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Chmielnik

## THE DAY OF JUDAISM IN CHMIELNIK

The Day of Judaism in Chmielnik is a recurring event in the calendar of the *Ośrodek Edukacyjno-Muzealny 'Świętokrzyski Shtetl'* (the *Świętokrzyski Shtetl* Education and Museum Centre). The institution is located in Chmielnik's former synagogue, originally built in the 18th century, and now carefully renovated and with modern audio-visual equipment.

### Discovering the Roots Together

The Day of Judaism in Poland is celebrated annually on 17 January, the day before the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It was an initiative of the Polish Episcopate which was initiated in 1997. The celebrations are held to help Catholics discover the Judaic roots of Christianity and deepen the awareness that – as John Paul II preached – Judaism is not external for Christians but “internal, and unlike the relationship that Christianity has to any other religion”. As highlighted by the Polish Episcopal Committee for the Dialogue with Judaism, it is also an opportunity to propagate the Vatican II Council's interpretation of those passages of the Scriptures which may have borne anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic traits in the past. The opportunity to mark these occasions with explanations about the tragic Genocide of the Jewish people and show anti-Semitism as a sin is of

great importance. The joint prayers of Jews and the representatives of Christian denominations other than Catholic within the Day of Judaism are encouraged.

Poland is the second European country to celebrate a Day of Judaism after Italy. Countries such as Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland joined the initiative later.

The Day of Judaism is celebrated in Chmielnik in mid-January (on the 17th or around that date). The first celebration in 2014 was rather modest, but it has since expanded.

Many guests have attended the annual Chmielnik event, such as Rabbi Abraham Skórka, rector of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary [*Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano*] in Buenos Aires (also rabbi to the Benei Tikva community and a friend to Pope Francis); Tanya Segal, the first female rabbi in Poland (rabbi of the Reform Jewish Community of Cracow, Beit Cracow); Avi Baumol, a rabbi from Cracow; Shalom Dov Ber Stambler, a rabbi from Warsaw, the Methodist pastor Janusz Daszuta (parson at the *Ogród Oliwny* [Gethsemane] Evangelical-Methodist Church in Kielce); along with the biblical scholar Rev. Tomasz Siemieniec PhD (researcher at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the Higher Theological Seminary in Kielce); Rev. Rafał Dudała PhD from Kielce, a diocesan academic chaplain; Rev. Piotr Nyk PhD, a Carmelite from Cracow; employees of the Institute of National Remembrance, State Archives in Kielce, the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, the Jagiellonian University, the Taube Centre for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland, the Jewish Historical Institute; and the Marshal of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship Adam Jarubas; the board member Agata Binkowska; the deputy voivode of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship Andrzej Bętkowski; and the district head in Kielce Michał Godowski. The event is widely discussed in the media.

### Celebrations in the *Świętokrzyski Shtetl*

The organisation of the Day of Judaism in Chmielnik closely follows some rules that have developed over the years. The annual points of the celebrations are: a debate amongst the delegates of Christian denominations on the theme for each particular year, a presentation of the history of the Kielce region's shtetl by local historians, discussions of the new editions of the competition 'Nasi sąsiedzi – Żydzi' ["Our neighbours the Jews"], the opening of a themed exhibition,

and the exploration of musical and culinary pieces inspired by the past traditions of the shtetl.

‘What is peace, and what it is not?’ was the topic of the debate held on 16 January 2018 during the fifth celebrations of the Day of Judaism in Chmielnik. This particular time was filled with discussions, debates, academic insights and songs. It was additionally enriched with the presence of old and young participants in the celebrations.

The organisers gladly welcomed guests from Warsaw, Łódź, Katowice, Cracow, Sandomierz, Ciechanów, Wieliczka, Miechów, Ożarów, Kielce and nearby towns, and many others. There were also many groups of young people from the Mikołaj Rey Social School Complex in Kielce, all the schools in Chmielnik, and other educational institutions.

The list of the prominent guests at the event includes the deputy voivode of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship Andrzej Bętkowski; the deputy marshal of the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship, Agata Binkowska; the deputy president of the Kielce City Council, Władysław Burzawa; the deputy school superintendent Tomasz Pleban; mayors of twinned municipalities, including Robert Jaworski from Chęciny; Tomasz Domański from the Institute of National Remembrance; delegates from the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce; employees of cultural institutions and museums, and members of the Righteous Among the Nations from Wieliczka. The Chmielnik meeting, just like throughout Poland (the 21st national celebrations), drew from the quotation: “Peace, peace, to those far and near!” (Is 57:19).

The participants in the Chmielnik celebrations listened to a debate and participated in a discussion about issues of peace alongside representatives of Judaism, the Roman Catholic Church and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

The debate’s participants were: Rev. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski (a Catholic priest of the Armenian and Latin rites), Rev. Stanisław Sadowski (of the Roman Catholic Church), Rev. Artur Aleksiejuk PhD (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church), Miriam Szychowska (the Jewish Community of Łódź) and Włodzimierz Kac (leader of the Jewish Community of Katowice). They spoke of the traditions and ways of understanding peace in their respective religions.

Włodzimierz Kac emphasised, “we are all children of Abraham”. He expressed his joy that Poland is taking noticeable care to stress the “unity of history”, the

Polish-Jewish past. Kac was also glad that there has been progress in restoring the Jewish heritage, as exemplified by Chmielnik.

“Let us think about what peace is. Is it when we allow a man with sidelocks to walk by undisturbed, or is it the fact that so many of you have come and want to talk about it with us?” asked Miriam Szychowska, a sociologist running the Jewish kindergarten in Łódź, the author of many educational, religious and cultural programs. “Is peace about paying attention to another person, or rather... a piece of mind? If my grandmother had been granted peace, she would not have been sent to a death camp”, she said further.

“I think that this is a grand historical event, as we meet and enrich each other whilst retaining our own identity,” remarked Rev. Artur Aleksiejuk PhD, a lecturer at the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw and a noted ecumenist. He stressed “it is more difficult to talk about what peace is, and not about its signs.” He also discussed the need to address other people directly, face to face, and look them in the eye. In his opinion, this is a path to peace.

Rev. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, a social commentator, poet and activist, discussed the understanding of peace in the Armenian tradition. Moreover, he presented peace-related threads from the *Kresy* [the Polish borderlands], where during the genocide committed by the OUN-UPA – many Poles were saved by Righteous Ukrainians. Rev. Isakowicz-Zaleski also remarked about the absence of peace in public debate and the media.

Rev. Stanisław Sadowski of Kielce, a biblical scholar engaged in ecumenic dialogue, referred to the Bible-reading community and analysed biblical contexts of peace and justice. He also talked about the feeling of fulfilment and harmony that peace brings.

During the discussion, the questions included the understanding of Isaiah’s ‘those far’ and ‘those near’, how to overcome prejudices, and what the role of forgiveness is in establishing inner peace amongst people.

## Presentations and Conclusions

During the conference panel, ‘Chassidic motifs in Chmielnik’ were discussed by Marek Maciągowski PhD, Director of the Centre for Patriotic and Civic Reflection in Kielce. A speech entitled ‘Społeczność żydowska w Wodzisławiu – między

kahałem, gminą a parafią. Pokój i sąsiedztwo' [The Jewish community in Wodzisław: between the *kahal*, the municipality and parish. Peace and neighbourhood] was delivered by Michał Kazimierz Nowak.

Edyta Majcher-Ociesa PhD (from the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce), and Tomasz Domański PhD (the Institute of National Remembrance in Kielce), summarised the previous editions of the 'Our neighbours the Jews' contest. Since its sixth edition, the competition has become a nationwide initiative. The goal is to restore the memory and popularise the knowledge of the Jewish communities and the functioning of shtetls in pre-1939 Poland, and the histories of Poles who saved Jews during World War II. The competition is addressed to students, and the participants are divided into three age-based categories.

The work prepared during previous editions has a wide educational application, and it has formed the inspiration for exhibitions and films. Approximately 50 students' works from the first three editions were used as the foundation of an academic publication entitled *Nasi sąsiedzi – Żydzi. Z dziejów relacji polsko-żydowskich na Kielecczyźnie z XX wieku* [Our neighbours the Jews. From the history of Polish-Jewish relations in the Kielce area in the 20th century], published by the Institute of National Remembrance in 2018.

Primary school students individually prepare drawings that commemorates the material remnants of the Jewish community in their region. Post-primary/secondary school students (individually or in groups) prepare an interview, report or film devoted to the functioning of a shtetl, or the help offered to the Jews in their area. The competition is organised by the Institute of National Remembrance, the Municipality of Chmielnik, the *Świętokrzyski Shtetl* Education & Museum Centre, the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce and the Regional Education Board in Kielce.

The social importance of this theme is confirmed by the fact that 300 students from all over Poland applied to participate in the competition in 2018.

Some of the students' workshops were held at the former synagogue, in the open air, and at the Community Centre during the 2018 Day of Judaism in Chmielnik. They were supervised by the visual artist Wojciech Książek and Zuzanna Ferenc-Warchałowska, a teacher at the Mikołaj Rey Social School Complex in Kielce. The young people had the chance to learn about the history of the city and the

fate of the Jews who once lived in Chmielnik. The workshop participants reported “While walking around the town, we stopped at the *Gęsia Studnia* [Goose Well] and took some commemorative pictures. Then, the group went to the former synagogue. There we met Józef Jakubowski, the grandson of one of the Righteous Among the Nations. Last year, he helped our students in a project on Jews saved by Polish families. We were very curious about the museum exhibition: various items in showcases around a unique glass bimah.” Divided into three groups, the students explored the Judaic culture and the permanent and temporary exhibitions. Gathered around the glass bimah in the synagogue, they took part in workshops on family life as portrayed in the Book of Ruth.

The all-day event in the Chmielnik synagogue also featured psalms sung by a vocal group composed of Monika Cetner, Zdzisław Łakomicz and Jacek Dziubel (with a violin solo by Marta Brzyszczyk). It was also possible to taste some dishes inspired by the shtetl’s culinary traditions, as interpreted by the *Bar Rondo* in Chmielnik.

### The Clergy in Kielce on the Holocaust as the Topic for an Exhibition on the Day of Judaism

The former women’s gallery in the Chmielnik synagogue hosted a 2018 Day of Judaism exhibition entitled ‘*Kościół wobec Zagłady Żydów na Kielecczyźnie*’ [The clergy on the Holocaust of the Jews in the Kielce region] prepared by *Świętokrzyski Shtetl*. The exhibition was curated by the historian Ewa Kołomańska, who familiarised the guests with the main theme. She pointed out that the event does not cover the issue thoroughly, and that the exhibition could be expanded in the future.

The collection presents the support provided to the Jewish community by the parishes, particular priests and convents in Kielce. It also displays the biographies of priests and the contribution of the Kielce and Sandomierz bishops. The exhibition outlines the historical background of those events and personalities, as well as the anti-Jewish laws introduced in Nazi-occupied Poland, short biographies and ‘snapshots’ from the occupation.