

Ten Years of the Thematic Competition for Students “Our Neighbours – Jews”

DOI: 10.25951/11140

For centuries Poles and Jews lived side by side, developing their cultures, caring for traditions and education, and giving character to the economic and trading activity in small towns. This coexistence influenced the perception of diversity and left a mark on both people's consciousness and landmarks. The Polish-Jewish relations became the main concept of the competition “Our Neighbours – Jews” because of its topicality and the need to reconstruct the common history.

The aim of the competition is to attract the participants to the regional history, and to research the reality of shtetls and these parts of the Jewish community that are not well explored. The competition has a great didactic potencial as students recall the complex Polish-Jewish relations. The development of the participants' historical consciousness is also important – they are introduced to the facts of Polish-Jewish history that are not well known for the young generation, which usually become a lesson of the multiculturalism of Poland and of tolerance on the local level. There are discovered new facts and various attitudes concerning the Holocaust, both noble and shameful. The interdisciplinary formula of the competition encourages participants to search for sources of knowledge, interesting interviewees, and unique places to visit and document. The outcome of these activities are original works prepared in various techniques: films, interviews, auditions, art. Different forms of works are assigned to participants, depending on their age.

Participants have various forms to choose from. High school students can interview a person who remembers his/her Jewish neighbours. The conversation needs to be recorded. The works can be related to various aspects of everyday life, culture, and economic and social activity of Jews. Another option is a film registering remains of the old shtetls. Participants may present, inter alia, cemeteries, synagogues, prayer houses, architecture, artwork. A historical account in the form of an essay, a film or audition devoted to the subject of rescuing Jews by Poles

can also be prepared for the competition. The authors of the best three works in each age groups are awarded and honourable mentions are also announced. The competition results are published in the annual journal "Świętokrzyskie Studia Archiwalno-Historyczne". Because of their uniqueness, all the works collected during the first three editions of the competition (2013–2015) were published¹.

The first edition of the competition took place in 2013. The seventh edition of the competition 'Our Neighbours – Jews' was organised in 2019 by the Majer Mały Education-Museum Centre 'Świętokrzyski Shtetl' in Chmielnik, Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce and the Institute of National Remembrance – Delegation in Kielce. Originally it was only intended for pupils of junior high schools and high schools in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship and in the form of art competition for pupils of primary schools. However, the formula was changed and students of the University of the Third Age can participate since 2017. The competition became a national one in 2018.

The competition is supervised by the Organisational Committee which comprises: Paweł Wójcik – Mayor (Town and Commune Council in Chmielnik), prof. dr hab. Stanisław Głuszek – Rector (the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce), dr Dorota Koczwańska-Kalita – Director of the Office (Institute of the National Remembrance – Delegation in Kielce) and Kazimierz Mądzik – Chief Educational Officer of Świętokrzyskie (Regional Board of Education in Kielce).

The Selection Board is responsible for the competition annual announcement and schedule, participants recruitment and evaluation of the works. The Board comprises: Chairperson dr Agnieszka Dziarmaga (Education-Museum Centre 'Świętokrzyski Shtetl'), Vice-Chairperson dr hab. Edyta Majcher-Ociesa (Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce), dr Wiesława Rutkowska (The National Archives in Kielce), dr Jan Główka (Museum of the History of Kielce), Aleksandra Żaczek (TVP3 Kielce – regional branch of the Poland's public television broadcaster), dr Tomasz Domański (Institute of the National Remembrance) and Secretaries Michał Brzoza, Tomasz Świątkowski and Paweł Pryt (students, members of the Student Scientific Club 'Judaica', JKU). The competition is announced yearly during the 'Day of Judaism' in Chmielnik.

The ten editions of the 'Our Neighbours – Jews' competition have had the participation of 208 pupils of junior high and high schools. Amongst the participants there prevailed individual contestants, but there were also teams of 2,

¹ *Nasi sąsiedzi Żydzi. Z dziejów relacji polsko-żydowskich na Kielecczyźnie w XX wieku [Our Neighbours – Jews. From the History of Polish-Jewish Relations in Kielecczyzna Area in 20th Century]*, red. A. Dziarmaga, D. Koczwańska-Kalita, E. Majcher-Ociesa, Warszawa 2018.

3 and 4 people. The students prepared over 100 interviews with more than 130 respondents, the majority of whom are Poles living in villages and towns. The interviews are enriched with photographs. During the competition, primary school students prepared almost 200 works of art.

The interviews cover a wide range of topics relating to the religious, cultural, economic and social activity of Jews. In terms of Jewish rituals, funerals and weddings are most commonly recalled, as well as the cyclical holidays of Shabbat and Sukkot. Poles did not participate in Jewish religious celebrations so they often remembered those that they had witnessed on the street, through a window or from behind fence. Some respondents mentioned Jewish festive outfits. They described elements of the Jewish culture using the words and phrases they knew. The majority of respondents emphasised the respect Jews had for holidays, especially Shabbat, and for their religious and spiritual activity. Everyday scenes can also be found in the submitted works. For instance, interviewee of Joanna Zachariasz recalled the fire in Niegosławice (village in Poland), where was a small shop led by a Jewish lady, Ms Joskowa: "There was a horrible hubbub and people tried to rescue what they could – usually some valuable items from their homes. But not Ms Joskowa – moaning, she tried to take off the front door of her shop. The door was of the highest value to her as it was some sort of a 'bank account'. On this door she meticulously noted debts and past-due bills of her clients. Losing the door would mean losing the evidence of the debts".

The dramatic events of WWII are also worth mentioning. Some of the interviews continue to the post-war times. The works often describe the various ways in which Jews were helped during the Second World War – giving food, offering a bed for a night or more, medical help, long-term support and hiding. The Poles could not help all the Jews, so there are stories of people refusing to help out of fear or poverty. Severe punishments, including the death penalty, were used against those who helped Jews in occupied Poland. In general, Poles helped the Jews they knew. When analysing the wartime accounts, it is important to remember that these are the memories of people who were children during the war.

The works are an important source allowing to study the complicated Polish-Jewish relations in the Second Republic, during the German occupation in Poland and after WWII. On the basis of the collected stories it can be concluded that the two nations lived side by side but not together. The relations between Poles and Jews may be called 'correct'. Polish knowledge of Jews was limited to the observed rites and was not substantively explored. Trade was the most common ground for direct contact. Jews from smaller towns usually traded in groceries produced

by Poles, selling them also to Poles. On the other hand, the Poles benefited from cash-free transactions with Jewish merchants, borrowed money at interest from them, and got their supplies on tick in hard times. The Polish were the main target of Jewish trade and craft.

Not only is the subject of the competition challenging, but it is also becoming increasingly difficult to find respondents, as eyewitnesses to these events are passing away. For these reasons it is important that students from the Swietokrzyskie Voivodeship and other regions of Poland make an effort to research the subject and collect valuable sources for historians. This motivates the organisers to continue the initiative which contributes to better understand the history of Poland in the last century. The important role of the Jewish community in Poland has been distorted and forgotten in the shadow of the Holocaust. However, it is undeniable that Jewish culture in Poland was built through interactions with Poles and members of other nations – Ukrainians, Belorussians. The competition is a reminder of this fact. It is also an important part of the research on individual and social remembrance and its transformations and the debate on the Jewish heritage in Poland.

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Zainteresowania badawcze: historia gospodarcza XX w., interwencjonizm państwowy w przemyśle w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, historia mniejszości narodowych i wyznaniowych w XX w. oraz historia policji.

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