senate to establish a center for Jewish studies. A senate resolution of June 1986 created the Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland – the first university institution of this kind in Poland.

Prof. Gierowski, who became the center’s director, attempted to endow it with an interdisciplinary character from its inception. Activities at the center began with the international conference “The Autonomy of Jews in the Polish Commonwealth,” the first conference since World War II devoted to such a subject at any Polish university. In the inauguration address Gierowski declared that “the time has come for

reliable research into the past of Jewish society with the aim of defining the history of this mutual interaction without bias and emotion.” He saw his mission as “the launching and marking out of new directions for research” as well as supporting academic work at the graduate and post-doctoral levels on the broadly understood subject of the history of Polish Jews.

This vision and program has been systematically developed. Activities concentrate on documentation – bibliographies and archival inventories, the organization of conferences and seminars, and offering public lectures for university audiences. The staff members have assisted in the creation of new institutions that promote Jewish studies in Poland, such as the Centre of Jewish Culture in Kraków. On the initiative of Prof. Gierowski the Commission on the History and Culture of Jews was created at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Arts PAU, and on the

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initiative of the center’s staff the Polish Society for Jewish Studies was formed in 1996. Thanks to the creation and activities of the Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland, the Jagiellonian University became a leading institution in the field of research into Jews in Poland and Polish-Jewish relations.

From Department to Institute

The breakthrough in the organization of Jewish studies occurred in 2000 when the Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland

was transformed into the Department of Jewish Studies, which became an independent unit within the Faculty of History. Prof. Edward Dąbrowa was appointed the first head of the department.

From its inception the Department of Jewish Studies offered BA and MA programs in history with a specialization in Jewish studies. Courses included the history of ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible, contemporary Hebrew and Yiddish literature, the history of Jews in Poland and modern Israel and the Diaspora, the history of Judaism, the Holocaust, and Jewish culture and heritage, as well as Hebrew and Yiddish language classes.

In 2012 the Department of Jewish Studies was elevated to become the Institute of Jewish Studies, which soon moved from Batorego Street 12 in the city center to Józefa Street 19 in the heart of the Jewish quarter in Kazimierz. This move gave us more space and placed us next to kindred institutions. Fourteen

faculty members and three administrative staff run the institute, which has three departments. The Department of Jewish History is directed by Prof. Adam Kaźmierczyk, the Department of Jewish Culture by Prof. Leszek Hońdo, and the Department of the History of Judaism and Jewish Literatures by Associate Prof. Michał Galas, who in 2016 was also elected to serve as the director of whole Institute of Jewish Studies. Within the institute are two other units. The first is the Marcell and Maria Roth Center for the Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry and Polish-Jewish Relations, which seeks to popularize and support studies into the heritage of Polish Jews and Polish-Jewish relations. The second is the Centre for Studies on the History and Culture of Jews in Kraków, directed by Dr. Edyta Gawron.

Teaching

Recent years have seen the development not only of



Institute of Jewish Studies on Józefa Street 19, Kraków, opened in 2012

scholarly activities, but of teaching programs. In 2011 the institute was the first in Poland granted permission to introduce specific BA and MA programs granting degrees in Jewish studies. Each year, 120-140 students study at the institute. Under the aegis of the Faculty of History the institute also offers more advanced studies, and we currently have 18 doctoral students.

Since 2000 the department and later the institute have offered educational programs

for more than 1,000 students who have received various degrees in Jewish studies.

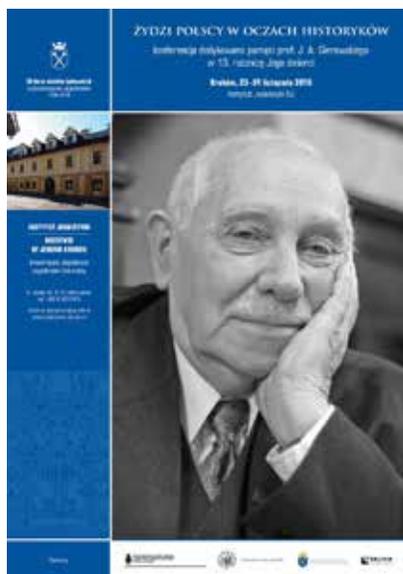
Outreach

The members of the Institute of Jewish Studies collaborate with several Polish cultural and academic centers and institutions and help set the tone in many organizations that promote Jewish studies in Poland, such as the Polish Academy of Sciences and Art's Commission on Jewish History and Culture, the Polish Association for Jewish Studies,

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and the Polish Society of Yiddish Studies. The institute works closely with the Jewish Community, JCC Krakow, the Galicia Jewish Museum, the Kraków Municipal Museum of History, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, and many others.

The Institute of Jewish Studies also cooperates closely with many academic centers, for example the University of Tel Aviv, the Hebrew University, the Yad Vashem Institute, and the Association of Cracovians in Israel. In Europe it works with University College London and the universities of Halle, Potsdam, and



Poster from one of the many conferences of the Institute of Jewish Studies, this one featuring J.A. Gierowski in November 2016.

Tübingen; and in the United States with Brandeis University, the University of Rochester, and Arizona State University, among others. In addition the institute promotes its academic achievements through *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia*, published annually since 2002.

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standards and acting as an academic model for other institutions in Poland and the world. In recognition of the achievements of the entire Kraków Jewish scene, Prof. Edward Dąbrowa was elected president and Prof. Michał Galas treasurer of the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS) at its congress in Paris in 2014. The next EAJS congress will take place in 2018 in Kraków. ■

For further information visit www.judaistyka.uj.edu.pl and michal.galas@uj.edu.pl.

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