and create a strong infrastructure. Jonathan Ornstein, director of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Kraków believes that steps have been taken so that the next leaders in the Jewish community, the next chief rabbi, the next director of the JCC, will be local, a true sign of permanence and sustainability in Jewish communities in Poland.

For Jews and non–Jews, especially, this “discovery” of Jewish identity in Poland is a burgeoning field of study at the university level in post-communist Poland. Polish secondary schools are now teaching about the Holocaust, although the role of Jews in Polish history is still a largely unexamined area at that level. Along with the scholarly explorations there are also social explorations of Judaism and Jews. Since 1989 there has also been an increase in the amount of literature, particularly novels, which demonstrate a shift in the portrayal of Jews as “Others” who are part of Polish society not outside it. There has been a renewal of interest in Jewish culture, Jewish customs, Jewish music, and Jewish life as evidenced by a variety of museum exhibits and cultural festivals.

The following essay is from the perspective of a young man who grew up in Poland in the post–Communist era. He looks at Jewish identity in twenty-first century Poland and what kinds of organizations are available for Polish-Jewish young people to strengthen their identities and to create bonds with other young people. He closes with reflections on what the future holds for the children of the next generation.

**Jewish Student NGOs in Present-Day Poland (1999–2013): Being Here**

*by Piotr Goldstein*

All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all.—Reb Nachman of Bratslav

This essay 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 organizations in present-day Poland. Finally, it presents a
brief analysis of changes in these NGOs in the given period (1999–2013). The essay is entirely based on participant observation and in particular autoethnography (Marechal, 2009): 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 organizations and through friends or other channels is exposed to the functioning of those organizations to which he does not belong himself.

**How Is Being a Jewish Student in Poland Different from Being a Jewish Student Elsewhere?**

Three specific aspects of the Polish-Jewish student’s existence have been identified for the purposes of this essay: (a) being the constant subject of attention; (b) living with (the memory of) the Holocaust; (c) having limited “Jewish infrastructure” in and around campus.

**Being the subject of attention:** A Polish-Jewish student studying in Poland can easily feel under constant observation and may often be approached as a “living example” of a member of a once huge and incredibly significant—but today supposedly practically non-existent (Serraf, 2010; Smith, 2007)—Jewish minority in Poland. This attention, and often not hidden 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 anti-Semitic propaganda of 1957 and 1968, the few Jews left in Poland were in most cases very cautious about 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 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 chapter 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 (Easton, 2012; Ingram, 1997; Liège, 2000; Tzur, 2013). 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 Jewish student in Poland who is involved in the community 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, the Jewish student 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 (e.g. Bilewicz, 2007; Fleming, 2003; Gudonis, 2003; Krajewski, 2005; Reszke, 2013) 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.

Living with (the memory of) the Holocaust: Along with the many researchers, journalists and tourists often comes astonishment about the pos-
sibility of living “so close to Auschwitz” or “so close to the ghetto.” The aston-
ishment is even greater when it is found out that there is a Jewish student 
living in the very city of Oświęcim (on the outskirts of which stands the infa-
mous camp), or that some of us live not close but in the areas of former 
ghetto or even in former ghetto houses, something which is not difficult 
when you live in Łódź where the ghetto occupied a large part of the city and 
where most buildings survived the war.

How this is possible, or how this is difficult, is very personal and there 
is no one good answer to the above questions. One thing to consider is that 
despite the internationally announced economic boom in Poland (Dougherty, 
2009) deciding where to live is not an option for everyone. People who live 
in the old ghetto houses in Łódź, Jews and non–Jews, would probably not 
mind moving with their families to Miami, Florida (or at least to some more 
modern housing within the city), but this is hardly ever an option.

In this case, is a Polish-Jewish student, upon waking up, thinking about 
living in, or close to, a ghetto, or is the student instead swearing at whoever 
scheduled his or her class at eight in the morning? We do live with the mem-
ory and many of us feel to be its “guardians” (an issue explored in the section 
by Izabella Goldstein). It is hard to say, however, whether this feeling is in 
any respect related to distance. After all, is a Jew who lives five thousand 
miles from Auschwitz less responsible for remembering it than one who lives 
in the city next door?

“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 univer-
sities in places like the USA or the UK and their own in Poland 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 stu-
dents between one class and another—do not happen. Kosher, or even 
“kosher friendly” (e.g. vegetarian) food is either not available or hard to get. 
Jews are not visible at university the way they are in countries with larger 
Jewish communities. A chance to run into a fellow Jew on the way from a 
classroom to the library is very small.

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 take exams during 
Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. These legal changes and the related pol-
itics were analyzed by Fleming (2002) who suggested that these issues are related to a minority community’s ability to express its concerns in politically strategic ways.

Jewish (Student) Organizations

One expression of Jewish community life is a variety of organizations and initiatives run by, and for, local Jewish students. The following Polish-Jewish student and semi-student organizations will now be considered: PUSZ, ZOOM, Czulent, Yalla! and Tślil.

PUSZ (Polska Unia Studentów Żydowskich—the Polish Union of Jewish Students) is the only one of these organizations 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 organization in Poland. In 2000 it had approximately 300 members all around the country. The Union organized 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 members from different cities during Shabbatons (an educational event or program held during a weekend, including the Jewish sabbath), conferences, leadership training, and other meetings organized 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 organizations 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 organizations, 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 organizations 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 highly visible. The organization 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 programs 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 organization 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 organization 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 some other uniquely Jewish organization. It is also important as a truly inter-generational organization 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 organizations (of which this essay 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 too much of a generalization to say that there are three main elements in the work of all of the above-mentioned organizations: 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 organizations. 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?
What Is Changing?

The author of this essay has noticed four important factors that changed the nature of the operation and existence of Jewish student and semi-student organizations between 1999 and 2013. These are:

- The on-going change in attitude towards Jews in Polish society;
- A trend in the organizations to diversify their funding sources by including non–Jewish sponsors;
- The rapidly growing level of access to cheap Internet and mobile communication, as well as the popularity of community portals;
- Birthright-Taglit (sponsors of heritage trips to Israel).

Changing attitudes towards Jews: The situation described earlier, 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 changing, for various reasons. As Polish society becomes re-acquainted to the existence of Jewish life in Poland, Jewish student organizations are more and more confident in their existence. One visible example of this is the inclusion of photographs of members on organizational websites. In the late 1990s and early 2000s PUSZ, as well as other Polish-Jewish organizations, had a strict policy of not publishing photographs of its members on the Internet. Today the websites of most, if not all, Jewish organizations are full of sharp-focus photographs of local Jewish faces. This shows how the Jewish community in general, and Jewish student organizations in particular, have become less and less insolated and are becoming more often understood as a normal element of the Polish social landscape or, in the case of the student NGOs, of university life.

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 organizations have widely diversified budgets. Polish government programs, 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 improved funding contributes to an increased independence and, again, to the confidence of these Jewish student associations.

Cheap Internet, Cellphones and Facebook: Back in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, communication within organizations, partic-
ularly on a national scale, was one of the biggest challenges of Jewish students in Poland. The Internet was expensive and not available to everyone, and the same was true of cellphones. 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.

Unlike PUSZers in the 1990s, today’s members of ZOOM not only have the Internet at home but usually are able to check for new messages on their handheld devices also. Tslil, established in 2003, also 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 of directors 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. This change in availability of Internet and cheap mobile communication also has made it possible for Yalla! to operate on a zero-budget. A Yahoo group, text messages and Facebook were all used to arrange get-togethers with no extra cost or serious time investment for anyone.

**Birthright:** In the past, 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 realize they had them. For Jewish student organizations to rely on such a small group of active members was often a problem. Although Jewish student leaders would recruit new members for their organizations through appearing in the Polish media or through personal contacts and “marketing” within the Jewish community, the influx of new members was slow.

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

**Conclusion**

Jewish student life in Poland is still not comparable 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 organizations which differ in size, budget, target group, etc. Yet, it can be said that all these organizations complement each other and contribute to the common goal of integrating and educating (in a Jewish sense) young Polish Jews. Globalization 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 the Internet, cheap mobile communication and Facebook are some of the factors which make these organizations 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.

Jewish education, remembering, and teaching, both about the vivid pre-war Jewish life in Poland and about the Holocaust, are important elements of lives of young Polish Jews. They are shaped through work of Jewish NGOs, such as Tsidil.

Post-Scriptum—Growing (Up)

According to the recently announced results of the 2011 Polish census, the number of Jews in Poland grew from 1,133 in 2002 to 7,508 in 2012. The announcement, the analysis of which often fails to acknowledge that the change in the way the question about ethnicity was asked could be responsible for the rise (in 2002 respondents were able to choose only one ethnicity, i.e. either Polish or Jewish, while in 2011 they could choose two), was the impetus for another wave of press articles about the “generation unexpected” of Polish Jewry (e.g. Connolly, 2013). While such numbers should not be taken as an indication of the growth of the Jewish community of Poland, this community is growing, not only by new “hidden Jews” joining, but also it is experiencing natural growth. Student activists of PUSZ of the early 2000s have grown up and many of them are now parents of two, and in some cases, three little “new Polish Jews.” If a list of first names of members of PUSZ and other Polish-Jewish student and youth organizations operating in the 1990s and early 2000s was created, it could serve as a catalogue of Christian names with names of the evangelists (John, Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the apostles (especially Peter and Paul) accompanied by Christopher, Christina, and the like. At that time some Marias became Miriams, some Matthews became
Mordechais or Matans and many Saras became Sarahs. However, the children of these Jewish university graduates, shaped by their experience in Jewish organizations, will not be able to hide, will not need to change names, and are unlikely to be asked “where did your ancestor come from?” Now children, with names like Bela, Lea, Natan, Joel, Benjamin or David, will form their own, probably very different, Jewish Student Organizations. Will they be dubbed “generation very-unexpected,” or maybe “we are here!”?

(A shorter version of this essay was originally presented at “Poland: A Jewish Matter” a symposium in London on May 30, 2010, and was published by Adam Mickiewicz Institute in the proceedings of this symposium [Goldstein, 2010].)

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**Websites for Further Information**


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