The Polish Republic of Untruth

It didn’t take long for the recently elected government to have a troubling impact on the state of the country’s democracy.

by Konstanty Gebert
“Who murdered Kielce’s Jews during the town pogrom?”

The woman asking the question, Monika Olejnik, is Poland’s most popular TV host, an interviewer with a reputation for asking tough questions; her interviewee, a middle-aged woman, squirms nervously. This is not a trick question: The murder of 42 Jewish survivors of the Shoah by a Polish mob in the southeastern Polish town of Kielce on July 4, 1946, is a well-established fact. Nine participants were sentenced to death and executed. And yet, the woman being interviewed live, days after the 60th anniversary of the pogrom, is hemming and hawing.

“Well, there were different historical vicissitudes,” she says with a tight smile.

“So who committed the crime?” Olejnik presses on.

“Anti-Semites.”

“Meaning who? Were they Poles?”

“Well, Poles can’t exactly be equated with anti-Semites.”

Olejnik gives up. Earlier in the interview, she tried to have her guest address the Jedwabne massacre, which preceded the one in Kielce by five years. Jedwabne is equally well-documented, though the evidence became widely known only in 2000, following the publication of the book Neighbors by Polish historian Jan T. Gross. In 1941, immediately after the German conquest of Poland, the Polish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne herded several hundred of their Jewish neighbors into a barn and burned them alive. Despite these facts, the woman being interviewed didn’t waver. “Jedwabne is a historical fact that has led to many misunderstandings and very biased opinions,” she said.

“No, Poles burned Jews in a barn.”

“That’s your opinion, echoing the opinion of Mr. Gross.”

This Monty Pythonesque dialogue would be troubling no matter who the participants were. But the fact that the interviewee is Anna Zalewska, Poland’s minister of education, is chilling. She is a member of the government set up after the 2015 electoral victory of Law and Justice, the right-wing populist party led by Jarosław Kaczyński. Its short reign has fueled fears that Poland—long considered a poster child for post-communist transformation—is experiencing an illiberal backlash. After the fall of communism, Poland embraced democracy and free enterprise with a passion. This optimism came with more than a bit of arrogance—and with a total underappreciation of the pull of national glory and the dark appeal of conspiracy theories. All that was considered the baggage of the past, consigned to the garbage heap of history. It proved instead to be a harbinger.

The rise of the Law and Justice party began with a plane crash. In April 2010, a plane carrying Jarosław Kaczyński’s twin brother, Lech, then Poland’s president, and 96 members of the nation’s elite—including members of the government, military and clergy—crashed in Smolensk, Russia, while attempting to land in bad weather. The delegation had been on its way to a commemoration of the 1940 massacre of 20,000 Polish officers by the Soviets. No one survived.

Although both Polish and Russian investigations at the time pointed to pilot error as the cause of the fatal crash, conspiracy theories soon arose—namely, that the crash was orchestrated by Russia, perhaps with help from the president’s political enemies in Poland. These swirling rumors captured the imagination of the Polish public; Law and Justice, led by Kaczyński, used them as a way to destabilize the Civic Platform-led government. To be sure, it was not the only campaign talking point: Civic Platform, in power for eight years, had had its share of scandals and seemed indifferent to the social concerns of many Poles. Law and Justice offered voters social spending and national glory—and revenge.

To the surprise of half the country, it worked. The party’s presidential candidate, Andrzej Duda, received just over half of the vote in the runoff, and Law and Justice itself received just under 38 percent of the vote (with a turnout of just over 50 percent), which translated to a little over half of the seats in Parliament—giving it an unsailable mandate to govern.

The changes came quickly. The new government ignored rulings of the Constitutional Tribunal (the equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court) and declared the tribunal itself subject to its approval. Duda refused to recognize new judges elected to the court in the last days of the previous parliament, instead choosing his own judges after the ruling party pushed through new legislation that gave him greater say in who got the job. The president pardoned a former Law and Justice head of the Central Anticorruption Of-
fice, Mariusz Kaminski, while his case was in appeal. Kaminski had been sentenced to three years in jail for abuse of power during his investigation of an opposition politician, who later committed suicide. Following his pardon, Kaminski was appointed to head the Internal Security Agency. New laws threatening basic freedoms (for example, allowing electronic snooping without a warrant and admitting “fruit of the poisonous tree” evidence in court) were passed.

The media have suffered as well: More than 100 journalists were purged from public broadcast media, which was turned into a propaganda outlet. Public media’s new head, Jacek Kurski, a former Law and Justice member of Parliament, cited steady public support for the party as proof he is doing a good job. Media critical of the government were accused of being in the service and pay of dark foreign forces and treasonous former elites.

These measures have sparked waves of protests: More than 200,000 people demonstrated against the government in Warsaw in May—the biggest protest since the fall of communism—an event organized by a newly formed grassroots civic organization, the Committee for the Defense of Democracy. Abroad, the European Commission, the European Union’s governing body, censured the Polish government for its attacks on the independence of the judiciary and the media, and came close to voting on sanctions against it. Poland replied by telling the EU to mind its own business—which apparently did not include the state of affairs in Poland, a member since 2004.

The door has been opened wide to the introduction of what the new government has called one of its top priorities: polityka historyczna, or “history policy.” Senior politicians, from the president and prime minister downward, have repeatedly told Poles—and the world—that Poland has nothing to be ashamed of in its history, and that Poles should be free of the “pedagogy of shame” forced on them by previous governments.

The term “pedagogy of shame” refers mainly to the official contrition expressed by Polish presidents and prime ministers, starting in the post-communist period, for crimes committed by Poles against their Jewish compatriots. In a policy of historical honesty, endorsed by governments both
left- and right-wing, anti-Semitic crimes were acknowledged and condemned. This soul-searching and accounting was viewed on the international stage—as well as the Jewish one—first with incredulity and mistrust, then with growing appreciation and respect. Polish public opinion was another matter. Raised for generations with the (legitimate) belief that theirs was a martyred nation, many Poles found it increasingly hard to accept that their victimhood did not automatically grant them the moral high ground when it came to their behavior toward Jews during the Holocaust. The Poles are not unique in this mistaken assumption. But Poland is especially fraught because of its central position in the 20th-century killing fields, so aptly described by historian Timothy Snyder in his seminal book *Bloodlands*. Many Poles saw it as a zero-sum game wherein they had been transformed from victims to perpetrators.

In a televised presidential debate held before the May 2015 elections, Duda took advantage of this sentiment to attack incumbent Bronisław Komorowski of Civic Platform, who was elected following Lech Kaczyński’s death. He asked Komorowski why, in a 2011 letter commemorating Jedwabne, he’d acknowledged that Poles perpetrated the massacre. “Mr. President, what does your policy of the defense of the good name of Poland look like, if in your declarations you use a formulation which destroys the real historical memory?”

Duda’s words were craftily designed. He did not allege that Komorowski had lied, but rather that his words were an assault on Poland’s good name. Therefore, Komorowski’s retort—“Who does not acknowledge what happened in Jedwabne closes his eyes to historical truth”—while entirely correct, was also entirely off the mark. Duda had just comforted the voters by saying: I will defend your memory, while Komorowski will continue to threaten it.

What is truth, anyway? In the case of the Smolensk plane crash, Law and Justice voters believed the previous government had falsely attributed responsibility to Poles to cover up a Russian crime. Why, then, believe in Polish responsibility for other crimes? The Jews in Jedwabne could well have been murdered, as in innumerable other places, by Germans. Polish responsibility for the Kielce pogrom could have been a “provocation” (i.e. communists incited the pogrom to give the authorities a pretext to crack down, and to falsely paint Poles as anti-Semites). Just as in the case of Smolensk, apparently the historical record is a matter of opinion.

More broadly, the new Polish government has asked, “Whom should you believe?” Even national heroes can’t be trusted. Take Lech Walesa, the head of Solidarity and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, who served as Poland’s president from 1990 to 1995. Today, leading Law and Justice figures, including Kaczyński, claim that Walesa was a communist secret police agent, code-named “Bolek,” who was following Moscow’s orders while working to overthrow the regime.

This falsehood contains a grain of truth: Walesa had, in fact, been intimidated into reporting to the secret police as a young man, but soon after he broke off all contact with the police, eventually becoming a worker activist. The idea of his overthrowing communist rule at the bidding of the communists is grotesque and implausible, but it serves a purpose: It undermines his credibility. As post-communist Poland’s first president, he fired the Kaczyński brothers from his administration and has been an implacable adversary of the brothers ever since. If you accept the idea that Walesa was a communist stooge, everything becomes possible. It becomes imaginable that the Polish government conspired with Russia to kill the Polish president and that the historical records of Jedwabne and Kielce are a farrago of anti-Polish slander. Why believe in anything at all?

By this logic, Jan Gross, who revealed the facts of Jedwabne to the public and then followed it up with a thorough study of Kielce and postwar anti-Semitic violence, is not a groundbreaking historian, but a liar. In 1996, he received Poland’s Order of Merit for his historic research on Polish suffering under Soviet occupation. In 2015, the president’s office announced it was considering rescinding the decoration. No decision has been made, but Gross is also under investigation for the possible crime of having slandered the Polish nation. “The unresolved situation concerning Jan Gross’s order seems characteristic of creating ongoing open, still-pending, cases,” says Anna Chipczynska, a human rights lawyer who is the chair of the Warsaw Jewish Community. “This generates anxiety; no one knows what other issues can become politicized.”
Just a few days before the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre, Kaczynski made an unexpected appearance in Białystok, at a ceremony honoring the several thousand Jews burned alive by Germans in the city’s Great Synagogue. After laying a bouquet of flowers on the spot, he spoke about the need to remember that this crime was “the fault of the German state and of the German nation, which supported Adolf Hitler.” While he did concede that “on the side of other nations of Europe, also on the side of the Polish nation, shameful and criminal acts were perpetrated,” he reiterated that “the [German] guilt is clear, determined and one has to speak about it.” This guilt cannot be overshadowed by Jedwabne, he said, “a crime that occurred but has been presented in a way that has nothing to do with its real course, with the facts.”

This unsubstantiated remark was echoed by Jarosław Szarek, the new president of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)—a state research institute specializing in the examination of crimes committed by the Nazi and communist regimes in Poland from 1939 to 1989. When Szarek was still a candidate for the job, he stated unequivocally that responsibility for Jedwabne lies with “the Germans, who had in their own machinery of terror used, under duress, a group of Poles.” Since appointed, he has mitigated his views somewhat. But meanwhile, the government is preparing a law that would stifle any discussion of past crimes Poles committed against Jews. It would impose a penalty of up to three years in jail for the use of the term “Polish camps” instead of “Nazi camps,” and for alleging that “the Polish nation” shared responsibility for “German Nazi crimes.” Chipczynska is one of the many concerned by the implications of such a law. “It would make it impossible to discuss relevant issues, such as the teaching about the Holocaust or about Polish-Jewish relations,” she says. “People will fear that anything they say may be construed as contravening Poland’s raison d’état.”

Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, a native New Yorker whose entire adult life is bound up with Poland—and whose citi-
President Duda wants Poland to have good relations with Jews, yet he is also concerned that he might lose a part of his constituency if he follows these goals. This balancing act is a challenge.

On November 11, 2015, Poland’s independence day, more than 35,000 people participated in an extreme-right demonstration in Warsaw, many more than attended the official commemoration ceremonies. In the western Polish city of Wrocław, several dozen people gathered at a similar rally under the auspices of the fascist National Radical Camp party. The National Radical Camp has a long history in Poland. A fascist movement formed in 1934, it was found unconstitutional and banned by the Polish authorities a few months later. It was re-established in 1989 and for many years remained a fringe group. But in recent years it has been gaining prominence with the rising tide in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment. At the Wrocław demonstration, participants chanted, “Poland: not Islamic, not secular, but Catholic,” and “Islam, fuck off.” At the conclusion of the event, a life-size effigy of a Hasidic Jew with sidelocks (which the perpetrator would later say symbolized George Soros, the regime’s bête noire, for his support of democratic NGOs), holding an EU flag, was set ablaze to laughter and applause.

Then, in April, the National Radical Camp commemorated the anniversary of its founding with a mass held in the cathedral of the city of Białystok, bedecked for the occasion with party flags. After the mass, Father Jacek Miedlar, a Catholic priest who considers himself the chaplain of the extreme right and ends his sermons with a Nazi salute, warned participants to beware of “Jewish cowardice” and ignore accusations leveled by “Jewish scum.” Miedlar, who has since been expelled from his religious order (but not from the priesthood) for “insubordination,” had earlier warned of the threat of “genocide of Europe at the hands of Zionists and Islamists.” Taking his warnings to heart, hundreds of uniformed Law and Justice party members marched down the city’s main street, chanting “In the spring Zionists, instead of leaves, will hang from trees.” (It rhymes in Polish.)

Although the mayor of Wrocław and its local bishop have both condemned the effigy-burning, the ruling party, the government and the president have not reacted. The prosecutor’s office eventually decided not to indict the organizers of the National Radical Camp event, deciding that no laws had been broken. “It boggles the imagination that the prosecutor, in the case of Father Jacek Miedlar’s sermon in Białystok and of the march that followed, could say that there is no basis for prosecution,” says Schudrich. “Having seen the video of the march in which the slogan about ‘hanging Zionists’ was chanted, I can only say: If that is not incitement to racial hatred, what is?”

Schudrich’s outrage is widely shared by other members of the Jewish community. Sergiusz Kowalski, a former dissident who now chairs B’nai B’rith Poland, does not mince his words: “The Law and Justice government declares it is not anti-Semitic. But what counts is what one does, not what one says,” he stresses. “The government had until now only tolerated the anti-Semitism of its supporters, but the refusal to prosecute the obvious incitement during National Radical Camp’s Białystok event is a step further toward endorsing anti-Semitism.
And it is impossible to separate this from the privileged presence of National Radical Camp at state functions. This is a clear invitation of anti-Semitic extremists into the mainstream.”

Minister Wojciech Kolarsi, undersecretary of state in the president’s administration and the Jewish community’s main contact, counters that these events are anomalies: “Poles do not accept such behavior. If it occurs, these are individual cases, far removed from prevailing attitudes in our country.” He adds, “Anti-Semitism has no nationality. Anti-Semites happen in every community—unfortunately, in Polish society as well.” To Kolarsi, what’s important “is that they are met with the proper reaction, both from the authorities and from civil society.”

But politicians who have rebuked the party’s handling of such events have faced repercussions. At the 73rd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, in April 2016, Duda gave a speech praising the heroism of the insurgents and commemorating the Shoah but steering clear of all contemporary or controversial issues. Warsaw Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, a member of the opposition Civic Platform, speaking after him, denounced the presence of racism, anti-Semitism and extremism in Polish public life and the silence of the Polish political class. Soon after, Gronkiewicz-Waltz was denounced by government politicians and media for defaming Poland in front of the world and manipulating “the tragedy of the ghetto” to do so. Former conservative Civic Platform politician Jan Rokita claimed (falsely) that French President Francois Hollande “does not go around condemning anti-Semitic incidents, which is why France does not get called anti-Semitic”—while Poland, unfairly, does. Gronkiewicz-Waltz is one of nine Polish mayors who have signed the American Jewish Committee's Mayors United Against Anti-Semitism statement. With one exception, they are all members of opposition parties. The intensity of the attack on Gronkiewicz-Waltz is a prime example of the Law and Justice propaganda signature: If someone criticizes it, the critic, not that which is being criticized, is to blame.

Continues on page 61
It should be noted—and often is by Polish officials—that physical violence against Jews is all but unknown in contemporary Poland. “While we do see a rise in anti-Semitism, the number of serious incidents has remained constant and low. Poland is not Malmö [Sweden]; it is safe for Jews,” says Artur Hofman, chairman of the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland.

“I think that President Andrzej Duda really wants Poland to have good relations with Jews, and that the Jewish heritage is important for Poland,” says Schudrich. “Yet he is also concerned that he might lose a part of his constituency if he follows these goals. This balancing act is a challenge, but I believe we should engage with him and see where he ultimately stands.”

Hofman sees things similarly. “I assume that President Andrzej Duda’s declarations regarding Jews are sincere. The government does not have an interest in promoting anti-Semitism,” he says. “But there is a contradiction between their stated intention of having ‘the Polish nation rise from its knees’ and their attacks on ‘Jew communism’ and alleged Jewish wrongs committed against Poland and an honest accounting for wrongs committed by Poles against Jews.”

When the president visited the recently opened Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, he declared himself delighted by what he saw, saying that “all the youth in Poland should visit that museum.” Other positive developments have occurred. “We have observed a greater sensitivity of the new Ministry of Culture regarding issues related to cemeteries, their maintenance and preservation of their integrity,” says Schudrich. Warsaw’s Jewish community leader Chipczynska agrees: “It would seem that religious people, and Law and Justice has many Catholics, recognize the religious imperatives of others, be they of a different faith,” he says. “They make good dialogue partners.”

The Polish government has also demonstrated strong public support of Israel. During Kaczyński’s visit to the synagogue in Białystok, he said, “We have today in Europe a great wave of anti-Semitism, at times completely overt, at times completely covert, concentrating on attacks on the State of Israel. Well, let us remember: the State of Israel is the beachhead of our culture in that world, with which we have to cooperate.” Minister of Defense Antoni Macierewicz, when visiting Israel in April, was even more forthright in his praise of the Jewish state, saying, “Poland shares with Israel the same values and the same goals.”

Poland has become a vocal ally for Israel in the EU, as the Foreign Ministry makes sure to let me know in an emailed response to my questions: “We are making efforts to counteract negative phenomena which we sometimes see in Europe: We counteract anti-Semitism, but we also condemn the BDS movement—in Poland it is practically insignificant—and other cases of the discrimination and stigmatization of Israel. In discussions in EU bodies and in other international organizations, we consistently present a balanced position on the Middle East peace process, and support the development of EU-Israel cooperation.”

When Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło went with a delegation to Israel on an official visit in November—the two countries are negotiating an arms agreement—the joint statement published following an Israeli-Polish cabinet meeting contained no direct references to the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland, nor to the new government’s “history policy.” This generated some protests in Israel. Knesset member Dov Khenin, head of the Knesset caucus for Holocaust survivors, criticized the agreement in Haaretz, saying, “The Polish government is working to erase this dark chapter from its history, rather than acknowledge it and study it. The Israeli government yesterday signed an agreement that legitimizes this.”

After Minister Zalewska’s interview, multiple Polish Jewish organizations reached out to her. Together with the director of Polin Museum, they invited her to visit the museum to learn about the history of the Kielce pogrom. She never replied to the invitation. “We deeply believe that a person remains a student all their life,” says Rabbi Schudrich. “This includes the minister of education as well. We are still ready to engage the minister and educate her.” Adds Chipczynska, “She sees issues such as Kielce or Jedwabne as political, not historical. The fact that she has not to this day responded to the invitation to visit Polin is extremely disappointing to us.”

In another interview, six weeks later, Zalewska conceded Polish “co-responsibility” for the murders, but her response was less than clear. The journalist pushed her: “Someone had to set fire to the barn, and you still do not know who. IPN knows, the president knows—and the minister of education doesn’t?” asked an incredulous journalist. “Of course, yes,” the minister answered, “and we speak about this, that these places, these situations, should not be treated as the sole source of knowledge about Polish behavior toward Jews. I remind you that the [Polish] Underground State [under German occupation] punished people for murdering Jews. Therefore do let us speak about the participation of Poles in dramas and pogroms, but in historical context.”

Yet the Polish education minister still genuinely seems not to know who killed Jews in Jedwabne and Kielce; apparently, the narrative has not yet been decided upon. Different versions are being floated, and nobody knows which one will ultimately be chosen. The same is true of the Smolensk plane crash. What really happened has not yet been decided. An explosion on board? Two explosions? Artificial mist sprayed by a Russian plane to confuse the pilot? Misleading information from the Russian control tower? Even with Walesa, details are vague. Did he stop being an agent in 1981? 1989? Or maybe he never stopped and is following his controllers’ orders to this very day?

One thing, however, is certain. Under the new government, Walesa was never a hero, Smolensk was not an accident and Jews in Jedwabne were not killed by Polish anti-Semites. And this is what Polish children will be learning in school; the minister of education will make sure of it. ervice.