This paper addresses three key issues. Firstly, it gives a general overview about how being a Jewish student in Poland is different from being a Jewish student elsewhere. Secondly, it shows examples of several student and semi-student Jewish organisations in present-day Poland. Finally, it presents a brief analysis of changes in these NGOs in the given period (1999-2010). The paper is entirely based on participant observation – the author was for a number of years a Jewish student in Poland and was – or in some cases still is – a member of several of the mentioned organisations and through friends or other channels is exposed to the functioning of those organisations to which he does not belong himself. For this reason, statements in this paper should largely be treated as an insider’s opinion or feelings, rather than as academically verified ‘knowledge’.

1. How being a Jewish student in Poland is different from being a Jewish student elsewhere

Two specific aspects of the Polish-Jewish student’s existence have been identified for the purposes of this paper: a) being the constant subject of attention and b) having limited ‘Jewish infrastructure’ in and around campus.

a) Being the subject of attention

A Polish-Jewish student studying in Poland can easily feel under constant observation and may be often approached as a ‘living example’ of a member of a once huge and incredibly significant – but today supposedly practically non-existent – Jewish minority in Poland. This attention, and often unhidden surprise, is augmented by the fact that between 1968 and 1989 Jews were practically non-visible in Polish public life. After the Holocaust and the post-war experiences of 1946 pogroms, followed by the official antisemitic propaganda of 1957 and 1968, the few Jews left in Poland were in most cases very cautious in revealing their Jewishness. It was not uncommon for parents not to tell their children about their Jewish roots and few of those knowing of their origins would make this knowledge public. As a result, many of today’s young Poles have never had the opportunity to meet a person who is

---

1 This paper was originally presented at ‘Poland: A Jewish Matter’ symposium in London on 30 May 2010 and later the same year published by Adam Mickiewicz Institute in the proceedings of this symposium. Please cite as: Piotr Goldstein, “Jewish Student NGOs in Present-day Poland (1999-2010): An Insider’s View,” in Poland: A Jewish Matter, eds. Kate Craddy, Mike Levy, and Jakub Nowakowski (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2010), pp. 65-73.
openly Jewish. Their knowledge about Jews, therefore, is often limited to whatever can be found in the textbooks, the internet or the media.

Many young people also doubt that there is anyone ever willing to openly say ‘I am Jewish’. Some even think that the word ‘Jew’ is offensive and will try not to use it in conversation with someone who is possibly Jewish. Because of this, a Polish-Jewish student will hardly ever be asked ‘Are you Jewish?’ by his or her classmates. The question ‘Where did your ancestors come from?’ is posed instead. The author of this paper would usually answer, ‘from Egypt’, trying to bring the asker’s attention back to the absurdity of the question. Similarly, a Jewish student may notice that their last name is believed to be nothing else but a synonym of the word ‘Jew’. ‘What is Goldstein’s last name?’ would be asked by those who always thought that ‘Goldsteins’ and ‘Rosenfelds’ could only exist in Israel or America, assuming instead that such surnames would only be used in Poland in order to avoid saying ‘my Jewish friend’.

On the other hand, a Jewish student’s teachers may also be (positively) surprised by a Jew in their class. One then becomes a living example of those Jews who came to Poland 1000 years ago, selling fish in medieval markets, contributing to the growth and prosperity of Polish towns, and of the many other Jews they know only from textbooks. More than that, since it is thought that no one can know better about Jewish things than the Jews themselves, one is often believed to be an expert on everything Jewish: Hebrew, Yiddish, Torah, Talmud, Hasidism, traditions, the history of the Jews here – the history of the Jews there...

Finally, a Polish-Jewish student in Poland is the subject of attention of local and international media, as well as of researchers and tourists. To date, a huge number of newspaper and magazine articles on ‘Jewish Revival in Poland’ have been published in English, Polish, Hebrew, French and many other languages. TV and radio interviews have been recorded as well as documentary and semi-documentary films. Some of these intend to give a general overview, while many others focus on personal stories. In any case, the number of productions is so large that probably each community-involved Jewish student in Poland has participated – or has at least been asked to participate – in several newspaper/magazine/radio/TV/film interviews/productions on the subject.

As well as such interviews, one may also be asked to participate in academic research (both Polish and international) or to tell one’s story to tourists. Some of this research is without doubt of a very high standard and many of the visitors to Poland are well informed. Yet there is also some ignorant research and ignorant tourism. For some tourists a synagogue in Łódź or Warsaw is just one more sight on a long list of things to see in Europe. A Polish-Jewish student photographed inside or outside the synagogue building may then be fairly sure that his or her picture will later be shown alongside the noble company of a zebra from the Berlin zoo, or the Charles Bridge in Prague. The label ‘the last Jew of Poland’ may also be there underneath the photograph.
b) ‘Jewish infrastructure’ in and around campus

It should first be noted that many, if not most, Polish universities do not have campuses. For example, Łódź University has its departments and institutes spread across the city. Yet, for the Jewish student, the biggest difference between universities in places like the USA or the UK and their own is what could be called ‘Jewish life on campus’. Institutions like Hillel do not exist in Poland. Events like a ‘bagel lunch’ – the chance to meet fellow Jewish students between one class and another – do not happen. Kosher, or even ‘kosher friendly’ (e.g. vegetarian) food is either not available or very hard to get. Jews are not visible at university the way they are in countries with larger Jewish communities.

It would be wrong, however, to say that Jewish student life in Poland is non-existent. There are Jewish students at Polish universities, as there are also Jewish teachers. The existence of Polish-Jewish students has been acknowledged by Polish law, which now allows Jews not to sit exams during Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. There is also a variety of organisations and initiatives run by, and for, local Jewish students.

2. Jewish (student) organisations

The following Polish-Jewish student and semi-student organisations will now be considered: PUSZ, ZOOM, Czulent, Yalla! and Tslil.

PUSZ (Polska Unia Studentów Żydowskich – the Polish Union of Jewish Students) is the only one of these with ‘Jewish students’ in its name. It was a member of the European Union of Jewish Students, and was for several years the only Jewish student organisation in Poland. In 2000 it had approximately 300 members all around the country. The Union organised summer and winter camps, which often involved cleaning Jewish cemeteries or exploring the remains of Jewish communities in Polish towns and villages. It also brought together its members from different cities during Shabbatons, conferences, leadership trainings and other meetings organised centrally or by local branches, in places like Wrocław, Łódź, Kraków, Bielsko Biała, Poznań or Gdańsk. Many of the leaders of today’s Jewish Communities and other Jewish organisations and initiatives around Poland originated from within PUSZ, which existed between 1992 and 2007.

ZOOM (Żydowska Ogólnopolska Organizacja Młodzieżowa – The Polish Jewish Youth Organization) is considered to be the successor of PUSZ. Certainly, it was started soon after PUSZ was dissolved, and many PUSZ members joined ZOOM. One of the main differences between the two organisations, however, is that ZOOM seems to have much less desire than PUSZ to operate outside Warsaw. Its summer and winter camps are attended by young Jewish people (mostly students) from around the country, yet its everyday activities are mostly Warsaw-based. Another difference is that it relies on Jewish sponsorship much less
than PUSZ did: its office is not located in the Jewish community buildings in Warsaw and many of its projects are funded by EU sources rather than by Jewish ones.

Czulent and Yalla! are local organisations operating in Kraków and Łódź respectively. Czulent is a well-established NGO with an office, a professional website, good PR and a significant budget. It has run projects which are large-scale and well visible. The organisation even has its own library. Yalla! is the opposite — it has no office, is not very well known and operates on zero budget. Members communicate through a mailing list and Facebook, project initiatives are irregular and often spontaneous, and most of the programmes are not externally visible. Yet Yalla! should not be seen as insignificant — its simple get-togethers, Jewish cooking, Israeli dance classes or Yiddish film nights help create a form of Jewish student life in the city.

Tslil Jewish Choir of Łódź and Warsaw is not a student or youth organisation per se. The age range of the singers is from 16 to over 75. Nevertheless, many of Tslil’s members are students. In its short history, the organisation has already proved to be an important link between the Jewish community and those Jews who are not in any way engaged in Jewish communal life. The choir, which includes both Jews and non-Jews, is a safe way-in for people who, having lived their lives in non-Jewish settings, would feel overwhelmed by membership in a Jewish community or other uniquely Jewish organisation. It is also important as a truly inter-generational organisation where young people have the chance to work on an equal basis with the peers of their parents and grandparents.

As well as the larger Jewish student or semi-student organisations (of which this paper does not intend to list all) there is also a number of smaller short- or long-lived Jewish student-run initiatives, some of which maintain their status as an informal group, while others are legally established NGOs. It should not, therefore, be a surprise to hear about the existence of Polish-Jewish scouts, a pan-Baltic Jewish student union, an association of young Jewish women or a local Jewish film club.

It would probably not be a too great a generalisation to say that there are three main elements in all of the above-mentioned organisations: recreation, integration and education. All three are tightly interlaced. These NGOs and informal groups bring people together and make sure that, while they have fun and get to know each other, they also learn, usually about Jewish things. In this respect it is easy to see the similarity in all these organisations.

At the same time one could probably say that the wide spectrum of Jewish student opportunities is valuable. Why would a young Polish Jew not do traditional kosher cooking with Yalla! on Monday, learn Yiddish and Hebrew songs with Tslil on Wednesday and celebrate Shabbat with ZOOM on Friday, meeting fellow Jewish students from all of these places?
3. What is changing?

The author of this paper has noticed four important factors that changed the nature of operation and existence of Jewish student and semi-student organisations between 1999 and 2010. These are:

   a) The on-going change in attitude towards Jews in Polish society;

   b) A trend in the organisations to diversify their funding sources by including non-Jewish sources;

   c) The rapidly growing level of access to cheap internet and mobile communication, as well as the popularity of community portals;

   d) Birthright-Taglit (sponsors of heritage trips to Israel).

a) Changing attitudes towards Jews

The situation described earlier – that is that many young Poles have never had the chance to see a ‘real Jew’ and that many may consider the word ‘Jew’ offensive – is fortunately, for various reasons, changing. As Polish society becomes re-accustomed to the existence of Jewish life in Poland, Jewish student organisations are more and more confident in their existence. One visible example of this is the inclusion of photographs of members on organisational websites. While in the late 1990s and early 2000s PUSZ, as other Polish-Jewish organisations, had a strict policy of not publishing photographs of its members on the Internet, today the websites of most, if not all, Jewish organisations are full of sharp-focus photographs of local Jewish faces. This shows how the Jewish community in general, and Jewish student organisations in particular, have become less and less hermetic and ever more often are understood as a normal element of the Polish social landscape or – in the case of the student NGOs – of university life.

b) Funding

Some level of non-Jewish sponsorship has always been visible in the budgets of Jewish student NGOs in Poland. Yet for many years their finances depended mostly on the handful of international Jewish foundations that were well-established in Poland. Today, however, Jewish student organisations have widely diversified budgets. Polish government programmes, European Union schemes and foreign Jewish and non-Jewish foundations (along with local Jewish and often non-Jewish sources) all sponsor the various activities of Polish-Jewish students. This contributes to an increased independence and, again, to the confidence of these Jewish student associations.
c) Cheap Internet, mobile phones and Facebook

Back in the late 1990s and early 21st century, communication within organisations – and particularly on a national scale – was one of the biggest challenges of Jewish students in Poland. Internet was expensive and not available to everyone, and the same was true of mobile phones. PUSZ needed a significant investment of time and money by its leadership and volunteers just to inform its members of new activities: to send out letters or to make phone calls, which were also quite expensive at that time. It is no secret that huge phone bills were one element of the ‘financial problems’ that led to the dissolution of PUSZ.

Tslil, established in 2003, has never had this kind of problem. Since its very beginning it has communicated with members mostly through text messages (SMS) sent by the board from special websites either for free or for very little money. For ZOOM even this expenditure is not necessary – it has a Facebook group which is all it requires for effective communication. Today’s student members of ZOOM not only have the Internet at home but usually are also able to check for new messages on their handheld devices. It is also this change in availability of internet and cheap mobile communication that has made it possible for Yalla! to operate on a zero-budget. A Yahoo group, text messages and facebook are all used to arrange get-togethers with no extra cost or serious time investment for anyone.

d) Birthright

Recruiting new members was another major challenge of Jewish student NGOs in Poland. As noted before, not only were many young people afraid to disclose their Jewish origins, many did not even realise them. For Jewish student organisations to rely on only a small group of active members was often a problem.

Jewish student leaders would recruit new members for their organisations through appearing in the Polish media or through personal contacts and ‘marketing’ within the Jewish community. But the influx of new members was slow.

The establishment of the Taglit-Birthright Israel programme and its introduction to Poland has changed these dynamics. Nowadays, groups of ‘newly discovered’ young Jews depart from Poland to Israel, every winter and summer, to return with new Polish-Jewish friends and often with a desire to stay engaged in Jewish student life in Poland. These young people fill the ranks of existing Jewish student organisations and enrich them with their fresh enthusiasm.
Conclusion

Jewish student life in Poland is still incomparable to Jewish student life in countries with larger Jewish communities. It is unique not only because of the small size of the Jewish minority in Poland but also because of the level of attention it receives both within and outside the country. Jewish students in Poland are associated with a range of organisations which differ in size, budget, target group, etc. Yet, it can be said that all these organisations complement each other and contribute to a common goal of integrating and educating (in a Jewish sense) young Polish Jews. Globalisation and the spread of new technologies have had a visible impact on the functioning of Jewish student and semi-student NGOs. The wide accessibility of Internet, cheap mobile communication and Facebook are some of the factors which make these organisations ever more efficient and at the same time visible and accessible. The Birthright program has also been significant for the Polish-Jewish student NGO scene as it has guaranteed a regular influx of new members and new energy into these associations. All in all, building Jewish student life in post-1989 Poland is an on-going process and we are still to see how it will develop.