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A Touch of Controversy

by John A. Drobnicki

The following is a review article of *My Brother's Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, edited by Antony Polonsky.

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In 1987, Jan Błoński, Professor of the History of Polish Literature at the Jagiellonian University, touched off a controversy among Poles when *Tygodnik Powszechny* published an article of his entitled "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto." Błoński's article and some of the many responses to it have been collected and translated into English in *My Brother's Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, edited by Antony Polonsky (New York: Routledge, 1990, 242 pp., \$25.00).

Błoński accuses the Poles of indifference toward the extermination of the Jews, arguing that Poles must accept moral, but not actual, responsibility for the crimes against the Jewish nation which took place on Polish soil. Błoński writes, "One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it. Our responsibility is for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist." Commenting on the "virulent" anti-Semitism in Poland in the interwar years, he expressed surprise "that words were not followed by deeds. But they were not (or very rarely). God held back our hand. Yes, I do mean God, because if we did not take part in that crime, it was because we were still Christians, and at the last moment we came to realize what a satanic enterprise it was." In the midst of a later discussion in the book, Błoński summarized his thesis by stating, "I believe that the Holocaust is a call for us Poles to take a new look at ourselves as people who, albeit in a small, in a very small way, allowed it to take place."

Antony Polonsky reprints 15 of the many responses to Błoński's article (*Tygodnik Powszechny* alone received over 200 letters and articles), including a very valuable discussion held at a conference in Jerusalem in 1988, entitled "Ethical Problems of the Holocaust in Poland," which includes comments by such eminent historians as Yisrael Gutman and Władysław Bartoszewski.

Several of the essays echo Błoński, although even some of his supporters criticize his, at times, exceedingly harsh language. Others are highly critical of him; Władysław Siła-Nowicki, in particular, is vehement in his opposition to Błoński's article. Witold Rymanowski bluntly accuses Błoński of slandering the Polish nation.

An interesting essay is by Teresa Prekerowa, in which she attempts to statistically analyze the extent of Polish wartime help to the Jews. Based on her research, she concludes that between 80,000 and 120,000 Jews were in hiding during the occupation, of which

about 40,000 to 60,000 survived the war. According to Prekerowa, support to these fugitives was provided by between 160,000 to 360,000 Poles, who constituted only about 1 to 2.5 percent of the 15 million Poles who could have helped. Her figures are considerably lower than those provided by other scholars. In his 1971 monograph *He Who Saves One Life*, Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki estimated that 1 million righteous Poles were involved in hiding Jews in occupied Poland.

Could Poles have done more? Were they indifferent to the fate of the Jews? Jan Błoński certainly believes his people were indifferent, and that was the image presented in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*. Richard Lukas offered a different view in his book, *The Forgotten Holocaust*. Describing the horrible conditions in occupied Poland, Lukas concluded that it was not Polish anti-Semitism but the degree of the Nazis' control of Poland which determined the number of Jews that survived the attempted extermination.

Yes, more aid could have been given to Jews, by Americans, by Europeans, by the Jewish Diaspora, and by the Poles. While much of American Polonia will take exception to many of the essays in *My Brother's Keeper*, Antony Polonsky has nonetheless done a great service in making them available to the English-speaking public. Polonsky, who teaches at the London School of Economics, is president of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, Oxford, and editor of the Institute's journal, *Polin*. (See the May 1990 PAJ for a review of *Polin* by Eugene Kusielewicz.)

Although some of the essays are polemical and insulting, *My Brother's Keeper* should be required reading for anyone interested in Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. It bluntly forces Poles to look at some of the charges which have been leveled against them in recent years. Before pondering Jan Błoński's accusations, however, the reader should consult the aforementioned books by Iranek-Osmecki and Lukas, as well as Bartoszewski and Lewin's *The Samaritans: Heroes of the Holocaust*.

Perhaps Władysław Bartoszewski, a founder of the Council for Aid to Jews (*Zegota*) who was himself honored by Yad Vashem with the title of "Righteous Among Nations," expressed it best when, speaking about Polish help during the Warsaw ghetto uprising, he said, "I am very proud as a Pole that there were some Poles who helped, but only a limited number, which is both a great deal and also very little."

John A. Drobnicki, a librarian in New York City, previously taught History at St. John's University.