

# Gazeta

Newsletter of the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies

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Fay and Julian Bussgang, Editors

## Letter from the President

Dear Members and Friends,

I would like to wish all of you a somewhat belated Happy and Healthy New Year. We in the Association had a fine year and started the new one off October 12-14 with our second major conference, "Living Side By Side". The turnout was a lot larger than we dared to hope, and participants were interested and involved. Papers were fascinating, but I will let Antony Polonsky tell you all about that. Some of our Polish guests suggested that we hold our next conference in Kraków (in 1998), and we are seriously considering it. If you hold views on that subject, please let us hear from you.

At our recent meeting in Cambridge on November 17, Mrs. Elizabeth Wittlin-Lipton reminisced about her famous father, Józef Wittlin, and her life with him.

I would like to welcome the following new members to AAPJS: Abraham Brumberg, Emile Hiesiger, David Lincoln, Peter Pletka, Alex Soyka, Aron Szulman and David Yentis.

My old friend and school fellow from Warsaw, Alexander Shatton (Szatensztajn), died recently of Alzheimer's disease at a much too early age. He was one of the first members to support the work of our Association.

At the Board meeting on October 29, we unanimously elected two new members: Anna Barańczak and Frances Ziegler. I am happy to announce that both of them have accepted.

Irene Pipes

## United Restitution Organization

Because of the importance of this topic to many Polish Jews, we again provide the address of the United Restitution Organization, newly formed by the World Jewish Congress. The URO will assist former Polish citizens with property claims. URO, 570 Fifth Ave., Room 1106, New York, NY 10018, Tel. 212/921-3860.

## Remembering Józef Wittlin

The November AAPJS program, held at Harvard Hillel in Cambridge, was a talk about Józef Wittlin by his daughter Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton, who spoke in very personal and moving terms about the life and creative work of her father.

Józef Wittlin, poet and author, was born 100 years ago in 1886. Although he later converted to Catholicism, out of sincere conviction, he never masked his Jewish roots. Wittlin spent his early years in Lwów and later lived in Warsaw. After the outbreak of World War II, he managed to leave Poland for Spain and Portugal with his wife and daughter, and they then came to the U.S. He spent his later years in New York City.

Wittlin's poetry and writing are regarded by literary critics as some of the most beautiful Polish literary treasures. Towards the end of World War I, he wrote *Hymns*, which expresses the pain and suffering of humanity caused by military conflicts. His poetry is humanistic and almost pacifistic.

Wittlin worked for many years on a trilogy, the first volume of which, *Salt of the Earth (Sól Ziemi)*, gained him such literary acclaim that he was recommended and considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In a video documentary dedicated to Wittlin, a Polish academician remarked that Wittlin never received the prize because he wrote "End of Volume I" at the end of the book, and the other volumes were never completed. The Nobel Committee does not issue prizes for unfinished work.

One of Wittlin's most famous works is the translation of Homer's *Odyssey* into Polish. Those from Lwów, particularly remember the writer and poet for his touching booklet, *My Lwów (Mój Lwów)*, written and published after the war in New York.

**Renew Your Membership for 1997!**

## Report from the AAPJS Conference "Jews and Poles: Living Side by Side"

by Antony Polonsky

The conference organized in Cambridge on October 13th by the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies addressed the question why attempts to integrate Jews into Polish society were not, for the most part, successful, and why, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, two separate and often hostile societies emerged on Polish lands. Speakers examined the theme of why and with what consequences these two societies came to emerge, the reasons why the attempt to transform the Jews in Poland into "Poles of the Mosaic faith" did not succeed more fully, and how autonomous concepts of self-understanding came to dominate the Jewish self-perception on Polish lands.

The Polish writer, Antoni Golubiew, lamented the degree to which, in pre-war Poland, "the two worlds, the Christian and the Jewish, living next to each other in the same land, united by thousands of links and connections, meeting daily, were really separated by an insurmountable wall, remote, and almost foreign."

In spite of efforts in recent years to bridge this gulf, these two worlds still seem divided by their different perceptions of the past. A scholarly and dispassionate investigation of reasons for this "double memory" seemed to our Association all the more necessary because of the tension and bitterness which still pervade relations between Poles and Jews and which have been so evident in the last year.

Controversy has recently been aroused by the film "Shtetl"; the letter of Edward Moskal, President of the Polish American Congress, to the newly elected Polish President, Alexander Kwaśniewski, accusing him and his government of excessive subservience to Jewish influences; the anger provoked by Elie Wiesel's speech at the commemoration of the Kielce pogrom, in which he referred to the crosses erected at Birkenau in the field in front of the "sauna" building as an "insult" and a "blasphemy"; and the dispute over the circumstances of the death, at Polish hands, in the town of Ejszyski, of Yaffa Eliach's mother and baby brother, after they had survived the war hidden by a Polish farmer. All these have shown how far apart are the perceptions of Poles and Jews of the past which they share and which seems more often to divide than to unite them.

The consensus of those attending the conference was that the various papers illustrated many complex aspects of "living side by side" and enabled rational and

serious discussions to take place.

Professor Ben Nathans, University of Indiana, Bloomington, described in his lecture the most successful of the reforms of Czar Alexander II, his establishment of a modern legal system with independent lawyers and a jury trial. Jews were an important element in the legal profession of the Czarist Empire (which included the Kingdom of Poland), and leading Jewish lawyers, like Oscar Gruzenberg, Genrikh Sliozberg, and Maxim Winawer (born in Warsaw) hoped vainly, through the establishment of a society based on the rule of law, to alleviate Jewish legal disabilities and facilitate Jewish integration.

The failure of integration in Polish lands was primarily the result of government policy and the rejection of such an option by the majority society, as was demonstrated in a paper by Professor Theodore Weeks, University of Southern Illinois. But it was also the consequence of the size of the Jewish community and the stereotypical views of gentile society which prevailed widely among Jews.

How the Jewish view of Poles and Ukrainians evolved, reflected in Yiddish and Hebrew writings, was examined by Professor David Roskies of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

In Jewish literature, an ethnic Pole rarely appears among Jews unless on a practical business matter and with a feeling of fateful biological differences. One enters usually not as a private person but as if in the role of a messenger with a specific mission.

One of the areas where sections of the two societies interacted was in the theater. Poland had a flourishing Jewish theater, both in Yiddish and in Polish. Professor Maya Peretz examined the subject of Jewish theater in Poland in the interwar period, its audience and critics. She showed that even here, among those of good will, art was not sufficient to overcome the ethnic divide. According to the editor of the Jewish daily, *Nasz Przegląd*, Jakub Appenzlak, Poles were "less familiar with [Jewish theater]... than with that of distant China."

Today, there is no subject on which Polish and Jewish views are further apart than in their understanding of the Holocaust on Polish lands, in which the overwhelming majority of Polish Jews were murdered by the Germans. For many Jews, the Poles,

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with a few honorable exceptions, failed to display elementary human solidarity with their Jewish fellow citizens, and, in a number of cases, not only profited from, but participated in, the genocide. For many Poles, the Jewish accusations are seen as unfair, exaggerating the degree of Polish collaboration with the Nazis and not taking into account the scale of the Nazi terror against the Poles nor the high cost of aiding Jews. The way this double memory of the Holocaust has developed was the theme of a lecture by Professor Piotr Wróbel, University of Toronto.

Another matter which has often caused controversy is the role of communists of Jewish origin in the security apparatus after 1944. This thorny question was investigated, on the basis of recently-opened Polish

archives, by Dr. Lech Gluchowski, also of the University of Toronto.

The day concluded with a round-table presentation of the situation of Jews in East-Central Europe since 1989. Among the participants were Professor Feliks Tych, Director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Professor Szymon Rudnicki, Dean of the History Department at the University of Warsaw, Dr. Joachim Russek, Director of the Jewish Cultural Center in Kraków, and Professor Stanisław Blejwas of Central Connecticut State University.

The conference afforded a valuable opportunity to look in a more detached and scholarly way at the complex and often painful problem of Polish-Jewish relations. Dialogue rather than mutual accusation is seen as the only way forward.

## **A Report from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw**

**(Summary of remarks by Professor Feliks Tych, Director)**

There are now more Armenians, Lithuanians and Gypsies in Poland than Jews, yet, after an active presence for over eight hundred years, the Jews have left behind monuments of their culture and archival records that continue to maintain Poland as a spiritual and cultural center of the Jewish Diaspora.

The Jewish Historical Institute (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny - ŻIH), located on Tłomackie Street in Warsaw, has become a vital bridge between Jews living abroad and the heritage they left behind.

Just in terms of wartime and post-war collections, ŻIH is the depository of such precious documents as the Ringelblum Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto, Judenrat archives of many important ghettos, archives of Jewish local committees from 1944 to the 1950s, as well as numerous diaries, testimonies, and lists of survivors.

The Institute also plays an invaluable and growing role as a source of educational information for the Polish community about the significant presence, over the centuries, of Jews in Poland (10% of total population, 40% in cities) and about their valuable contributions to Polish life. While awareness of the Jewish presence was suppressed under communism, today, attempts are growing to present a truer picture of prewar Poland. The Institute is leading in this effort through preservation of historical materials, educational programs, and a family of new textbooks.

While the oft cited number for Jews still living in Poland is 8,000-12,000, the more accurate current estimate is probably 40,000-50,000, not that insignificant a number. Polls show that 35% of Poles appreciate the diligence and thrift of Jews, while 20% picture Jews as being tricky and cunning (although down from 40% two years earlier). Still, even today, with few Jews in Poland, only 20% of Poles look favorably on Jews and 40%, unfavorably. 10% of those polled even indicated that they suspected Jews of engaging in a conspiracy against the world!

Much work remains to be done by the Institute to support an emerging positive trend. The Institute has modest means, however. Most of its financial support at present comes from the State Committee for Research, which itself has few resources and supports 110 other institutions.

The Institute has been receiving some assistance from the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC with respect to conservation technology and special equipment. The Lauder Foundation has provided support and a researcher for a genealogical project. A German Foundation is now financing major renovations. Individual donors have also contributed directly or through American organizations.

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Professor Tych, who only recently took over as Director, observed that 50% of the archival materials and 40% of the printed collections are still not catalogued or treated for preservation. As the present research program makes little use of the Institute's collections, a new one is being developed. A new generation of scholars is being recruited, and a quarterly bulletin has been reinstated. There will be new versions of previous permanent exhibitions. The Institute is instrumental in the planning for a new Museum of the History of Polish Jews to be built in Warsaw.

An international conference on the "Bund", an important and influential Polish-Jewish labor organization, is planned for November 1997. Conference papers are to be published in English.

As can be seen, ŻIH is undergoing significant changes and expects great progress in the coming years.

### **Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw**

Earlier this year, a Polish daily reported on a tour of the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw, led by Jan Jagielski of the Jewish Historical Institute, for local members of the Council of Christians and Jews.

Jagielski told the group that at one time, women were buried in a different part of the cemetery than men. Most of the older inscriptions are in Hebrew only. Gravestones often carry sculpted images of objects reflecting on the interests of the deceased. A book may denote that the person was a scholar or loved to read, a collection box, that the deceased helped the poor.

Prominent Jewish persons buried in this cemetery include Ludwik Zamenhof, creator of the universal language Esperanto, Zygmunt Dekler, founder of LOT Airlines, and Stanisław Mendelson, founder of the Polish Socialist Party. There is a statue of Dr. Janusz Korczak, educator and head of Warsaw orphanages, who was sent to Treblinka with his charges. There are also mass graves of those who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto and elsewhere during World War II.

Recently, an incident of vandalism occurred, and 66 tombstones were damaged. Funds are needed for restoration and for the maintenance of the cemetery. Anyone interested in contributing can send money to the bank account of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Monuments, ul. Piękna 44a, 00-672 Warszawa, Poland, Account No. PBK III O. Warszawa 370015-9700-189-853.

### **Jewish Heritage Program of LOT**

LOT Airlines was once again very helpful to the October AAPJS Conference by providing free travel from Poland for some of the participants.

LOT in New York has created a Jewish Heritage Department which offers tour programs exploring some of the most hallowed sites associated with Jewish history in Poland. Heading the department is Joram Kagan, AAPJS member and author of *Poland's Jewish Heritage*, a book which identifies and provides maps locating points of Jewish interest in Poland.

Kagan guides Jewish tour groups and takes special interest in connecting visitors to today's small Jewish community in Poland and to Jewish events, such as the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków. LOT and El Al provide a joint Apex fare for travelers who wish to stop in Poland on their way to Israel. LOT also arranges for kosher meals.

A Map of Jewish Heritage and a brochure on the Jewish presence in Poland are available on request from the Polish National Tourist Office in New York.

### **Photo Exhibition in Warsaw of Polish Jews**

An exhibition of some 400 photographs from the lives of Polish Jews, entitled, "And I Still See Their Faces", attracted crowds of viewers to the Zachęta Art Museum in Warsaw. On opening night alone, over 4,000 people attended. Golda Tencer, a leading actress in the Yiddish Theater in Warsaw and president of the Shalom Foundation, organized the event. The curator was the well-known Polish photographer, Tomasz Tomaszewski, co-author, with his wife, of *Remnants*, a book of poignant photographs of mostly elderly Jews who remained in Poland after the war.

The organizers began assembling the photographs by appealing to people two years ago, on television and in local publications, for old photos of Jewish life. They were overwhelmed by over 8,000 submissions from which they selected 400. The photos depict Jewish life in Poland from the beginning of the 20th century to the Holocaust, a life which has all but disappeared.

It was particularly moving that so many Poles had preserved photographs of Jews they had known, were friendly with, or lived next to. Personal stories accompanied many of the submissions.

There has been some discussion of bringing the exhibit to New York and Boston.

## Polish - Jewish Dialogue

Edward J. Moskal, head of the Polish American Congress (PAC), issued a letter in May to President Alexander Kwaśniewski of Poland, criticizing what he regards as an overly conciliatory, and even preferential, attitude of the Polish government towards Jews.

President Kwaśniewski responded to Moskal by a letter explaining point by point the positions of the Polish Government, and stating that Polish-Jewish relations should be free of prejudice, xenophobia, and stereotyping. The President reasserted that the Polish Government is seeking reconciliation and friendship with the Jewish people.

Although Moskal claimed that he spoke in the name of 10 million Polish-Americans, many prominent Poles in America wrote letters to newspapers in the U.S. and Poland disassociating themselves from Moskal's views. Not long thereafter, the national gathering of PAC directors in Newport Beach, CA voted unanimously to express regrets to "our Jewish brothers" for Mr. Moskal's unfortunate and offensive outburst.

In the absence of any personal retraction or apology from Moskal himself, the American Jewish Committee broke off relations with PAC and is reviewing other ways of continuing the Polish-Jewish dialogue which had progressed in recent years.

In Boston, the local PAC and AAPJS have recently formed a joint committee to increase communications between the two organizations.

## *Jesteśmy (We are Here)*

Before the war, there were 11,000 Jews in Gdańsk and numerous synagogues. Recently the 300 Jews now living in Gdańsk organized themselves into a Jewish community. In October, they launched an eleven-page first issue of a monthly newsletter, *Jesteśmy (We Are Here)*. In it, they report that after more than 50 years, a Torah scroll, preserved in Warsaw, has been returned to the Jewish synagogue of Gdańsk. The Jewish community meets in a part of the building which now serves as a music school.

To mark the joyous occasion of the return of the Torah, the Jewish community, the Catholic Foundation *Pro Arte Sacra*, and the Polish Council of Christians and Jews jointly celebrated the "Festival of the Bible - Simchat Torah". The mayor of Gdańsk issued a welcoming declaration.

## Follow-up to "Shtetl"

Many Poles who saw the movie/video *Shtetl*, produced by Marian Marzyński about the town of Brańsk, were very upset that the presentation predominantly showed situations derogatory to Poles. Scenes that may have provided a better balance were either cut out or not produced. Zbigniew Romaniuk, prominently featured in the movie as the guide to the American-Jewish visitors, is said to have been taken aback when he viewed the final product.

In order to publicize "the other side of the story", the Polish community in Chicago brought Romaniuk to Chicago where he pointed out a number of inaccuracies in the movie which he feels did an injustice to the people of Brańsk. In particular, he felt that nothing was shown about the people in Brańsk who provided help to Jews, even though some of them had been interviewed.

Some Polish activists have even suggested the possibility of a movie, entitled *Shtetl II*, as a response to what they consider a negative one-sided presentation.

## President Kwaśniewski in New York

During his visit to the United States this spring, President Alexander Kwaśniewski, in a gesture rare for foreign heads of state, arranged to meet with Jewish leaders in New York, to discuss Poland's efforts to improve its image with the Jewish community.

The 41 year old leader, who to many in Poland represents the new generation, reminded the attendees that Poland is the only country to have designated an official emissary to the Jewish community in the *Diaspora*, Krzysztof Śliwiński.

Kwaśniewski distanced himself from the statements of Edward Moskal, Chairman of the Polish American Congress, and appealed for improved relations.

## Development Plans at Auschwitz

In response to pressure from Polish authorities and international public reaction, the developers planning to build a large supermarket and mini-mall next to Auschwitz reached a compromise agreement to build instead a facility for visitors to the camp museum. In order to avoid similar conflicts in the future, the Polish government has issued a new ordinance controlling all development around Auschwitz.

## What Happened in Ejszyszki?

The National Holocaust Museum in Washington has a room dedicated to photographs from Ejszyszki, once a Polish town, now in Lithuania. The exhibit was assembled by Yaffa Eliach, a professor at Brooklyn College, who was born in Ejszyszki.

On August 6 of this year, the *New York Times* published an article by Eliach with her recollections of an October 1944 pogrom in Ejszyszki, several months after the Germans had evacuated. After the family had returned to their home, her mother and baby brother were murdered during a night attack. The killers were not German soldiers but local men who knew the family well, some of whom belonged to the Polish Home Army. She relates that some survivors heard the leader proclaim "Poland without Jews!" which she regards as a call popular with the Polish Underground.

Eventually, the Soviet Secret Police (NKVD) arrived in town to investigate the pogrom, and a trial was held in Vilnius. Those accused were sentenced to prison terms and exiled to Siberia.

Many in the Polish-American community objected to the failure of the *New York Times* to publish the full response to Eliach's article by Andrzej Jaroszyński, the Polish *Chargé d'Affaires* in the U.S. Evidently, the *Times* cut out a comment that the Polish Ministry of Justice had established a special commission to investigate such crimes against humanity.

Moreover, the *Times* was criticized for placing the abbreviated Jaroszyński letter between letters from two Jewish researchers who assert that Ejszyszki was not an isolated incident but a part of an organized campaign by leaders of the underground to eliminate Jews.

The press in Poland also took issue with Eliach's account, claiming that on the basis of information from newly opened NKVD archives, the target of the attack on this particular house was a captain of the NKVD who lived there and that the Jewish residents of the house became victims only accidentally.

Eliach, however, relates that her mother recognized her murderers and addressed them by name, to which other witnesses, in addition to Eliach, can attest. Thus, it seems unlikely that these killings were an "accident".

Hopefully, the Polish commission will make a thorough and unbiased investigation and interview all available witnesses.

## Lucjan Dobroszycki Honored

The noted scholar of Jewish life in Poland, Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki, was honored posthumously with a major decoration by the Republic of Poland. The occasion was a Polish Independence Day ceremony and reception in the New York Consulate on November 10. Outgoing Consul General Jerzy Surdykowski made the presentation to Professor Dobroszycki's widow, Felicja, and daughter, Joanna.

The legendary, last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Marek Edelman, who was in New York for a conference, also attended the ceremony.

## Concert of Remembrance

The Seventh Annual Interfaith Concert of Remembrance took place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on November 16. Music performed included the New York premiere of *Rhapsody Pathétique* by Richard Nanes, excerpts from *Holocaust Suite* by Morton Gould, the world premiere of *Cartload of Shoes* by Ronald Senator, and theme music from *Schindler's List* by John Williams.

## Prof. Skowronek Dies in a Car Crash

Noted historian, Professor Jerzy Skowronek, Director General of the Polish Archives, was tragically killed this July in an automobile crash in France. Skowronek was very receptive to Jewish genealogists abroad and cooperated with the American Jewish Genealogical Association to facilitate access to the Polish Archives for genealogical research.

## Julian Strykowski Dies in Poland

Julian Strykowski, author of *Austeria* and *Voices in the Darkness*, passed away at age 91. *Austeria*, made into a film and video, was shown in Kraków at the Jewish Culture Center.

Born Pesach Stark in Stryj, near Lwów, he survived the war by escaping to the Soviet Union. Strykowski's novels, which depicted pre-war Jewish life in Poland, were known for their stories with philosophical and moral messages.

## Commemoration of the Kielce Pogrom

This summer, the city of Kielce unveiled a monument to the 27,000 Jews murdered in the Kielce Ghetto by the Germans during the war. Next to the monument is a wall inscribed with the names of 80 townspeople declared "Righteous Among the Nations".

A solemn ceremony was also held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the pogrom that occurred on July 4, 1946, in which 42 Jews were killed and 40 wounded by a frenzied mob.

The Kielce massacre was followed by an immediate trial July 9-11, 1946, in which nine persons were sentenced to death and executed almost immediately. The participation of local militia during the turmoil, the lack of more definitive efforts to prevent the tragedy by the authorities, as well as the speedy trial, have all caused many questions to persist. With the advent of democracy, several new books have appeared on the subject and another investigation is going on to establish the historical facts. Some of these books and their theories are discussed in *POLIN*, Volume 9.

The commemoration ceremony was attended by many Polish dignitaries, including Poland's Prime Minister, as well as representatives of the Jewish community. Polish speakers condemned the killings and echoed the recent apology for the post-war massacre issued by Foreign Minister Rossati. They expressed the hope that, by working together, a true reconciliation could be brought about.

Elie Wiesel, the featured Jewish speaker, called on the Polish people to face up to the sins of the past. He used this opportunity to appeal for the removal of seven 10-foot wooden crosses standing in Auschwitz-Birkenau, erected some 12 years ago by Polish-Jewish and non-Jewish youth. Wiesel stated that there is no justification for Christian crosses to be placed in Auschwitz, that for Jews these crosses are blasphemy.

Wiesel's speech generated both surprise and controversy in Poland, since for Poles, Auschwitz is a symbol of German atrocities against themselves as much as against Jews. Because of the deliberate policy of silence by the Soviets, it has been only since the fall of communism that Poles have become aware of the meaning of Auschwitz to Jews.

The fact is that for the first year and a half of its existence, Auschwitz was primarily a camp for Polish "political prisoners", and throughout the war, there was a Polish section. It thus seemed to Poles that Wiesel was being insensitive to their own tragedies and to the fact that many Poles had also been imprisoned and killed in Auschwitz.

Bishop Pieronek, who is active in Polish-Jewish dialogue, expressed surprise that those who preach tolerance should lack respect for religious symbols of another faith. He declared that there is certainly room in this huge extermination camp for both crosses and Stars of David.

### To: American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies

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### **Return of Properties**

The Polish Parliament has on its agenda many demands for the return of nationalized properties from the Catholic Church and from other denominations, as well as from previous owners who still live in Poland or now live abroad. Some come from associations and unions whose property were seized under communism for anti-government activities.

Poland, which has applied for membership in the European Union, is now confronting the issue of restitution of Jewish properties because the European Parliament has linked restitution policies to admittance.

Recently, the Parliament reached a compromise agreement with the unions. Other situations are being studied, but those whom the political situation in Poland forced to live abroad seem to have the lowest priority.

The Polish Parliament also intends to address laws regulating relations between the state and various organized religious denominations in Poland, including Jewish communities. Laws defining relations with the dominant Catholic Church are under discussion.

### **Hungary Recognizes Seized Jewish Properties**

Reuters reports that Hungary agreed to help the 20,000 Holocaust survivors still living in Hungary with money obtained from nationalized Jewish properties. This agreement is considered to be a precedent for other European countries to follow.

The agreement between Hungary and the US-based World Jewish Congress does not, however, seem to provide for any restitution to survivors living abroad.

American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies  
1583 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138  
tel. (617) 547-7701