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Jews, Communism, and the Jewish Communists

Ten Theses

1. Marxism, radical leftist ideologies, and ‘real socialism’ constitute not only a fragment of world history, and of Polish or Hungarian history, but also a chapter of Jewish history.
2. Anti-Semites have grossly exaggerated the Jewish involvement in communism, distorted the facts, and interpreted them according to conspiracy theories. Jews were also victims of communism.
3. Jewish communists rarely cared about Jewish concerns and often virtually stopped being Jewish.
4. Some of those who had abandoned Jewishness later came back. The number of Jewish communists, and their role, was so important that other Jews must not ignore it.
5. The deepest problem is posed by the quasi-religious character of the communist involvement of some Jews.
6. There is no distinctive Jewish radicalism. There is no ‘Jewish communism’. Jews became communists because of general mechanisms.
7. It was not Judaism or Jewish traditions but the social situation that led Jews to involvement in communism.
8. Participation in evil can begin with noble and selfless intentions.
9. Moral responsibility can be indirect. Reemerging Jewish communities in Eastern Europe should face the legacy of Jewish participation in communism. However, accepting a Jewish share of moral responsibility does not make non-Jews less responsible.
10. Objective research is needed to clarify the extent and nature of Jewish participation in communism. The tragic consequences of the anti-Semitic myth of ‘Jewish communism’ should impose no taboo.

Introductory Remarks

The phrase ‘Jews and communism’ immediately brings to mind two sets of associations. The first image, common in the West, is that of the *persecution* of Jews in communist countries: the destruction of religious traditions; the doctors’ plot and, more generally, Stalin’s anti-Semitism, which almost led to the large-scale murder of Jews; the fate of *refusniks* and the discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union; official anti-Semitism in Poland in 1967–68. The second set of associations, popular in East Central Europe and beyond, is expressed as the image of ‘Jewish communism’: Jews as the founders of leftist movements and as communist leaders in the states that were governed by communist parties;

persecuting Christian religions; preeminent in the bloody communist dictatorships.

Now, the first image is true but it does not represent the total picture of the relationship of Jews with communism. The second image is false but it does point to certain facts, specifically to the large number of Jews among active communists. As Andre W. M. Gerrits puts it: the power of the association of Jews with communism comes from the fact that “it was based on elements of fiction *and* reality”.¹ The myth of ‘Jewish communism’ is only a myth. What is real is the existence and importance of *Jewish communists*. The distinction made by Gerrits had been made earlier by Jaff Schatz in the most important book-length study of the topic,² and also by me.³ This reality has been subjected to surprisingly little research.

The neglected topic—which I propose to consider now—is then not so much ‘Jews and communism’, not ‘Jews under communism’, and certainly not ‘Jewish communism’, but rather ‘Jewish communists’. In addition to seeing this topic as a subject for scholarly research I propose its less objective variant: ‘Jewish communists as a Jewish concern’. My remarks can serve only as a loose introduction to the problem that in my opinion deserves study by scholars and reflection by Jews, even by those who have never met a communist.⁴

It should also be mentioned that my interest is not devoid of personal motivation. In the 1970s, I read a remarkable book of conversations between two great writers, Czesław Miłosz and Aleksander Wat, *Pamiętnik mówiony* [Spoken diary]. Wat recalled that a certain communist leader functioned as a ‘*tsadik*’ to his followers. That leader, Adolf Warski, was one of the founders of the Polish Communist Party, was later a member of the Polish parliament, was murdered in Russia during the Stalinist terror, and happened to be my great-grandfather.

Comments on the Ten Theses

1. Marxism, radical leftist ideologies, and ‘real socialism’ constitute not only a fragment of world history, and of Polish or Hungarian history, but also a chapter in Jewish history.

Communism constitutes a relatively important part of recent Polish or Hungarian history, as well as of Russian or, say, Chinese history; clearly, it will always remain a chapter of European history, and indeed in the history of our civilization. I propose to also consider communism as a chapter of Jewish history.

By communism I mean, first, Marxism and a broader field of left-wing radicalism, and second, ‘real socialism’, the countries governed by communist parties. It is this second element, their participation in the communist rule, and the resulting responsibility for its activities, that makes the issue of the role of Jewish communists in the framework of Jewish history highly emotional. If the phenomenon of Jewish communists is seen as part of a comprehensive Jewish history, it follows that in our century, in Eastern Europe, Jews were not

¹ A. W. M. Gerrits, ‘Anti-Semitism and Anti-Communism. The Myth of “Jewish Communism” in Eastern Europe’, *Dialogue and Universalism* 11–12 (1995), pp. 27–51, p. 32.

² J. Schatz, *The Generation. The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (University of California Press, 1991).

³ In an article ‘Żydzi a komunizm’ [Jews and Communism] published in the underground periodical *Krytyka* 15 (1983), pp. 178–206, under my then pen-name of Abel Kainer. It was published in English in *From the Polish Underground. Selection from Krytyka 1978–1993*, ed. M. Bernhard and H. Szlajfer (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 353–94.

⁴ Of course, the topic has been approached by a number of scholars, such as Jacob Talmon and Erich Fromm, and by writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Israel Singer, as well as by Polish contemporary writers Julian Strykowski and Henryk Grynberg. This is, however, not enough. The theses and many of the comments presented below were published, sometimes in an expanded form, in my book *Żydzi, judaizm, Polska* [Jews, Judaism, Poland] (Warsaw, 1997). Additional considerations are contained in ‘Żydzi a komunizm’, *Krytyka*.

only among the oppressed, but *also among the oppressors!* Because we Jews were the victims of the most horrible persecutions, the very idea that some of us were among the victimizers sounds dramatic and is hard to accept. Yet it is clearly a fact.

Of course, this thesis about Jews being also among the oppressors can be accepted only if we admit that communists did oppress and persecute. I guess that very few people deny this. It is, however, true that the early communists, the revolutionaries from the period of illegal activities, were motivated by a desire to bring an end to social injustice. They wanted to create a just society and eventually produced a system of organized terror.

Let me mention just some examples showing that communism, and, more generally, left-wing radicalism, was relatively widespread among Jews, especially in Eastern Europe. I refer to facts not myths. Most Jews who left the closed traditional communities tended to support political radicalism. If they did not choose Zionism, they supported the revolutionary left. Sometimes both. Secular Yiddish culture was predominantly leftist. What is even more relevant, Jews were important in communist movements. They were prominent among revolutionary leaders, both before and after the seizure of power by the communists. Occasionally, other leaders praised Jews for this, as was the case with Engels and Lenin, for example.

Reproaching Jews for this has been common among conservatives. To give less well-known examples: in the 1920s, some Swedish experts on Russia had no doubt about the role of Jews. Alfred Jensen (neither pro-Jewish, nor anti-Semitic, I have been told) wrote in 1921 that “approximately 75 per cent of the leading Bolsheviks are of Jewish origin”.⁵ The Russian Tsar Nicholas II had said that “nine-tenths of the troublemakers are Jews”.⁶ I have no idea how close to or far from the truth this is. Anti-Semitic usage of such statements has made it very difficult to know whether they refer to facts.

Of course, there is a great difference between those who became revolutionaries in order to fight injustice and those who supported communist oppression, another form of injustice. Usually, however, idealist radicals became functionaries of the system when the opportunity arose, or supporters of the new regime if they lived elsewhere. For instance, Jewish activists in Eastern Europe and in Israeli kibbutzim were eagerly pro-Soviet in the period of terror in the later years of Stalin’s life.

In Poland, right after the Second World War, most Jewish organizations were pro-communist; they saw communists as a force that could bring security and stabilization. To be a Jew was sometimes an advantage for those ready to make careers in the emerging communist system. (Though it could also be a burden. I know examples of returning Jews who were offered career opportunities, and examples of those who were denied them—in both cases Jewishness seemed essential.) I wish to avoid a misunderstanding: I am not saying that Jewishness was ever sufficient for a career; not Jews, but loyal persons were needed, preferably those with no family ties. Jews were often perfect candidates since they were isolated, with no families, not connected to the prewar power elite, dreaming about normal lives and about protection by the state authorities.

Some Jews in postwar Poland tried to punish those guilty of the murder of their families. This is mentioned in some literary renderings by Jewish survivors, as for example in a remarkable book, recently published, by a Polish–Jewish survivor Wilhelm Dichter.⁷ His mother asked a Soviet Jewish officer in Lvov to send to Siberia a Polish neighbor who had reported to Germans and thereby sent her family members to death. The most dramatic example is provided by the recently revealed story of Solomon Morel, sadistic head of a

⁵ K. Gerner, ‘Degrees of Anti-Semitism: the Swedish Example’, in *Jews and Christians, Who is Your Neighbour after the Holocaust?*, ed. M. Bron Jr. (Acta Sueco-Polonica, No. 2) (Uppsala, 1997).

⁶ Quoted after J. Schatz, *The Riddle of Jewish Radicalism* (manuscript), p. 1.

⁷ W. Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga* [God’s horse] (Cracow: Znak, 1996).

concentration camp for Germans in Poland, immediately after the Second World War.⁸

I am aware that anti-Semites have abused those facts, distorted them, and built on their basis a mythical picture of Jewish conspiracy.

2. Anti-Semites have grossly exaggerated the Jewish involvement in communism, distorted the facts, and interpreted them according to conspiracy theories. Jews were also victims of communism.

The view that the phenomenon of Jewish communists must be seen as part of the comprehensive history of Jews is not accepted by average Jews and by many authors. They point to the fact that the existence of Jewish communists was a pretext for anti-Semites, who used it in their conspiracy theories. It is true that the myth of ‘Jewish communism’ (*żydokomuna* or ‘jewcommies’) has been one of the most sinister ideas that ever shaped European politics; it was used to justify aggressive and violent anti-Semitism, and eventually led to mass murder by Nazi Germany. And it is still used, in Poland and elsewhere, by demagogue politicians.

It is imperative, then, to remember all the facts that contradict the image of ‘Jewish communism’. Let me mention just a few. Of course, most Jews were never communist or pro-communist, and most communists were never Jewish. Various minorities were over-represented among communists. This was, by the way, a paradox because communists believed that they represented the working masses, the national majority. Most Jews did not support communism. Even in postwar Poland when the choice for Jews was limited (this is also true of Hungary) the majority of Jews were not pro-communist and most of them left Poland.

Jews were also victims of communism. Some facts, like the doctors’ plot, are well known. But the anti-Jewish practice of communism was much more fundamental. Despite the opportunities for individual careers, all Jews who wanted to continue specifically Jewish activities—be they religious, political, or Zionist—were seen as enemies by communists, including the Jewish communists. Traditional Jewish communal life was destroyed by the victorious communists. Moreover, communism created its own version of the myth of ‘Jewish (anti-)communism’: the world Trotskyite/Zionist conspiracy. As a matter of fact, the picture of ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ was used by communists and anti-communists alike.

The persecutions of Jews took place not only when large campaigns against ‘Zionists’ were mounted, but also when the Jewish communists were most influential, as for example in the late 1940s in Poland, when many Jews were sent to prison for ‘speculation’, that is, doing business. And those who really tried to be active as Zionists could become ‘prisoners of Zion’ in each communist country.

Anti-Semitism has always existed on the left. Some revolutionaries, not excluding the young Marx, were ready to treat capitalism as an essentially Jewish phenomenon. In fact, the specter of ‘Jewish communism’ haunted the communist parties from the very beginning. The over-representation of Jews caused “an embarrassment and a political liability” to communist parties. This is a largely neglected story.⁹ To give a specific example: in 1948, a short time before his (temporary) removal from the chairmanship of the Communist Party, Władysław Gomułka wrote a letter to Stalin in which he stated that he saw “the necessity not only of stopping the increase in the percentage of the Jewish element in the state and party apparatus,

⁸ The story was described by J. Sack in *An Eye for an Eye* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁹ A. W. M. Gerrits, ‘Anti-Semitism and Anti-Communism’, pp. 42–43.

but also of gradually reducing this percentage.”¹⁰

Sooner or later, there were anti-Semitic purges in most communist parties in the hope of achieving their “national purification”. That revealed a deeper phenomenon. As Adam Michnik rightly observed, in Poland the anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual campaign of 1968 was the culmination of an attempt to legitimize the regime by appropriating Polish fascist traditions, together with that nation’s virulent anti-Semitism.

3. Jewish communists rarely cared about Jewish concerns and often virtually stopped being Jewish.

The view that the phenomenon of Jewish communists must be seen as part of the comprehensive history of Jews is not accepted by average Jews for another important reason. Jewish communists were so unrepresentative, so far removed from the mainstream of Jewish life that, say many Jews, their activities do not deserve to be included in Jewish history.

Communists of Jewish descent were alienated and tried to be “*plus catholiques que le pape*”. They were generally “not especially interested in the Jewish issue”.¹¹ For other, non-communist Jews the government was never free of anti-Semitism, even in the presence of Jews in power. One emigrant, Bernard Goldstein, complained that Jews who, like Minc, Berman, Zambrowski, or Borejsza, occupied top positions in the communist ruling elite, did not bother to help the Jewish community. “They were hired servants of the dictatorship”, he wrote.¹² Among the most significant features of Jewish communists was their desire to leave the Jewish world, often to stop being Jewish, so that at least their children would have no Jewish sentiments, and no Jewish problems. I, as well as many of my friends, know this from our own experience.

What is even more important, communist practice was invariably directed against Jewish traditions and communal life, and it may rightly be called anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitic expression was forbidden but Jewish life was restricted as much as other traditions and eventually even more. It is undeniable that Jewish communists acted not as Jews but as communists; they did exactly the same things that all other communists in similar positions did, and specifically Jewish concerns could not influence their decisions. Even traditional Jews could understand that point. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote that Jewish Bolsheviks “wanted to convince Stalin that they were first and foremost communists rather than Jews”.¹³

The only exception were the communists active *among* Jews. They stressed their Jewishness but fought against Jewish traditions. The rare Jewish communists who in postwar Poland wanted to be active *as* Jews referred to “the progressive Jewish nation under the auspices of Comrade Stalin”.¹⁴ They expressed Stalinist ideas in Yiddish. But even they wanted in the long run to finish with Jewish distinctiveness. They seemed to assume that in the future ideal world there would be nothing specifically Jewish. One proof of this is that they raised deJudaized children. Another was that in postwar Poland they were “unhappy about the government’s policy of allowing Jewish emigration in 1949–50”, and tried “to sabotage it by delaying and otherwise obstructing the issue of documents required for exit

¹⁰ The letter was discovered in Russia, and presented to the public by A. Paczkowski (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 18–19 December, 1993, p. 17.).

¹¹ A. W. M. Gerrits, ‘Anti-Semitism and Anti-Communism’, p. 46.

¹² Quoted after one of the most important contributions to the study of our topic, K. Kersten’s *Polacy, żydzi, komunizm, Anatomia półprawd 1939–1968* [Poles, Jews, Communism: An Anatomy of Half-Truths] (Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1992), p. 81.

¹³ *Midstream*, January 1997, p. 40.

¹⁴ K. Kersten, *Polacy, żydzi, komunizm*, p. 78.

applications”.¹⁵

Communism was, among other things, a form of assimilation. To some, this “red assimilation”, to use the phrase of Ozjasz Thon, “that repulsive red assimilation—spiritual desolation among the youth”¹⁶ seemed the most promising way. It was often efficient—up to a point. When they became rejected or just disenchanted they often ‘regressed’ to Jewishness.

4. Some of those who had abandoned Jewishness later came back. The number of Jewish communists, and their role, was so important that other Jews must not ignore it.

For anti-Semites, the number and visibility of Jewish communists means that communism was Jewish and that Jews were in power. This is nonsense. In fact, it is easy to show that the presence of Jews was politically unessential, be it in Poland, Hungary, or in other countries. I think it is evident that even if there had been no Jews in these countries after the war, the political developments in the post-Yalta world would have been the same. If so, is the presence of Jews among communists a noteworthy occurrence? And why should we care now? From the perspective of the contemporary Westerner the story of Jewish communists seems rather exotic, an unimportant dead end of Jewish history.

I disagree with this point of view. It is true that most of them were strongly un-Jewish, that is, they tried hard to abandon their Jewishness. Some authors maintain that no relationship existed between their origins and their communism.¹⁷ After all, they clearly did not act *as* Jews. However, many of them came back to the Jewish world when the communist world rejected them. Also, they had Jewish family members. One striking example is Jakub Berman, number-two in Stalinist Poland, who was very far from paying heed to Jewish concerns; at the same time, his brother, Adolf, was a left-wing Zionist who emigrated to Israel. Also, many Marxist Jews had a strong Jewish identity and were ‘Jewishly’ active. Bundists and left-wing Zionists believed in socialism and in revolution in a similar fashion to communists.

Above all, the size of the phenomenon should not be underestimated. Isaac Bashevis Singer recalled how in the 1920s, in Warsaw, in the coffee shops attended by Jewish writers and journalists “everyone” was looking forward to revolutionary changes, and he alone was “living in the past”. We are not talking about a handful of individuals. It was a social phenomenon: radical leftist alternatives were dominant in some Jewish circles.

Also, it is a fact that Jews holding high official positions in postwar Poland—as well as in Hungary, Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Lithuania—were, relatively speaking, very numerous. Not as numerous, though, as the anti-Semitic stereotype to the effect that ‘they were all Jews’ has it. In 1945, the bulletin of the London-based Polish Telegraphic Agency stated that “all official positions in ministries and state offices were filled by Jews”.¹⁸ Krystyna Kersten reports a private note by Bierut, the leader of Stalinist Poland, who recorded that while there were 438 Jews among 25,600 employees of the state security forces (1.7 per cent), 67 (13.4 per cent) of the top 500 security officers were Jewish.¹⁹ According to internal statistics compiled by the Polish Ministry of Interior (made available by Andrzej Paczkowski) in the period 1944–1956 almost 30 per cent of top officers were Jewish.²⁰ In 1953, Ostap

¹⁵ J. Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 252.

¹⁶ In the introduction to the monumental volume *Żydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej* [Jews in Reborn Poland] (Warsaw, 1928).

¹⁷ This point has been argued by, among others, my father (Warski’s grandson): ‘Fakty i mity. O roli żydów w okresie stalinowskim’, in *Więź* (1997), pp. 109–22. English translation: ‘Facts and Myths: On the Role of the Jews during the Stalinist Period’, in *Więź Special Issue: Under One Heaven* (Warsaw, 1998), pp. 93–110.

¹⁸ K. Kersten, *Polacy, żydzi, komunizm*, p. 79.

¹⁹ K. Kersten, *Polacy, żydzi, komunizm*, pp. 83–84.

²⁰ ‘Aparat bezpieczeństwa’, in *Instytucje Państwa Totalitarnego*, research report of the Institute of Political

Dłuski wrote that in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there were “8 directors of departments of which 5 were Jews, [while] for the 12 available posts of deputy directors only 4 were nominated, among whom 3 were Jews, and of 28 division managers 18 were Jews.”²¹

In Poland, *żydzi w UB*, that is “Jews in the security forces” has become a standard image. This is an expression of anti-Semitic attitudes. There is no reason to believe that these posts were occupied by Jews *because* they were Jewish. But even if we reject the stereotype and the generalization, it is wrong to ignore the above-mentioned figures as irrelevant. Communism was—and continues to be—perceived as ‘the rule of Jews’, even by persons who were far from being anti-Semites. In 1996, the posthumous diaries of two important personalities—the prominent writer, Maria Dąbrowska and another well-known writer and journalist, Stefan Kisielewski—were published in Poland. Anti-communist Kisielewski wrote that “Jews have always loved communism”, but also that “Poland without Jews is the saddest possible Poland”.²² Both writers mentioned “the ruling Jews” as an evident fact of Stalinist Poland.

This impression was probably partly derived from the fact that during the Second World War Jews were seen as victims, only victims, and nothing but victims. However, suddenly they were important, the “resurrected Judas”.²³ The image of Jews participating in power and in state administration incomparably more than had been the case in prewar Poland, was so strange to Poles that it was considered as conspicuous.²⁴ Despite all these reservations, the fact remains that communist Jews were numerous and influential. I believe that this fact should be incorporated into their thinking about Jewish history by scholars and by ‘average’ Jews alike. And to me the sheer number of communist Jews is not the only and not even the most important aspect of the problem.

5. The deepest problem is posed by the quasi-religious character of the communist involvement of some Jews.

I can certainly understand Jews being pro-communist in certain periods. In the polarized Poland of 1946 they unfortunately had little choice in the selection of allies. Communists could be seen as the only force that could efficiently defend Jews against anti-Semitism. This resulted in a vicious circle: the more Jews were afraid, the more they relied on the communist authorities—and at the beginning of the postwar period on the Red Army itself²⁵—and the more they relied on them, the more they were threatened and the more afraid they became. It was hard to step out of the circle. What then is the problem (what I see as a Jewish problem)?

The character of the alliance of Jews with communist rulers was not determined. The cooperation of Jewish leaders with victorious communists was rather natural.²⁶ What they could have avoided was the quasi-religious zeal with which so many of them assumed communist positions. For some this had begun much earlier. The revolution was perceived by some Jews in quasi-messianic terms. The fanaticism of the early revolutionaries was not weaker than in the most extreme religious sects. The party became their family, Stalin their Messiah. To understand the phenomenon of communism, we must perceive it also as a quasi-religious movement. Jewish leftist intellectuals produced commentaries on Marx, treating his work much as ‘holy’ scripture. According to testimonies gathered by Schatz, in prewar

Studies (PAN, 1994), p. 61.

²¹ Quoted after a manuscript by D. Stola, *The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland 1967–1968*, endnote 10, p. 79.

²² S. Kisielewski, *Dzienniki 1968–1980* (Warsaw: Iskry, 1996).

²³ A. Smolar, ‘Tabu i niewinność’ [Taboo and Innocence], *Aneks* 41/42 (1986), pp. 89–133, p. 110.

²⁴ This aspect has been stressed by J. T. Gross in *Upiorna dekada* [The Horrible Decade] (Cracow: Universitas, 1998).

²⁵ This was described by H. Grynberg in the novel *Zwycięstwo* [Victory].

²⁶ See the chapter about the cooperation of Jews with state security in J. T. Gross’s *Upiorna dekada*.

prisons they formed communist ‘*yeshivahs*’, adapting Talmudic dialectic *pilpul* methods to the study of their literature.²⁷ After the Second World War the prewar communists entered the state of ‘holy madness’. Even those who survived in Russia were not shaken in their faith. Messianic anticipation was transformed into enthusiasm. Politics was perceived “in truly mystical terms . . . They saw themselves as active in . . . the beginning of a new era.”²⁸

Ex-communists often presented their experience using the metaphor of the “God who failed”. Sergey Bulgakov described revolutionaries as adherents of a “religion founded on atheism”.²⁹ Nikolai Berdyaev was among the first to show that secularized Messianism was the key to understanding modern revolutionaries. Modern—and obviously not only Jewish.

It must be stressed that fanaticism was characteristic of all ‘believing communists’ (as distinct from the pragmatic, career-oriented communists in the period of communist rule), and not just of Jewish communists. Jewish communists expressed their quasi-religious zeal in a Jewish style. The Messianic-like intensity, and the uncritical belief that communists would end both anti-Semitism and discrimination of all kinds, made them ready to use any means to make possible the building of the new communist order. That is why even well-meaning and humane people could participate in the system of terror. I see a deep problem here, and a matter of concern for Jews, because it shows the dead-end of the Jewish religious fervor and Messianic yearnings when directed to false gods.

One can ask, however: how important is the Jewishness of those leftists and communists? If this is just a matter of style, is it perhaps irrelevant?

6. There is no distinctive Jewish radicalism. There is no ‘Jewish communism’. Jews became communists because of general mechanisms.

Is the Jewishness of Jewish communists relevant? My answer is that it may be irrelevant, but we have no right to assume that this is indeed the case. It needs to be proven. Otherwise, we would be doing just what anti-Semites do when they assume that communism has a Jewish nature, only in reverse. What must be recognized is the existence of a genuine problem here.

Have some elements of Jewish tradition or the Jewish condition influenced the ideology and practice of communism? A full answer can be given only as a result of the pursuit of a comprehensive research program.

Anti-Semites in Europe have often said that Jews created communism and that communism is Jewish. Already in 1879 a report written by the Prussian police contained the conclusion that “Jewry is by nature a revolutionary movement”.³⁰ Also, Kisielewski, who was never an anti-Semite, wrote that Jews “created communism”. He added that they “should be punished for this”, but the ruling communists “punished them for alleged treason against communism”. Is there a sense in which communism can be reasonably seen as a Jewish creation? Clearly, Jews as a group did not create communism, even if Jews were prominent among its founders. Also, organized Jewish communities were not lovers of communism, even if some individual Jews were.

A comparison will be instructive. Christianity is really a Jewish creation, or rather it was at the beginning. All its founders were Jewish. It started as a Jewish sect. Communism in none of its forms has ever been a Jewish sect. In addition, Christianity depends on its Jewish—or Hebrew—roots, and must always ponder their significance. Nothing like this has ever been the case with socialism, with its many currents. If we look at the sources of

²⁷ J. Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 138.

²⁸ J. Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 249.

²⁹ Quoted after I. Shafarevich, *Le phénomène socialiste* (Paris, 1977), p. 267.

³⁰ J. Schatz, *The Riddle of Jewish Radicalism*, p. 1.

communism we see a highly complex picture. We can discern its forerunners as far back as the states of ancient Egypt or China, and in the political philosophy of Plato. The other sources were listed by Erich Fromm: “Marxist and other forms of socialism are the heirs of prophetic Messianism, Christian Chiliastic sectarianism, thirteenth-century Thomism, Renaissance Utopianism, and eighteenth-century Enlightenment.”³¹ It makes no sense to call communism a Jewish creation even in the sense in which Christianity is Jewish.

Nevertheless, it is possible to ask whether there are features of communism that make it ‘Jewish’ in some sense. How deep were the similarities between Judaism and communism, and, more generally, between Judaism and ideologies based on Marxism? Some authors stress the importance of Jewish cultural heritage, especially Messianism, prophetic traditions, the stress on social justice, the imperative to set the world right. Melvin Lasky believes that a line can be drawn “from the anger of the Biblical prophets to the modern tumults associated with 1917”.³²

As already mentioned, in order to understand the phenomenon of communism we must look at it as a quasi-religious movement. Abraham Kaplan noticed that the communist party became “in effect, a priesthood”.³³ One can be even more specific. According to Kaplan,

the communist myth of human history begins with the Eden of what they call primitive communism; man is then cursed with class differences and the class struggle, moves through the trials of a feudal and bourgeois period, enters the purgatory of socialism, and is redeemed at last in the heaven of communism. Production takes the place of Providence, ownership is sin, revolution is redemption.³⁴

What is apparent in this elegant parallel is not so much similarity with Judaism, but rather structural affinity to Christianity! The result of the analysis is completely different from the intentions of those who maintain that the nature of communism is Jewish. There is no objective reason to stress its Jewish elements rather than its Christian ones. This reminds me of an elderly Jew from the Warsaw synagogue who says he is a communist in the sense that Jesus was a communist!

Those who practice the Jewish religious tradition rarely become radicals or revolutionaries. The Jewish ideal of *tsedek* is inconsistent with the revolutionary ethos. The cultural heritage is not sufficient by itself to explain the choices of Jewish communists: while some elements of tradition support leftist and radical approaches, others favor conservatism. The tradition is more than comprehensive enough. The problem remains why one element is selected and not another.

According to some, there exists a Jewish tendency to extremism or radical solutions. Perhaps so. This is, however, not sufficiently specific. Similar characteristics are attributed, for instance, to the Russians (Berdyaev: “Communism suits the Russian soul.”) and to the French (Proudhon: Jacobinism is “a kind of moral pestilence particular to the French temperament.”).³⁵

My opinion is that, although there are similarities between the Judaic tradition and communist thinking, they are not very deep. The connection between Jews and leftist ideas and practice is not of an absolute character but limited to specific times and places. The communist fanaticism of Jews often contained Jewish ingredients but there is no specifically Jewish radicalism. I completely agree with Jaff Schatz’ solution to the “riddle of radical

³¹ Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, cited in M. Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 66.

³² M. Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution*, p. 67.

³³ A. Kaplan, *The New World of Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 188.

³⁴ A. Kaplan, *The New World of Philosophy*, p. 173.

³⁵ M. Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution*, p. 78.

Jews”: there is no “Jewish radicalism”, there are only radical Jews.³⁶ Individuals become radical as a result of a process governed by general mechanisms and functioning in their specific situations. For Jews it was a Jewish situation and Jewish heritage played a role.

Communism is not a Jewish product. Or rather, it is certainly no more Jewish in origin than many other ideas of Western civilization, including Christianity. At the same time, it is true that Jews were prominent among European and American (but not Asian) communists. The correct question is not “Why did they create communism?” or “Why is communism Jewish?”, but rather “Why was communism so attractive to Jews?”

7. It was not Judaism or Jewish traditions but the social situation that led Jews to communist involvement.

There is no distinctive Jewish radicalism. There existed, however, processes leading Jews to leftist radicalism. They had little to do with Jewish traditions, but very much to do with the situation of the Jews. The Biblical tradition of social justice only sometimes led to revolutionary involvement. It all depended on the social situation of the Jews involved.

The mechanisms responsible for communist involvement were universal. For example, feelings of hopelessness always lead to radical attitudes. In the case of Jews, the lack of hope for satisfactory careers in a society permeated by anti-Semitism resulted in a belief in the necessity of a revolutionary change in the social order. Hopelessness was widespread in prewar Europe and led to political radicalism. For Jews, only left-wing radicalism was available, as right-wing radicals were deeply anti-Semitic. Only Zionism provided for Jews a way of being both radical and right-wing.

In Poland before the Second World War there were very few career prospects for bright Jewish young people. They were not accepted. The ‘reds’ were an exception. This led to a paradox: while communism was to some Jews, and other minorities, a way of assimilating, they remained mostly among people similar to themselves, thereby perpetuating their minority status.

By hopelessness I do not mean poverty. Poor people never supported communists *only* because they were poor. Many remained conservative. On the other hand, it is extremely significant that some children from well-to-do families became Marxists or even professional revolutionaries. They did not have to escape poverty, rather they believed in a mission to help others escape poverty. Jews figured prominently among these idealists.

Another general mechanism was the attraction of radical views for *marginalized intellectuals*. They were important in cultural life, and in radical politics. According to Isaac Deutcher, the revolutionary “non-Jewish Jews” transcended the particularistic and strove for the universal. Before the two world wars, the alienation of the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia was often painful. They were neither part of the traditional Jewish community nor accepted by Gentile society. Marginality led to self-hatred, an internalization of anti-Semitism. The double marginality, ethnic and religious, produced revolutionaries who sought “to have the non-Jews become like them, alienated from traditional religious and national values. Only then would these revolutionaries cease to feel alienated.”³⁷

There is a simple proof that it was the situation rather than tradition that led Jews to communism. In contemporary Israel, although not in the first decades of the state, the Communist Party has been predominantly Arab. Again, this was caused by their social situation and not by any fundamentally Islamic or Arab characteristics of communism.

³⁶ In the book and article already mentioned.

³⁷ D. Prager and J. Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reasons for Anti-Semitism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 60.

While the mechanisms that caused Jews to participate in communism were general, the whole phenomenon does constitute part of modern Jewish history. Every radical, revolutionary, or fanatic has his or her own reasons for this attitude. They are partly personal and partly reflect one's condition or status resulting from belonging to one group or another. For Jews, those reasons reflected the Jewish condition. In *this* sense they were Jewish. These Jews had Jewish reasons, even if shallowly Jewish, and brought a Jewish color to the leftist revolutionary movements.

8. Participation in evil could begin with noble and selfless intentions.

One could still ask: why should we remember the Jewishness of the communists, especially of those who did not want to be part of the Jewish people, of Jewish history? My answer is that what Jews did is usually considered as part of Jewish history, even if *they did not act as Jews*. Lists of outstanding Jewish sportsmen are compiled for Jewish encyclopedias: why not make one of the top Jewish communists? Jewish communists did not represent Jewish interests (and Jewish Olympic medal winners did not represent Jews), but they were perceived as Jews by others, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Even if the above is accepted, one could still say that these facts belong to history and there is no reason to remember them. I disagree. My answer is that, first, the story poses a most important *moral problem*. This is my personal motive for thinking about the subject. I am not a historian but I am a committed Jew and I have ancestors who were communist leaders.

Leftist radicalism contained an inherent evil. Jewish communists took part in a system of terror. I do not say that they started out with sinister intentions. The original intentions were often pure and sometimes very noble indeed. I, for one, have ancestors who were communists, and I know that they did not want to do evil. In fact, this is precisely the reason why the lesson offered by their story is significant. It can be instructive to all. Their history can teach us something about the traps that not only Jews can encounter. The danger is universal. We have seen many idealists-turned-terrorists or fighters-against-oppression-turned-oppressors. Any case study can help us understand the mechanism of that change. And the story of Jewish communists provides excellent material for study.

If the communists had not seized power, we would have seen them mostly as idealists or fanatics, but essentially not as harmful ones. The innocence of the early revolutionaries is best illustrated by a story whose events took place in Kaluszyn, in the Russian part of Poland, in 1905. Three young revolutionaries came to the rabbinical court of the town. One shot into the cupboard and demanded "the money that the bourgeoisie entrusts when they come to settle disputes". They were shown the little money entrusted by poor orphans, brides, and widows as their inheritance or dowries. Wealthy people left promissory notes which were of no use to the intruders. Then the youth said: "Listen, Rebe, we won't take money from poor orphans and widows, although we're desperately in need of money." They also said that they would send one of their men the next day to fix the hole made by the revolver. Shortly afterwards, they left, shouting "Long live the revolution!" And then the Rebe said to his colleagues: "You see? A Jewish soul cannot be fathomed. Even their path includes pity toward widows and orphans, and on account of that God will forgive them."³⁸

This romantic view of revolutionaries is still shared by some of my American and Western friends who remember the idealistic leftists who cared about justice. As the communists took power and created a system of terror and oppression, even those

³⁸ S. Kalushin. Quoted after J. Kugelmass and J. Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden* (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 118–19.

communists who were themselves not part of the power elite—like Western communists or those who had died before the communist takeover—have been included in the universe of evil done by communists in power.

This is clearly a challenge to all communists, and not only Jewish ones. To me, however, the drama of the Jewish revolutionaries is closer and more relevant. I can sympathize with their dilemmas. I can understand the feeling that only a radical reconstruction can mend the world that produced Hitler and the Shoah. At the same time, I am horrified by the consequences of their choices and I feel ashamed. Moreover, I believe that all Jews should understand the drama and share the feeling of uneasiness.

9. Moral responsibility can be indirect. Reemerging Jewish communities in Eastern Europe should face the legacy of Jewish participation in communism. However, accepting a Jewish share of moral responsibility does not make non-Jews less responsible.

I am not responsible for the bad things done by Jewish communists, even if some of them happened to be my ancestors. The same is true of an overwhelming majority of Jews—American or Sephardic Jews certainly cannot be held responsible, and most of them have had no personal connection with Jewish communists.

Guilt can only be individual. I can be ashamed nevertheless. Even those Jews who were actively opposed to communism can feel shame. From a Jewish religious point of view, it is not irrelevant what other, even non-religious and anti-religious, Jews do. The whole house of Israel, including its rebellious members, is the partner of the *Covenant*. If one sees Jews according to a Talmudic principle, assuming all of us to be “responsible for one another” (*Kol Israel arevim ze ba-ze*), then it is hard to deny that communist ideology and even more communist practice have created a problem for all Jews. Moral responsibility can be indirect. As in a family, if one family member does something wrong the others feel bad. The stronger the identification, the stronger the feeling. Even from a completely secular perspective the fact that so many Jews lost their minds in their belief in communism can be disquieting.

There also exists a logical argument. If one can feel pride because of the accomplishment of a particular Jew, even a ‘non-Jewish’ Jew who did not act as a Jew, then by the same token one can feel ashamed because of crimes committed by Jews. Anyone who has ever taken pride in, for example, Freud’s accomplishments, should be ready to feel ashamed because of Kaganowicz in Russia or Berman in Poland. Either both feelings or neither of them.

Jewish communists have left a disturbing legacy that needs to be confronted by the re-emerging Jewish communities in East Central Europe. This is *not* to say that Jews are guilty and non-Jews are not. That is the anti-Semitic opinion and I shall have nothing to do with it. Accepting a Jewish share of moral responsibility does not make non-Jews less responsible or less morally involved. The problem of communist crimes remains a challenge for the left (obviously, I do not propose to ignore the crimes committed by the right) and for many groups and nations.

It should be evident that I am not trying to free anyone from blame, but my theses on Jews and communism have made some people think that I am talking about Jewish moral responsibility in order to absolve Christians, Poles, and everyone else. This is not the case. Communism was the trouble, not the Jews.

Conclusion

10. *Objective research is needed to clarify the extent and nature of Jewish participation in communism. The tragic consequences of the anti-Semitic myth of 'Jewish communism' should impose no taboo.*

I have argued that Jewish communists, taken together, formed a category that belongs to the history of the Jewish people (Theses 1 through 4). Jaff Schatz compares the place of Jewish communists within the general history of Jews with that of the followers of Sabbatai Zvi.³⁹ No more but no less!

There is no simple formula that explains the problem of the relations between Jews and communism, or answers the question "How Jewish were Jewish communists?" Also, there is no simple answer to the problem of the affinity between Jewishness and communism. One must apply a variety of explanations. First, one has to refer to the cultural and religious background in order to explain the Jewish flavor of communist activities. Second, one must take into account the social situation of Jews in order to understand how the general psychological mechanism leading to radicalism functioned in the case of Jews (Theses 5 through 7).

Only anti-Semitic myths provide simple solutions. They usually express a vision of a 'Jewish world conspiracy'. According to a notorious book on the 'Jewish problem' which ran to dozens of editions in Nazi Germany, Marxism represents the nature of Jews. The author explicitly referred to the tradition of theological, or rather demonological, anti-Semitism. He wrote that "the Jew is the devil incarnate".⁴⁰ This, incidentally, shows that theology is as important in the analysis of anti-Semitism as it is in the analysis of the processes leading to communism.

Anti-Semitic nonsense should not stop research on the relationships between Jews and communism. We should not deny the existence of any relationship, although it is true that Jewish communists did the same as other communists. There are people who denounce as racist any attempt to find out the number of Jews among communists and in communist institutions. They even resent any mention that someone was Jewish (by origin). I believe that they impose a virtual taboo because they have not come to terms either with their own Jewish ancestry or with the collective Jewish moral responsibility for the Jewish involvement in communism. If Jewishness is really irrelevant in that story why should it be ignored? Lev Trotsky used to say: "I am not a Jew, I am an internationalist", but why should we follow his approach?

There was no Jewish communism, but there were Jewish communists. Discussing them and their role does not have to lead to putting all the blame for communist crimes on Jews.

I have presented (Theses 8 and 9) the moral problem posed by the extent and the nature of Jewish participation in the communist enterprise. That activity was not done in the name of the Jews, but they were Jews, nevertheless. A disturbing legacy has been left for all Jews, and in particular for the Jews of East Central Europe and their reemerging Jewish communities. Discussion of this must not be left to anti-Semites.

Sensitivity and good will is needed to understand the story of Jewish communists. It is a closed chapter, so it can be fully described. And this can be instructive to all. As the famous anonymous saying goes: "Jews are just like anybody else, only more so . . ."

³⁹ J. Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 2

⁴⁰ Th. Fritsch, *Handbuch der Judenfrage*, p. 236; quoted after A. W. M. Gerrits, 'Anti-Semitism and Anti-Communism', p. 35.