Anti-Israeli and antisemitic rhetoric in Polish public discourse – the case of Israeli study trips to Poland

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Polish attitudes towards the state of Israel have been shaped by several factors. The first and most important one is given by the political situation. During communism, the totalitarian regime often chose certain groups to constitute either an internal (such as the members of anti-Nazi resistance) or an external (e.g. western capitalists) “enemy”. This strategy helped to maintain a sense of threat within society and made governance easier. Jewish people fell victim to this strategy in 1968. In 1967, the Polish state had broken diplomatic relations with Israel due to pressure from the USSR, which supported Arabic nations in the six days war. In 1968, during a political crisis, a full-blown antisemitic and anti-zionist propaganda campaign was unleashed by the authorities. Jews, who were thenceforth exclusively referred to as Zionists in an aim to avoid accusations of antisemitism, were proclaimed guilty of provoking student protests but also of Stalinist crimes against the Polish nation during the 1940s and 50s. As a result, many Polish citizens of Jewish origin were removed from their positions in the state apparatus, the army, and higher education institutions which stimulated mass emigration. Partly as a consequence of these events, Poland is still seen as an inherently antisemitic country. Diplomatic relations with Israel were restored only just after the political transformation. This resulted in a shift towards more positive attitudes regarding Israel among Poles and in the development of cooperation between the two nations in areas such as politics, education, and culture.

Apart from the political situation, attitudes towards Israel are strongly dependent on antisemitic stereotypes which are still present in Poland, on an alleged closeness of the Jewish people as a perceived collective with the state of Israel, and also on the norms of political correctness aimed at minimizing the usage of offensive language and declarations of negative attitudes. An interesting point made by Arnold Forster and Benjamin Epstein in their 1974 book The new anti-semitism was that there is no difference between antisemitic and anti-
Israeli attitudes and that the refusal to acknowledge the role of Israel for the survival of Jews is just one of many forms of antisemitism.

Since a comprehensive analysis of Polish-Israeli relations is beyond the scope of our report, we decided to focus on the reception of Israeli youth trips to Poland. What makes this example so interesting is that analysing the study trips requires facing issues of a difficult past (Israelis come to Poland to visit places that are connected with the Holocaust or events leading up to it) as well as taking into account the current political context. The trips to Poland were first organized in 1988 – ever since then they have become a part of an official programme of the Israeli Ministry of Education. The number of yearly participants has been increasing steadily from 200 to 27,000 people (in 2009). The programme of all study trips is quite similar: they last about 8 to 10 days, the youth between ages of 17 and 18 who had been preparing for the trip for several months are accompanied by specially trained teachers, and they visit cities and towns which used to be centres of Jewish life before the war as well as concentration and death camps.

Study trips have stirred up a lot of criticism both in Poland and in Israel. Its main lines include: i) the prevalence of traumatic motifs in the trips’ itinerary; ii) an almost complete isolation from Poles and contemporary Polish reality; iii) the creation of a strongly negative and biased image of Poland by promoting so-called "dark tourism".

The scope of the analysis below encompasses a selection of articles from nationwide and local newspapers ("Gazeta Wyborcza", "Rzeczpospolitka", "Poland The Times", "Przekrój", "Gazeta Krakowska"), published between 1996 and 2011, and of comments from corresponding Internet forums. An initial search for items containing phrases such as “Israeli trips” and “Israeli youth” yielded 141 articles and forum threads. The publication dates of the articles and the dates of the respective original posts of forum threads were recorded and
complemented with content coding. Subsequent analysis showed that, in 2000, 2007, and 2010, there happened to be a significant increase in the number of publications concerned with Jewish youth excursions (see Figure 1).

![Articles and online forum threads pertaining to Israeli study trips to Poland](image)

*Figure 1.* Total number of articles and number of critical articles about Israeli study trips to Poland year since 1996.

The scrutinised items can be divided into two categories: i) those that describe study trips as experiences of “discovering the past” which focus mostly on the positive aspects of Israeli-Polish encounters; and ii) those that are critical of study trips and discuss any apparent shortcomings of the ways in which Israeli visits are organized. In our analysis, we concentrated on the second type of articles.

The main lines of criticism, as already mentioned, are concerned with the programme of the trips itself, with the behaviour of the bodyguards universally employed by the organisers, and with the behaviour of the Israeli youth themselves. During the analysed period, several articles were published in which the general practice of showing Israeli visitors
only places of Jewish commemoration was questioned. Even the Polish president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski argued that “It’s not enough to show [the visitors] what happened during the Holocaust – they need to learn about eight hundred years of Polish-Jewish life together.”¹ [emphasis added] Presenting only the Holocaust may create a very biased picture of Poland in young Israelis and perpetuate the existing stereotypes of Poles as being antisemitic. The journalists criticising the trips, however, fail to mention that the sense of threat which is associated with visiting Poland, and leads to the employment of bodyguards, may be caused by the circumstance that Poland is, in fact, the country where the Holocaust happened. Nonetheless, the behaviour of the bodyguards may deserve some criticism because they sometimes act aggressively. In March 2007, an Italian citizen living in Poland was beaten up by Israeli bodyguards accompanying a study trip. This event sparked off a heated media debate wherein many more misdeeds on the part of bodyguards as well as of trip participants were brought up. Airlines and hotel staff were quoted as complainants on the misbehaviour of Israeli youth.

Study trips are widely criticised also in Israel, especially because of the lack of opportunities for contact with people currently living in Poland. At the same time, the authors of critical articles published in Poland should be more conscious of the consequences of their writing, which may result in perpetuating negative attitudes of Poles towards Israelis. What is especially interesting and probably not widely acknowledged is the way in which the categories “Jewish” and “Israeli” are used in the Polish press. In our analysis we discovered that in the articles describing study trips as positive the two adjectives are used as synonyms, whereas the critical articles use almost exclusively the word “Israeli”. We believe this to be a

¹ Wycieczka, „Duży Format”, supplement to Gazeta Wyborcza, 288, 12/12/2005.
sign of an attempt, on the part of the journalists in questions, to avoid being accused of antisemitism – both in cases where such accusations may be quite accurate and where they are not. In any case, criticising Israel seems to be more readily acceptable than and clearly distinguished from criticising Jews.

Another important issue generally absent in the public discourse regarding study trips entails the impact which the experience of such a trip might have on young people’s behaviour. It may turn out that any misbehaviour is partly a result of psychological difficulties they face because of being exposed to this extremely traumatic history.

The last intuition we had was the surprising coincidence of the intensification of critical debate around study trips and the publications of Jan Tomasz Gross’ books dealing with the most difficult events in Polish-Jewish history. Neighbours is a story about the pogrom in the village of Jedwabne (published in 2000), Fear discusses post Second World War pogroms in Poland (published in 2006) and Golden harvest is concerned with the issue of the post war history of Jewish property (published in 2011 but heavily discussed before publication). In this context, the criticism of Israeli trips to Poland may be seen as a form of displacement reaction. Social frustrations caused by the books coupled with the restrictions placed on direct expressions of anti-Jewish attitudes by norms of political correctness may have resulted in a harsher assessment of Israeli trips.

To conclude, we would like to emphasise the dualism in Polish attitudes towards Jews as an ethnic group and towards the state of Israel. It seems that Forster and Epstein had a good point when they interpreted holding and expressing negative opinions about Israel as a new, more socially acceptable, form of antisemitism. This seems to be confirmed by the recent findings of Roland Imhoff (2010) who showed that criticising Israel significantly correlates with antisemitism.