

TO THE EDITOR

I have read with great interest the exchange of views between David Engel and Richard C. Lukas concerning historiographical approaches to Polish-Jewish relations (Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Slavic Review*). I support Engel's argument that a more extensive familiarity with related sources would have been helpful in Lukas's analysis. I also agree with Lukas that the Holocaust influences, at least to a certain degree, the writing of Jewish historians. No one can be perfectly impartial. Both Jews and Poles (as well as those who accept their views) perceive and write within their own consensus. It is a special gift of intellectual integrity and personal courage that enables one to transcend and transgress these limits. Such integrity has been displayed recently not by professional historians but by a literature professor and by a journalist. I refer to Jan Blonski of the Jagellonian University and Jerzy Turowicz, editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Both admitted that anti-Semitism was part and parcel of Polish society in interwar Poland and that it affected Polish behavior and particularly Polish attitudes toward Jews during the Holocaust.

In my opinion, only by breaking the barriers of our national and cultural milieu would it be possible to agree upon that painful past "as it really was."

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As Polish Jews exit the stage of history fewer witnesses and less testimony to their life in Poland before World War II are available. Consequently, many untrue or even bizarre notions about their past are rapidly gaining ground. Particularly popular in the United States is the general myth that in Poland there was total segregation of Poles and Jews. An important outgrowth of this myth is contained in Richard C. Lukas's statement (Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Slavic Review*) that in Poland "few Jews understood, let alone spoke Polish."

I shall not address myself to the myth of total segregation; I am not a sociologist. Lukas's assertion that "few Jews understood, let alone spoke Polish," however, should not be allowed to stand unopposed. It is not only patently false, but also tendentious and potentially damaging to future Polish-Jewish relations.

I regret that Lukas does not indicate what he means by "few." 1 percent? 10 percent? Surely not 25 percent or 30 percent? In the absence of an estimate in such a sweeping statement, I have to translate "few" as "exceptional," "sporadic," "sometimes."

I willingly forgo dwelling at length on the obvious, namely that in Poland there were Jews who were Polish writers, poets, actors, publishers, lawyers, scholars, and scientists. In short, there existed a whole group of Jewish luminaries in Polish culture and this group was representative of a much larger class of Polish-Jewish intelligentsia. Perhaps, according to Lukas, all these people would still be "few."

That a Jewish press in the Polish language existed in Poland is clear to anyone familiar with such newspapers as *Chwila*, *Nowy Dziennik*, or *Nasz Przegląd*. These papers made a profit. Who read them, subscribed to them, made them profitable if not large numbers of Polish Jews? There existed in Poland a fully accredited system of Polish-language high schools leading to the state-approved *matura*. The only concession to Jewishness was that Hebrew was taught as a foreign language in addition to the required Latin and French or German. Religion was taught in Polish. These schools met the stringent requirements of the Polish Ministry of Education and boasted a large number of distinguished faculty (including the renowned physicist Leopold Infeld and the historian Filip Friedmann) mainly because careers in Polish universities were, with few exceptions, practically closed to Jews.

Lukas quotes a rabbi, Joseph Friedenson, who told him "that as a student in a yeshiva in Lublin, he was one of the few students who knew Polish. He spent most of his time interpreting for his Jewish and Polish schoolmates." I am not certain how to interpret the rabbi's words. What schoolmates? Did he interpret for Polish students in the yeshiva or for Jewish students who at-