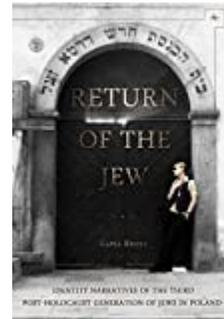




**Katka Reszke.** *Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland.* Jews of Poland Series. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013. 260 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61811-246-0; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61811-308-5.



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## Misfits of the Jewish World: The Next Generation of Polish Jews Speak

In *Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland*, Katka Reszke takes on an unenviable task: to determine the place of the so-called third generation of Jews in Poland. The term refers to the group of Jews coming after the first two generations of Jews living in Poland after the Shoah. Third generation Jews came of age in a newly independent Poland but still live with the specter of communism, which robbed most of them of their ties to Judaism. Reszke tries, above all, to give these young Jews, most of whom are under the age of thirty-five, a collective voice that others will understand. The book's central question is essentially "what makes a Jew?" in the unique climate of Poland, and many of the questions Reszke poses are the same challenges facing non-halachic and secular Jews in North America and elsewhere.

Reszke uses interviews of fifty people to discuss the challenges facing Polish Jews, issues stemming from within and outside of Poland. Most of the emphasis is given to challenges to their Jewishness presented by foreign Jews and goyim of all stripes, and Reszke notes that

the third generation has internalized much of the feelings of inadequacy that result from these clashes. They have been shunned and mocked by foreign Jews and unsure of their own heritage. Challenges from Israeli Jews and Poles inevitably take center stage because of the viciousness and influence of the former and the proximity of the latter. Ultimately, the third generation does not care about "living in a graveyard" and rejects such tropes outright, and they often believe that they are carrying the Polish Jewish torch, even if they do not have any direct connection to previous generations. Thus Reszke actively opposes organizations like the March of the Living and the narrative it promotes. The third generation clearly has no connection with the second generation, the Jews who remained behind after 1956 and 1968 and continued to practice Judaism, or at least did not hide their identity. Furthermore, Reszke distinguishes the third generation from their parents, many of whom did not practice Judaism at all, whether purposefully, through lack of interest, or due to conversion.

The central question that Reszke tackles is authentic-

ity, and here is where the book shines most. She attacks typical arguments made by Israeli and North American Jews, as well as non-Jewish Poles, about the third generation not being Jewish. Much of the reasoning she and her interviewees use would be comfortable territory for Reform and Conservative Jews; they emphasize the feeling and practice of being Jewish rather than bloodlines, as well as the inability to apply traditional halachic standards in these circumstances. The community she describes is unique in many ways, and while she draws comparisons with secular or non-halachic Jews in North America and elsewhere, the book tends to downplay these similarities. Nevertheless, her arguments serve as a cogent defense of these communities and their "Jewishness," and she shows how the practice of Jews judging Jews through personal comparisons can damage growing communities. This leads to the most difficult part of the book, an exploration as to why some people within and outside of Poland object to the growth of a new Jewish community, albeit one with little historical continuity. Ironically, anti-Semitism from non-Jewish Poles is not a priority for Reszke, and many of her subjects share the feeling that any discrimination they face now will diminish quickly with growing exposure through events celebrating Jewish culture, such as the Krakow Jewish Festival.

What her subjects are most concerned with are the reactions from Jews coming from abroad, most prominently from American and Israeli Jews. For the former, Reszke offers both praise and criticism, pointing out that most American Jews are usually merely dismissive or unbelieving toward the third generation, while gratefully acknowledging that many Polish Jewish communities could not exist without American Jewish support, financial or otherwise. Reszke does not shy away from discussions of polarizing issues, which offer some of the best and rawest parts of the book. She is concerned with the "patronizing attitude" of supportive North American Jews, but reserves particular ire for Israeli Jewish visitors to Poland. She describes the vehemence of their attacks and their insistence that Poland is "a Jewish graveyard" and that the Jews who remained are "the worst variety of fool." She defends the community in a personal way, and centers her discussion around the "mirroring effect" the Polish Jewish community has for Israel, which is increasingly moving to the right and rejecting its secular heritage.

From an academic standpoint, this book is rather problematic. A member of the third generation herself, Reszke does not hide the fact that she is an in-

sider; this gives her work a very personal feel which doubtlessly would appeal to many. But it is also difficult to write an academic work as an insider. Reszke delivers a personal defense of the third generation, which is certainly a strength, but her perspective also comes with a great deal of bias and anger which goes unacknowledged. The book's style comes across as too personal. While the book was published by a well-known publisher and presents itself as an academic text, there are too many elements that challenge this assertion.

Furthermore, and most important, the sample selection of interviewees has many issues. Reszke interviewed people she either knew from home or met in her travels, rather than people from a broad representative sample. For example, there are very few subjects from Krakow, and some from Warsaw, but the majority are from Wrocław. The most active Jewish communities are in Krakow and Warsaw, and by largely overlooking them, Reszke presents an incomplete picture of the third generation. Her analysis of interviews also could have been stronger; she often leaves the reader with too many unanswered questions, especially in regard to the communities the subjects are a part of, or presents unchallenged assertions relating to Halachah. Ultimately, the interviews and their analysis is highly repetitive, and defense of the preferred narrative is emphasized. Curiously, an important demographic is purposefully ignored, that of the "deathbed confession," numerous examples of which have been recorded in Polish, Israeli, and American media. The deathbed confession is the means by which many third generation Jews learn of their roots, literally from family members who are about to die. It is a traumatic but life-changing experience full of symbolism and hidden meaning, and it helps to explain the zeal with which many newfound Polish Jews approach their faith.

If one wishes to defend the existence and importance of the third generation, this is an excellent work, but it is not an unbiased study. The attempt alone is admirable, even if Reszke cannot reconcile her own feelings of resentment. In the end, this book is unsure of its own audience. Is it an academic treatment of a new identity, as it purports to be, or is it actually an appeal, rooted in a populist spirit, a plea for sympathy and the belief of a redeeming narrative? Either way, *Return of the Jew* is both a good start and a starting guide to an important part of Poland's contemporary Jewish community, albeit not of the whole community, or even the whole third generation, but of a force that will ultimately fundamentally challenge how the Jewish world views itself.

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