

# Poland's Condemnation of an Antisemitic Rally Signals Hope

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Last week, a blatant and distressing antisemitic event in the city of Kalisz marred Poland's Independence Day celebrations. At the same time, this incident was also an opportunity for the current nationalist government to make clear that antisemitism will not be tolerated in Poland. Amid chants of "Death to Jews," extreme nationalists burned a book that represented a 13th century Polish edict that legalized the Jewish presence in Poland and conveyed a measure of security against antisemitism.

This incident reminds us of both the best and worst of Poland's history toward its Jewish population.

There have been times in Poland's history when it was a welcome home to Jews. In the 13th and 14th centuries, Jews began to move from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, largely due to antisemitism. In 1290, the Jews of England were officially expelled and within years, Jews were also expelled from France and many German protectorates. In fact, for centuries after that, Jewish life in Western Europe was highly limited if it existed at all.

But over in Eastern Europe, Jews were developing a level of autonomy that, if not completely devoid of antisemitism, gave them a level of stability that had been largely lost in Western Europe. The Statute of Kalisz symbolized that spirit, and the Polin Museum in Warsaw describes a thousand years of Jewish life in Poland, the vast majority of which was peaceful and tolerant.

That era came to a brutal end during World War II, when Poland was occupied by Nazi Germany and the Nazis murdered three million Polish Jews, about 90 percent of the Polish Jewish community. During and after the war, Polish Jews were also targeted by their own Polish neighbors. In the village of Jedwabne in 1941, at least 350 Jews were burned to death by their neighbors. And in Kielce in 1946, a malicious blood libel led to the murder of 42 Jews and another 40 were wounded.

Even today, we know that antisemitic attitudes are pervasive among the Polish population. ADL's Global 100 survey found that more than four out of 10 Poles agreed with the majority of antisemitic statements we tested. Polish acceptance of antisemitic attitudes is roughly 50 percent higher than in Western Europe. More specifically, 57

percent believe that Polish Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Poland, and the same percent believe that Jews have too much power in the business world.

And now the burning of the Statute of Kalicz. A leading observer of antisemitism in Poland, Prof. Rafal Pankowski of the Never Again Association, said recently that he had never seen anything like the Kalisz incident in his 25 years of monitoring antisemitism in Poland. He likened it to the infamous book burnings that took place early in the Nazi regime.

The question facing Poland today is whether the nationalist Polish government sees Kalisz or Jedwabne as its model. Are Jews to be welcomed and protected or alienated and attacked?

The situation is promising. Having monitored the nationalist Polish government's reactions to antisemitism since it took office in 2015, we can say that the reaction to the Kalisz incident was among its best. The first condemnations came from both the Minister of Interior Mateusz Kaminski and the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Soon after, Polish President Andrzej Duda added his condemnation on behalf of all of Poland. Importantly, local leaders of every Christian church in Kalisz signed a joint letter, condemning the antisemitic event.

Kalisz can be an inflection point for Poland. It can be a moment to re-commit to the fight against antisemitism or it can be a milestone for "defining deviancy down" and excusing blatant antisemitic behavior with unconvincing arguments.

Let us hope that the early signs are indicative that Polish authorities and Polish society make the right choice and tell the world that Poland will not be complacent about contemporary antisemitism, which contradicts its illustrious past as a welcome home to Jews.

Let Kalisz reclaim its heritage and become a symbol of hope, not hate; of living together, not living in fear. That choice is for the Polish government to make.

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