

RAFAL PANKOWSKI

Met any Jews lately?

Aided by an apathetic media and the indulgence of fellow politicians, the far right has entered the heart of Polish mainstream politics

Ethnic minorities in Poland are few; its Jewish community barely 10,000 strong. Yet anti-Semitism is the most common form of racism. Infants may not imbibe it at the breast, but they are certainly nourished on it later: by extreme nationalist propaganda in the press and on radio, by members of the clergy, teachers and marginal but militant chauvinist politicians. Not everyone gets obsessively xenophobic, of course, most people seem to be immune, but it's undeniable that virtually every Pole is bound to encounter anti-Semitism in some form, somewhere, even if he has never actually met a Jew.

Racism can be treated in two ways. It can be acknowledged as a real problem and opposed, or persistently denied along with the consequences. The UK chose the first approach after the publication of the Macpherson Report in February 1999. Polish politicians have adopted the second: denial and trivialisation. The government has an ally in a large sector of the mainstream media that seldom publish anything on racism, xenophobia and the violence they provoke. What does appear is, on the whole, pretty unprofessional.

In Germany, where public opinion is heavily sensitised to any form of anti-Semitism or right-wing extremism, things are *different*. The contrast between Polish and German attitudes is strikingly reflected in statements made by government representatives from both countries during last year's conference on the extreme right in Frankfurt-am-Oder. Fifty years after WWII, the conviction that fascism has no right

ever to be reborn is a central tenet of German democratic culture. The Poles might be expected to be equally opposed to the political tendencies that cost the lives of six million of their fellow citizens. Not so: unlike their fellows in France or Belgium, Poland's extreme right had no opportunity to compromise itself by collaborating with the Nazis and did not, therefore, suffer the same post-war opprobrium.

Influential right-wing media like the magazines *Nasz Dziennik* or *Zycie* report any sign of right-wing extremism in Germany, Austria or Israel in detail. Similar events in Poland pass in media silence. Indeed, commentators in the leading newspapers react badly should anyone else dare to write on the subject – as though to write about racism were to expose a closely held family secret.

In November 1999, the apolitical, anti-fascist association *Nigdy Wiecej* (*Never Again*), published a shocking report documenting 19 deaths caused by racist or xenophobic violence in Poland over the last few years. A short note on the report found its way into just two national dailies: the centre-right *Rzeczpospolita* and the post-communist *Trybuna*. The remaining media, including the biggest newspaper in the country, the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza*, preferred silence.

Meanwhile, racist political groupings are growing slowly but visibly. Their message is amplified and fed by national chauvinism. The most active are the National Rebirth of Poland and All-Polish Youth, both of which cater for young adults. There are also other groups of varying size with the word 'national' in their name and, over the past decade they have travelled from the margins of politics to the corridors of power. The next stage in the structural formation of the 'national right' – its infiltration of government – is under way.

In the early 1980s, the best-known leader of the extreme nationalists, Boleslaw Tejkowski, had the support of just a handful of pensioners and an only slightly bigger group of disruptive teenage skinheads. The group, which went under the odd and lengthy name of the Polish National Community—the Polish National Party, seemed a combination of Nazism and communism in caricature. Intriguingly, in the 1950s and 60s Tejkowski had been active in a very different ideological and intellectual environment. As a sociologist he was known as an opposition activist with revisionist views who worked closely with the legendary dissidents Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski. He switched sides in 1968 and joined the regime's anti-Zionist crusade, acting as a witness for the

prosecution in the trials of his former friends. As communism fell, Tejkowski made a bid to become leader of the Polish Nationalists. But his remark that the Pope and the bishops were all Jewish, along with his calls for a return to Slavic pagan cults, left him on the political fringe, in altercation with rival leaders of the revived 'national movement'.

But the seed was sown. Tejkowski and his party are still marking time on the periphery, but the younger generation of nationalists has avoided the same mistake and chosen to break into more serious politics. They have been remarkably successful. In 1995, National Democratic Party leader Boguslaw Kowalski became press spokesman for President Lech Walesa, a past master of political manoeuvre who flirted with all kinds of political groupings.

But in the long term, the less spectacular achievement of another group of fanatical nationalists, the National Right, has proved more important. In 1996, they joined the Patriotic Camp, a coalition of several centre-right parties, and subsequently allied themselves with the Confederation of Independent Poland, the oldest anti-communist right-wing grouping in the country. Finally, they joined the ranks of a broad alliance seeking to dislodge the post-communists who had come back to power in 1993. The alliance, Solidarity Election Action (AWS), embraced a wide range of political sentiments: liberal, anti-communist, Christian Democrat and conservative. It now governs the country.

Alongside the AWS, activists from the National Right (PN) are also in power. They succeeded in something their idol, Jean-Marie Le Pen, never quite achieved: a coalition and entry into government on the back of the conservative right. The PN leader, Krzysztof Kawecki, wrote his PhD thesis on 'The socio-political thought and action of the National Radical Camp' (a radically anti-Semitic pre-WWII organisation). Although he failed to get into parliament as an AWS candidate, soon after the elections he was appointed cabinet secretary and chief adviser to the minister of education. Another AWS candidate recommended by the National Right, Marek Biernacki, was elected to parliament before he could complete his doctorate on the political thought of Roman Dmowski (the historical ideologue behind Polish anti-Semitism). Today he is minister of internal affairs. Yet another politician associated with the PN, Marcin Libicki, is head of the Polish delegation to the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe.

The French National Front leader has often been acknowledged by

PN politicians as their model. They have published a Polish translation of Le Pen's *Hope*. They have participated regularly at the 'Feast of St Joan of Arc' celebrated annually on 1 May by Le Pen's followers in Paris. But the PN owes its position less to its international contacts (which include far more extreme groups) than to public enthusiasm for anti-communism and a brutalisation of the language of politics.

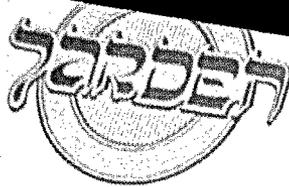
After the election of post-communist Aleksander Kwasniewski to the presidency, the PN held a demonstration in memory of Eligiusz Niewiadomski, the far-right fanatic who, in 1922, murdered the first president of independent, post-partition Poland because he regarded him as a Jewish-Masonic puppet. Supporters were encouraged to join the rally by means of a poster bearing the slogan 'Stolzman out!' and displaying Kwasniewski with a revolver at his head. According to anti-Semites, Stolzman was Kwasniewski's 'real' surname. Later on, Marcin Libicki defended Niewiadomski's motives in a parliamentary statement.

Not long ago, Libicki criticised a report on extremism presented to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, claiming that in Poland there was no such thing. He was supported by the remaining members of the Polish delegation, including representatives of the centre and the left.

The presence of 'national' activists in government has had a predictable influence on the politics of the country. The ministry of education has been recommending the use in schools of a history textbook by Mieczyslaw Szczesniak that is widely recognised as anti-Semitic. The ministry of internal affairs has initiated a campaign, code-named 'Alien', intended to hunt out foreigners whose papers are not in order. The police have been mobilised to seek out people from Vietnam and the former Soviet Union engaged in the black market. A hysterical media campaign is presenting migrants as the main cause of crime in the country, although statistically their contribution is negligible.

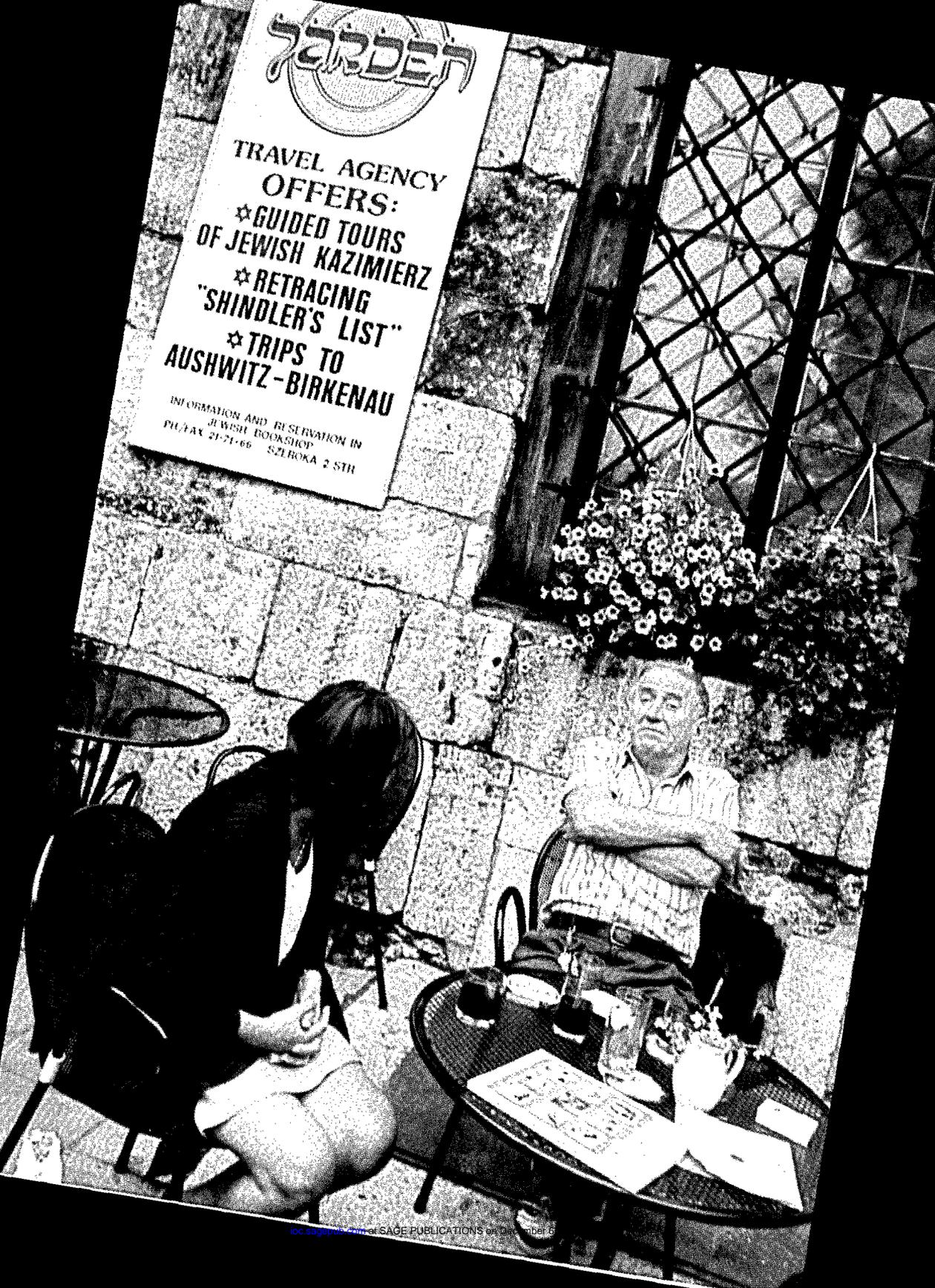
In December 1999, pressure from nationalist and Catholic activists led by All-Polish Youth contributed to a drastic tightening of laws against pornography. The nationalist urge to censor has also made itself felt in Gdynia where an AWS councillor linked with the PN initiated a campaign for the withdrawal of local council funds for a theatre that dared to stage the old hippy musical *Hair*. In Bialystok, a town in north-eastern Poland, nationalists are trying to put pressure on the ministry of culture to withdraw funding from the Belarusian minority's magazine *Czasopis*, because of its supposedly anti-Polish publications.

Krakow, Poland. A tourist trap 'Jewish café', run by non-Jews in the formerly Jewish quarter, Kazimierz – Credit: Philip Wolmuth/Panos



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Over the past decade, the far right has extended its power base and moved into the cultural arena where it can reach not only the older generation but the young. This makes the task of eliminating racism in Poland considerably more daunting. Right-wing culture has many platforms, from the sports stadium to the university. It incorporates the National Rock Scene promoted by mass-market right-wing weeklies, with records, concerts and T-shirts. It includes the music and anti-Semitic poetry of Leszek Czajkowski, the bard of the new Polish far right, and the xenophobic *Radio Maryja* which has hundreds of thousands of Catholic listeners daily. It embraces the press: from heavyweight quarterlies with titles like *Frona* and *Arcana* (both funded by the state) to *Nasz Dziennik*, connected to Channel 1 of public television. The choice of available reading is impressive: history, politics, philosophy and literary criticism are being given a far-right perspective. Even 'literary' works have appeared. Historical revisionism is flourishing and incorporates the denial of the Holocaust, which is officially forbidden. This first appeared in the form of Polish translations of David Irving, currently issued by the Ministry of Defence publishing house Bellona. In 1999, Dariusz Ratajczak, a research historian at the University of Opole, published a monograph questioning the existence of the gas chambers in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Opole is less than 150km from Auschwitz.

So are all Poles racists? Are chauvinism and xenophobia inextricably embedded in contemporary Polish political discourse? Not in the least. If the National Right and other similar groups sheltering under the AWS umbrella tried to stand for election on their own, they would doubtless be ignominiously defeated. Most people have probably never even heard of the National Right.

The presence of the far-right in mainstream politics does not emerge from the fact that it has significant public support, but from the frailty and superficiality of Polish democratic culture. Politicians tolerate colleagues who express racist views, the 'serious' media turn a blind eye, and the magic circle is closed. □

Rafal Pankowski is editor of *Nigdy Wiecej* (Never Again) an anti-fascist magazine published in Warsaw.
Translated by Irena Maryniak