

Text of email from Andrew Hingston of PSP to Professor Antony Polonsky of Brandeis University and the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

Sent as part of a correspondence between Dr. Hingston and Prof. Polonsky arising from Marcin Libicki's views on the Poznań synagogue, printed in the Poznań edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12.I.2006.

Marcin Libicki is a Polish member of the European Parliament, from the Law and Justice Party [PiS], a conservative, nationalist party with right-wing Catholic support. To read Mr. Libicki's opinion, please go to the Press section of this website.

Poznań - 26.I. 06

Dear Antony –

I'm sorry if you've received this several times. For some reason my computer thought it hadn't gone and kept on sending it. My apologies for any confusion or irritation....

As you must have gathered by now, I am a democracy and civil society advocate first and foremost – and a Jewish rights and Jewish heritage advocate because it fits with being a democracy and civil society advocate. The Jews of Europe have been the archetype of an oppressed and belabored people (forced to live outside civil society) for as long as anyone can remember. So, in a very real sense, reaching outside oneself and one's own culture to protect the fragile remaining artifacts of the Jewish heritage of Poland means, in microcosm, protecting and respecting all civilization and all culture. I mean what I do to be an example; I don't pretend to advocate an easy or familiar way of doing things; I mean in fact to cast aside the easy and familiar ways of doing things.

A Protestant minister who has befriended me in spite of my anti-clerical and faithless ways (or perhaps he simply likes a challenge) frequently reminds me that the idea that serving those who are least protected is truly a service to all mankind (and to God, too, for those who believe in Him) is one of Christianity's fundamental teachings. I don't know if Judaism provides a similar prescription, but it's a good prescription in any case. Even an agnostic like me can grab hold of it – not always perfectly, of course, but with a fair success.

I am a democracy advocate, and as a democracy advocate I am delighted to be living in Poland, in part because Poland is a long way from being a democracy in anything but name. It has a real chance, but it could still go either way, as David Remnik pointed out in the *New Yorker* sometime back. Forward in the manner of the western democracies or backward in the manner of Putin's Russia. The next 20 years will tell. (I guess I, too, like a challenge – and I hope that whatever I can do to urge Poland forward rather than back will have a genuine and positive effect.) There are a number of explanations for Poland's hovering indecisively between democracy and authoritarianism – most of them pretty good reasons, too, if one is looking for excuses for giving up. But, except in so far as study of the past gives one insight into how to remedy the problems of the present and avoid the problems of the future, the past itself does not matter much. Like every other player, Poland has to play with the cards it has been dealt. We may gain all sorts of

insights from studying, for example, the leadership styles of Józef Piłsudski and General Sikorski; but unless we do something with those insights, they won't do anyone much good. To a gifted and respected historian such as you these may seem blasphemous words, but I believe in Santayana's dictum. The purpose of learning history is so we don't repeat it. History has value – but only in so far as put it to good use.

Sadly, one can arguably say that Poland moves further from democracy with each passing season and almost every election – because a very significant and growing percentage of the electorate is deeply cynical, benumbed, uninformed, disillusioned, disbelieving, and, most damaging of all, non-participating. The older generations seem to long for a strong man, a new Piłsudski; the younger generations seem to long only to get away to a place where the pay is better. It is difficult to blame either group for wanting an easy answer when nearly everything at every level is blatantly corrupt (see the Transparency International website for the woeful report on where Poland stands in the world). Nevertheless, while blame may not be the right approach, something must be done if Poland is not to continue backsliding downhill.

Though you might find it shocking, I am such a believer in democracy that if an appropriate and truly representative body were to decide, through open, fair, and democratic means and without any corruption or improper influence, that the Poznań synagogue should be knocked down and turned into a chewing-gum factory, I would be very sad about it, but I would also think that Poland had chosen the right path in general if not necessarily the right direction in specific. All democracies make serious mistakes – look at the current slippery status of the USA: defending kidnapping and torture as necessary evils, mired in political corruption at high levels, suggesting that freedom of speech and association has gone too far, backtracking on women's rights, chiseling away at the most fundamental bulwarks against unreasonable search and seizure in favor of a Big Brother omnipresence – but democracy is still the best, fairest, and most accountable means of making decisions that respect the rights of both majority and minority. Even Bush and Blair haven't been able to completely undermine the foundations of democracy.

Marcin Libicki's statement – without regard to its specific content -- was a move in the right direction. Whatever he said and whatever he meant to say, he chose the right means of making his opinion known. He was open, honest, and public. He knew he would be held accountable for what he said, and he did not shirk from it. He respected and trusted the electorate. Unlike too many people in so-called public life in Poland – including everyone I can name in the leadership of the ZGWŻ -- he didn't try to do anything behind anyone's back, or to tailor his message to suit his audience. He didn't say one thing in public and another thing in private – a favorite ploy of both Kadlčík and Schudrich. He didn't assume he had a God-given "right" to do anything other than to put his views into the open marketplace of ideas and to see what happened when he did. He put his ideas out there, and, *mirabile dictu*, he got a very cold bath in return. Bravo on two counts. First, bravo to Libicki: he followed the right procedures. Second, bravo to the people of Wielkopolska: they abandoned their cynicism and fatalism, and rallied to a cause they believe in. Things went exactly as they should have gone.

Has the ZGWŻ bothered to ask the Jews of Poland (all 20,000 - 30,000 of them, not just the 2,000 or fewer who actually belong to the groups comprising the ZGWŻ – whom,

incidentally, they also haven't asked) what they want done with Poland's remaining Jewish patrimony? No, they have not. Has the Chief Rabbi of Poland bothered to ask all the Jews of Poland to prioritize the various projects of cemeteries, synagogues, community centers, libraries, mikvahs, etc.? No, he most definitely has not. He doesn't trust them to reach the decision he feels they should reach. He believes that scripture has made these decisions already and that democracy must take second place to theocracy. Has anyone in the ZGWŻ or the WJRO or the FODZ bothered to ask all the Jews of Poland if they would prefer that the money that comes in from the restitution process be spent inside Poland on projects of their choice rather than funneled off to Israel for goodness knows what purposes controlled by goodness knows whom? No, they haven't. And so fearful are the ZGWŻ and Schudrich of the answer that they would likely receive if they were to ask (or in anyone were even to find out), that they have even erected a web of camouflage, smoke, and mirrors to hide what they are up to, even laundering the restitution money through a Polish foundation whose only real purpose is to be a front for the WJRO. Does the ZGWŻ practice "good governance" (meaning open elections, open accounts, open and fair processes, and democratic methods) in any degree? No, it repeatedly refuses to do so, while scoffing at the idea that anyone can tell it how to run its business (for "business" is fundamentally what it is), preferring secrecy, opacity, authoritarianism, cronyism, and unaccountability at every step. We'll see what happens with its elections in February – if Kadlčik and Zozula keep their jobs, I shall wonder at who was counting the votes.

So, in my view, Marcin Libicki – in spite of his mistakes (which appear to be only the mistakes of an honest man of consistent and publicly acknowledged convictions, however misguided those convictions may appear to you and me) -- is far better than the ZGWŻ and Schudrich. Better because more honest, more reliable, more democratic, more trusting, and more trustworthy. Better for whom? Better for everyone – not because of what he says (Holy Smokes!), but because he is prepared to follow the rules of transparency and accountability, knowing that the rules are for everyone. Libicki follows and seems to trust that the right methods, the right procedures, will get to the right results. He trusts the electorate, even when it disagrees with him and wastes no time in telling him so. He has the decency and honesty not to hide behind a smiley face. He doesn't pretend to be one place (either physically or metaphorically) when in fact he is another. He doesn't pretend to be someone he isn't. His title – Member of the European Parliament -- is one he received in a fair and open election. He's not a *poseur*, and he hasn't hoodwinked anyone. He consistently speaks one and the same language to everyone. I don't agree with him, but I know he says what he means. As a result, I believe he can be trusted.

"I may disagree with what you say, sir; but I shall defend to the death your right to say it." Voltaire gets the credit, though apparently he never actually said it. Voltaire's or not, it's a good principle. However, I would add to it, "...I shall defend to the death your right to say it openly, honestly, and fairly." Openness, honesty, and fairness are the keys to making democracy and civil society work. There cannot be one set of rules for one group and another set for another group. But that appears to be exactly what Zozula, Kadlčik, and Schudrich want and are constantly scheming toward.

Poland is currently a heavily rigged society. As I have learned, even the newspapers participate in rigging it – deliberately tilting the playing field to whatever angle suits them and their friends. But in his statement about the synagogue, Marcin

Libicki didn't try to rig anything. He said what he meant, and within 24 hours he knew what people thought of his views. I can all but guarantee that he will accept their verdict and not try to do behind closed doors what he could not do openly.

I have no such faith in the ZGWŻ, which is the most closed-door organization I have ever encountered, and which somehow thinks God has given it a mandate that everyone else must roll over and accept.

Poznań Synagogue Project is not specifically a pro-Jewish organization. It sees the synagogue of Poznań not as something to be saved for Mrs. Kobus because she has worked so hard, or for her micro-gmina of 12 old souls because they have endured so much, or even for the Jews of Poland as separate category of human beings. If the synagogue of Poznań is to be saved and protected, it should happen on behalf of future generations of Poles (in which category I include all Poles: Christians, Jews, Krishnas, atheists, and crackpots all across the spectrum), so that, with luck, they will all see the synagogue and think hard on its complex lessons. That they may think on the suffering of the oppressed and the brutality of the oppressors; on the vanity of thinking it can't happen here, it can't happen again, and we've learned our lesson. That they may recall whatever the Polish equivalent is of Shelley's "Ozymandias," and of all the various *momenti mori* of western civilization (and western absence of civilization). I see the synagogue as an opportunity for everyone in Poznań (and well beyond Poznań, reaching outside to Germany and Israel as well) to participate in civil society and civic pride, and to learn to do things differently. And better. Much better.

Doing things differently is what I am working toward. Doing things the same as always is what Schudrich and the ZGWŻ are working for – in fact Schudrich's version of the world seems to have stopped changing sometime before the birth of Moses Mendelssohn. He works as hard as he can against heterodoxy and progressive, liberal ideals. In itself that might be fine – as fine in its way as Libicki's views, and for the same reason: because everyone ought to have his say and then listen respectfully to the reply. But the difference has been that people jump up and start shouting back at Libicki's views, while they merely nod uncomprehendingly at Schudrich's. Not that Schudrich's views ever get reported in the mainstream press with the clarity and precision that were accorded to Libicki. Poor Libicki: they handed him the rope; and of course they say it wasn't their fault that he chose to hang himself with it. Of course not, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a set-up, a trap into which he stepped, knowingly or unknowingly. Schudrich rarely winds the rope around his own neck, and on the few occasions when he has – as in 2001 when he was peevishly harassing the Conservative Jews of Wrocław about their conversions – the Polish newspapers very kindly did not report a word of it, even though the JTA did. Everything behind closed doors.

I am 100% certain that doing things the same way as always (meaning behind closed doors, with only a few unaccountable tribal chieftains making all the decisions for everyone) will only bring the same deplorable results as always. I cannot imagine working with people who cannot be trusted to speak their minds openly, who do not even trust their own constituencies, who choose secrecy over openness, authoritarianism over democracy, duplicity over honesty, and who routinely attempt to tilt the playing field in favor of one small group while disrespecting and disregarding all others. Either one trusts

that people, given good information and time to digest it, will reach good decisions most of the time, or one doesn't. I (and I hope you) trust the democratic process completely, even though it clearly fails from time to time. They don't trust it at all – as evidenced, for example, by their boycott of a fair and open conference that would have allowed everyone a level playing field and a chance to engage in the rough and tumble of free and open debate. Why did they boycott it? Schudrich didn't tell us – preferring simply to walk off in a grumpy huff, employing a scorched earth policy on his way out. But Szenicer, who is another person who speaks his mind and is unafraid to do so in the open, wrote to me to say it was because we had openly invited him, Szadaj, Beryt, Datner and some others who are critical of the present-day incarnation of the ZGWŻ and its holier than thou rabbi.. Szenicer went on to say we shouldn't have been so open about our plans – that we should have been trickier and had them all just show up “unexpected.” Yes, it might have worked in that one instance, but it certainly wasn't part of our message.

When people believe in what they are saying and also respect their fellow man, they don't mind being open and honest in what they say. Zozula, Kadlčik, and Schudrich don't trust their fellow man; not only do they not trust their fellow Poles (though, of course, this category is inapplicable to the Chief Rabbi of Poland, curiously enough), but they don't even their fellow Jews. One can say they have their reasons. One can even say that the Jews in general have their reasons for being distrustful and secretive. But that's a certain prescription for more of the same. What were once good reasons in particular circumstances are no longer good reasons when the circumstances have changed. Most alarmingly and undemocratically, Zozula, Kadlčik, and Schudrich don't trust even those within their tight little circle who in any way challenge their authority, which is why they tossed Beryt, Szadaj, Szenicer, and various others out of the ZGWŻ, and why they harassed and humiliated the Conservative Jewish Community of Wroclaw until it virtually imploded, and why they don't trust the Jewish Historical Institute to do its job properly, thoroughly, and without interference, preferring instead to get in the way and make trouble whenever they feel their authority might possibly be threatened. They want what they want – and for them anyone who doesn't also want what they want is wrong and mustn't be listened to. From my perspective, as an admirer of the great traditions of Jewish enlightenment (small “e”) they are an embarrassment to all that Judaism (and western civilization in general), have fought for since the beginning of recorded history. No one should be fighting and scheming solely for what is “good for the Jews”; we should all be working for what is good for mankind. That is the “win-win” approach. Their approach is the “win” / “lose” approach.

At the risk of overloading my point with cliché quotations, here is one I think worthwhile – not only because of what was said, but because of where and when it was said.

“We must indeed all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

-- Benjamin Franklin, spoken at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776.

I plan to post this letter on the PSP Website. I hope you will reply to it in as much detail as and with as much thoughtfulness as you have time for -- and if you do, I hope you will permit me to post your reply on the website as well.

All best, as always...and hoping to see you again soon,

dr Andrew Hingston
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