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Polish Jewish leaders call for dialogue

• By JEREMY SHARON

In the wake of the diplomatic crisis between Israel and Poland centered around the Holocaust and antisemitism, Polish Jewish leaders are urging for greater dialogue and understanding between Jews and Poles.

The head of Poland's communal Jewish umbrella organization, Monika Krawczyk, has called to increase the

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opportunities for young Jews and Poles to meet, while both she and Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich have said that hostile rhetoric on both sides must be toned down.

Schudrich added that despite a recent series of antisemitic comments and news items in the Polish media, Jews are still safe in Poland. He says Jews can wear Jewish symbols in public without fear of attack or harassment, noting this is not the case in some Western European countries.

Concern has been raised of late regarding a series of antisemitic incidents in the Polish media, as well as a rash of antisemitic rhetoric online. Krawczyk and Schudrich said that although they are aware of this phenomenon, it must be put in context – and that the outrage over Foreign Minister Israel Katz's comments, as well as those of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, must be properly understood.

Schudrich argues that there has been some condemnation of recent antisemitic statements, and also points to the rise of antisemitism across Europe as evidence that Poland is not unique in suffering a recurrence of the phenomenon.

And he notes that many Poles were "genuinely hurt" by Katz's comments.

"Katz was basically saying that all Poles are antisemitic, which is hurtful, unnecessary, wrong and false," Schudrich told *The Jerusalem Post*.

"While we fight against antisemitism, we must look at ourselves and think about what we should be sensitive about and what we say – and if we do that, we have a

chance of making a positive change."

Schudrich said, however, that in the current political climate, those who have long-held antisemitic beliefs now feel free to express them in public. He pointed to events in other countries, such as the 2017 neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville, Virginia, as evidence of the broader nature of this problem.

But he insists that life for Polish Jews remains good and that Jews may walk about publicly wearing Jewish symbols without fear of being attacked, something he says cannot be said of Jews in France and Belgium, for example.

"I call it the yarmulke test: Can you walk around safe with a yarmulke? It's a crude measure of antisemitism, but in Warsaw and Krakow we have no problems. Can the same be said walking with a yarmulke in Belgium and France?"

Rafal Pankowski, an associate professor at Collegium Civitas and cofounder of the Never Again Association, is not quite as sanguine, pointing to several severe examples of antisemitism in the Polish media, saying they constitute "a wave of antisemitic discourse that has not been seen for many years."

In February, following Katz's comments, Jacek Bartyzel, a professor of social science at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, said on Facebook that: "I can't get worked up about the fact that Jews hate us and spit upon us – what can you expect from that viperish tribe full of arrogance, venom and anger?"

The influential right-wing news website wPolityce.pl then granted Bartyzel a flattering interview where he stood by his comments, giving another academic from the same university a platform to defend Bartyzel as well.

Two days after Katz's comments, political journalist and commentator Artur Wróblewski said on a public radio station that "if there was no antisemitism, then perhaps Israel would invent it."

And a day after Netanyahu said in Warsaw that "Poles collaborated with the Nazis," journalist and author Rafal Ziemkiewicz accused US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of being "a sales rep of the Holocaust industry," after Pompeo stated during a visit to Poland that the country had to address concerns about property restitution for Holocaust survivors.

Meanwhile, the right-wing *Warszawska Gazeta* ran a front page in February with the headline "This is how the Jews murdered the Poles," which highlighted the Jewish background of some Communist-era judges and officials who sentenced high-ranking Poles to death following the World War II.

And just last week, the right-wing weekly newspaper *Tylko Polska* issued an edition with a front-page headline telling readers "how to recognize a Jew," including

by "Names, anthropological features, expressions, appearances, character traits, methods of operation" and "disinformation activities," the Polsat news website reported on Wednesday.

The article added "How to defeat them? This cannot go on!" The newspaper itself was available for purchase in a kiosk in the Polish parliament.

But Krawczyk, head of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland is, like Schudrich, more cautious when discussing these recent incidents.

She, too, says Katz's comments were deeply unhelpful, and noted, like Pankowski, that the diplomatic row with Israel is being used by politicians in Poland to drum up support, although she accuses Israeli politicians of the same.

Krawczyk also underlines the historical and societal context of these debates, noting that Poland was devastated by the World War II and was occupied by both the Nazi regime and the Soviet Union, yet never established a puppet government that collaborated with either side.

Poles therefore see themselves as not responsible for the Holocaust, she explained, because there was no formal collaboration on the state level.

Krawczyk nevertheless concedes that the recent outbreak of antisemitic rhetoric is worrying and that it needs to be addressed.

"It worries me, because if it is coming from people with higher education and academics who are copying rhetoric of pre-war right-wing groups that were responsible for acts of physical antisemitism, [then] we have a reason to be concerned and worried about that," she says.

Krawczyk said there is now a need to promote educational initiatives in Poland at the most fundamental level to underline the toxicity of antisemitism, saying the Polish government should partner in such projects.

She also suggested broadening the interaction of Jewish and Israeli high-school pupils visiting Poland to meet with their Polish peers, as some groups have done, in order to increase understanding.

"This should be encouraged and developed. If we say all Poles are antisemites, and the other side says Jews are ungrateful, greedy and conspiring, then the possibility of dialogue is completely closed and there is nothing to talk about."