Historical background: Poland
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Jewish life in Poland has a long and rich history that spans over a thousand years. After the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century, Poland was partitioned by its neighbors, Russia, Prussia and Austria. The Jewish communities that lived in three parts of former Poland functioned in very different legal, administrative and economic systems. In the 19th century they suffered from discrimination and oppression, particularly under Russian rule. Many Jews emigrated from Polish lands in the 19th and early 20th centuries seeking better opportunities, or joined various political and social movements that sought to improve their situation.

The 20th century brought devastation and tragedy to Polish Jewry. During the First World War, many Jews were caught in the crossfire of the warring parties and suffered from hunger, disease, and displacement. Young Polish and Jewish men were drawn to the armies and fought against each other in the troops of Austria-Hungary and Germany on one side, and Russia on the other. Poland regained its independence in 1918, with the end of the Great War. But the rebirth of the independent Polish state was marked by a series of pogroms and other acts of anti-Jewish violence by the end of 1918. In 1919-1921, Poland struggled to fight the invasion of Soviet Russia, then to have its borders set and internationally confirmed, and faced a deep economic crisis, including hyperinflation. This difficult situation obviously had a great negative impact on the Jewish communities.

In interwar Poland the 3,3 million Jews living there made up approximately 10 percent of the total population of the country, constituting the second largest minority after Ukrainians. By 1930 the great crisis struck, and a rise of nationalism meant that Jews faced a resurgence of antisemitism that led to violence, discrimination and boycotts. Despite these difficulties, Jewish life in Poland continued to flourish in various spheres, such as literature, art, music, education, and politics. But thousands of young Jewish people could not see any perspectives for themselves in Poland, and chose emigration. Poland supported emigration of Jews, and backed the idea of building a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The most horrific chapter of Jewish history in Poland was the Second World War and the Holocaust. In 1939, after the invasion of the Third Reich and the USSR, the Polish state again ceased to exist. The territory was divided between the two occupiers, and persecution on both sides began. The Soviets organised mass deportations of Polish and Polish-Jewish citizens to the east, and committed numerous crimes including the mass murder of captured Polish officers, known as Katyń massacre (approximately 8 percent of the victims were Jewish). Under the Nazi German occupation the persecution and killing of Jews began already in 1939. All major death camps established by the Nazis were located on occupied Polish territories. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 the entire territory of prewar Poland fell under Nazi German control and the mass murder of Jews began immediately. Out of over three million Jews who lived in Poland before the war, about 90 percent were murdered by the Nazis, their collaborators and accomplices in ghettos, concentration camps, death camps, in mass shootings, and in pogroms. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and other acts of resistance were heroic but futile attempts to fight back against the genocide. Only a few thousand Polish Jews survived the war in hiding or with the help of non-Jewish rescuers. The majority of survivors were those who ended up in Soviet Russia during the war, and later returned to Poland.

Immediately after the Second World War antisemitic violence was on the rise. In 1945-1946 several pogroms took place, including the one in Kielce, where more than 40 Jewish survivors who had returned after the war were killed. In the post-war years, until 1989, Poland was under communist

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rule. Thousands of Jews emigrated from Poland already in the 1940s and 1950s. But there were still Jewish people in Poland who struggled to rebuild the community and maintain Jewish culture and tradition. However, there were also those, who concealed their Jewish identities completely and had no ties with the community. In 1968, Polish communist authorities launched an antisemitic campaign that targeted Jews in various sectors of society. The campaign was sparked after the Six-Day War in 1967, when the countries of the Soviet bloc supported the Arab states against Israel. It was used as an excuse to accuse Jews of being Zionists and enemies of Poland. The government also cracked down on student demonstrations against censorship and repression, blaming them on Zionist influences. Because of this antisemitic wave, about 20,000 Jews had to emigrate from Poland between 1968 and 1972. This mass emigration was devastating for all Jewish communities that still existed in postwar Poland by the end of 1960s.

Only after 1989, with the democratic changes, a space opened for Polish Jews to speak about their identities, to reclaim their heritage, and to reconnect with Jewish tradition and culture. Today, Jewish communities in Poland are small and only exist in major cities, but a revival of Jewish culture and growing interest in Jewish history and heritage cannot be denied.