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¹ Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

Tribute to Antony Polonsky

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on behalf of the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

I have had the privilege of working with Antony Polonsky for some thirty years, since he approached the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in 1992 with a proposal to publish *Polin*. I don't think any of us imagined at the time that the decision to accept his proposal would continue bearing fruit for so long, and would have such enormous impact on the study of Polish Jewish history. Since Antony's involvement with Littman is so closely bound up with *Polin*, any tribute to him must start with a few words of introduction to the series.

Polin, or to give the series its official name, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, was associated from the beginning with the UK-based Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies, and later with its sister organization, the American Association for Polish–Jewish Studies. The Institute was the framework that Antony set up for the landmark First International Conference on Polish–Jewish Studies that he organized in Oxford in 1984. Part of his vision in organizing the conference – and Antony is certainly a man of great vision – was to initiate an annual English-language scholarly journal. That was a ground-breaking idea, and he took the proposal to Blackwell, an Oxford-based publisher fast becoming known at that time for its journals on contemporary topics. He did not even consider Littman: we were publishing through Oxford University Press, and accepting new projects was a slow business. Another major factor was that Louis Littman, who had established the Littman Library in 1965 and was still at its helm, was in and out of hospital with leukaemia, so it was not an appropriate time to suggest major new projects. This was of course all before my own involvement with Littman, which started only when I became managing editor in 1988.

So although *Polin* is now identified with Littman, it was originally published by Blackwell. The history of its publication by Blackwell is interesting. The first volume appeared in 1986, in hardback only, at the whopping price of £55; at today's prices that would be £138. That

high price reflected Blackwell's view of *Polin* as an annual that would be bought principally by libraries, as many journals are. Despite the price, the publication was in fact well received, with scholarly praise pouring in from all sides. This was encouraging, so Blackwell decided that they could increase their income by publishing three issues a year. That is how commercial journal publishing operates, but in this case it could not work, as Antony was unable to match that pace. He was essentially working on his own with no permanent staff, and, although he had great plans for the future of *Polin*, producing three issues a year was not part of his vision.

Antony set about solving the problem with his usual optimism and creativity. His first move was to ask whether the Littman Library, by this time newly independent from Oxford University Press and able to explore new ventures, might be willing to take on the series. The timing was fortuitous: Louis Littman had meanwhile died, and his widow Colette was fiercely determined to continue the publishing venture that her husband had started. Even so, a commitment to producing a volume a year for the foreseeable future, and indeed beyond, was quite daunting.

Finance was a potential sticking point, but, as we all know, Antony excels at finding creative solutions; he also knows how to use his vast web of contacts to help him. In this case, he approached the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies and offered to make his Institute an associate centre. This was an astute move because it added to *Polin*'s kudos by giving it an Oxford academic connection, and it added to the Oxford Centre's kudos by expanding its publishing activity and thereby increasing its visibility. Visibility is always good for fundraising, so this collaboration was in the Centre's interest too. However, it did not directly solve the financial problem of a subsidy for Littman.

That was Antony's next challenge. Once again his political skills came to the fore, and not only his political skills, but his ability to make connections. With his ear ever to the ground and aware of all relevant developments, he knew that the chair of the Oxford Centre's publications committee was just embarking on his own research projects in Poland – this was Jonathan Webber, now of course my husband, but that's a different story. Antony, ever the optimist, thought that somehow Jonathan might be able to help since he had secured major public funding for his own projects in Poland and was in that sense heavily invested in the subject. Antony's initiative paid off. Understanding the importance of *Polin*, Jonathan persuaded his co-trustees of a small family trust to

come up with some seed money: they agreed because the family's origins were in Poland, and it seemed right to honour those origins in this way. The subsidy was small, and only for three years, but it was sufficient to encourage Colette Littman and her son Roby to commit to publishing *Polin*, initially on a trial basis, for three years from 1994, starting with volume 8.

Thanks to Jonathan Webber's involvement, Littman quickly recognized *Polin*'s potential to open up a new field of scholarship. The first step was to reduce the price of *Polin* from £55 to £37.50, to make it more affordable for individual buyers. Next, each volume was to have a theme, reflected in the title; under Blackwell, volumes were identified merely by a number. It was felt that having a title would increase sales as individuals could immediately see the relevance of each volume to their own work. A related innovation was to have a picture on the jacket to reinforce the theme: the early *Polins* had all looked the same. A fourth innovation was an index. With these changes, *Polin* soon began to attract a new following, and even more scholarly plaudits.

Its success was such that two years later, with volume 10 in 1997, another major change was introduced: a paperback edition was introduced, at a price of £19.50. The objective here, once again, was to make *Polin* more accessible to individuals, especially junior academics and post-graduates, and even to a readership in Poland itself. Within four years, thanks to Littman being a registered charity and willing to absorb the full costs of publishing *Polin*, the price of the publication had been cut by almost a third relative to what Blackwell had charged.

As Antony noted in the preface to volume 10, these changes were "a sign of confidence in the growing interest in the area, particularly among the new generation, and of the changes taking place in Polish–Jewish relations". He continued, "This is clear too from the text of the lecture given by Krzysztof Śliwiński, Polish Ambassador to the Jewish Diaspora, under the auspices of the Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies, which is reproduced in this volume." Yes, Poland had appointed an ambassador to the Jewish Diaspora, and he had spoken at the launch of volume 9 of *Polin*, which took place at a one-day conference at the Polish embassy in London. This was the first volume of *Polin* to be launched at the embassy, but it became an established tradition that continued without interruption until the pandemic in 2020. That was enormously satisfying for those of us involved in organizing those early conferences.

Volume 11 recorded yet another milestone for Polin: the creation of an American Association for Polish–Jewish Studies, to help generate interest in the subject and also to raise money to support the costs that Antony was incurring in putting the volume together, and principally the costs of translating articles from Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and Hebrew. The ability to fund translations made it possible to disseminate research by scholars in Eastern Europe, another factor in raising the profile of Polin.

Let me now briefly present what Antony has achieved with Polin in terms of numbers and statistics. Volume 33, *Jewish Religious Life in Poland*, was published in January 2021. Volume 34, *Jewish Self-Government in Eastern Europe*, is in production at the time of writing and will be published in January 2022. Volume 35, *Promised Lands: Jews, Poland, and the Land of Israel*, is currently being edited. Volumes 36, 37, 38, and 39 are in preparation. All that is simply amazing – volume after volume of some 500 pages, year in and year out. And the fact that each has a theme really does help build up a credible picture of the astonishing breadth and richness of Polish Jewish history. The credit for implementing this thematic approach is entirely Antony's. He comes up with the themes and then identifies, for each theme, the editors who will be capable of bringing together contributors from around the world who together can create such a volume. And all this happens, each year, like clockwork. Let me also point out that all the volumes are still in print and available for purchase from our website.

Even if we consider only the thirty-three volumes already published, that's something like 17,000 pages of scholarship. Even by volume 12, Polin had clocked up contributions from 300 different scholars. I know that because in the year 2000 we published the *Index to Volumes 1 to 12*, edited by Antony of course. Announced as “a vital tool for research in any area of Polish–Jewish studies”, it included a table of contents by volume; a chronological table of contents; an index of persons (“more than 4,500 people”); an index of subjects (“more than 6,000 detailed entries”); an index of books reviewed; an index of contributors (that is how I know there were more than 300 of them); notes on contributors; a chronological table of Polish history; and ten maps. Unfortunately, it never sold well, but I commend it to all of you. Even on its own, it is a fair indication of Antony's energy, thoroughness, dedication, creativity, and organizational ability.

I am not going to give you any more statistics: probably everyone participating in this conference today has at some time published an article in Polin, and knows at first hand, far better than I do, the impact that

Polin has had on the field of Polish–Jewish studies. And in saying Polin, I am using the term as a shorthand way of referring to the impact that Antony has had in the field – through Polin, through his own three-volume *History of the Jews in Poland and Russia* (2010–12), also published by Littman, and through his one-volume abridged version (2013) which in itself runs to 650 pages.

And on top of all that there is Antony’s immense contribution to the Polin Museum in Warsaw, although of course that is an entirely separate venture from the Polin yearbook series published by Littman.

By now I hope I have given you a reasonable picture of what Antony has achieved, but I have barely scratched the surface in paying tribute to him in a more personal way. The problem I found myself facing is that I am not a historian, I am not even an academic, and I have no formal training in the field of Polish–Jewish studies. How, then, was I going to formulate a tribute to Antony? I solved the problem by doing what I do the whole time in my role as managing editor: I sought the advice of experts. Fortunately, Littman authors and friends of Littman were generous in helping me, and it is with great pleasure that I will share some of their thoughts with you now.

I want to start this off, though, by setting the scene. Up to now I have been talking about Polish–Jewish studies as an area of academic research. We have come to take it for granted that the field exists, forgetting that we largely owe the development of the field to Antony and to Polin. When Antony launched Polin, Poland was still a communist country, and movement between Poland and the rest of the world was not easy. In sending me her thoughts Natalia Aleksiuin recalls that period vividly. Now herself a professor at Touro College in New York and the author of a recent volume with Littman, *Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust* (2021), she was then a graduate student at Warsaw University. She writes as follows:

I first met Professor Polonsky in the early 1990s in Warsaw. He came as a guest to the seminar taught by my adviser Professor Jerzy Tomaszewski. We were just a small group of students, we gathered in a seminar room on the upper floor of the Institute of History and waited to meet this “foreign historian”. We belonged to a cohort that went through the university without international student exchanges or study trips abroad. I didn’t quite know what to expect. I remember we talked briefly about Professor Polonsky’s interest in the history of interwar Poland. He insisted on speaking in Polish – elegant and flawless, really. Until he mentioned

“Lodz” and then corrected himself to “Łódź”, explaining that the inhabitants of the city would pronounce its name differently, depending on who they were. For me, an MA student interested in the history of Polish Jews, this was a new and fascinating point, one that has stayed with me as one of those seemingly mundane but really transformative educational moments.

Aleksiu added in a second message that she remembered how elegantly dressed Antony was that day. Much has changed, but not that.

Let me continue with some other tributes I have received from our authors. I shall mention them in alphabetical order. The next one is from Professor Richard Cohen, who actually holds a chair in French history at the Hebrew University, but I consulted him because I respect his broad knowledge of Jewish history and because he is publishing a book with Littman on the Polish Jewish artist Samuel Hirszenberg. He did not disappoint; on the contrary:

Even one who, like myself, has spent his scholarly life afar from Polish history, stands in awe at what Antony Polonsky has achieved. Where else would one go to give a lecture in a general course on modern Jewish history than to his monumental three-volume history of Jews in Poland? And if one wants to know something about the contours of Jews in Łódź, Kraków, Warsaw, and beyond, where would one turn? To *Polin* of course. His work has enabled a wonderful network of scholars in various countries to emerge and find colleagues pursuing a range of issues and problems, and to allow them to profit from each other’s scholarship, and more important to disagree with one another.

Next is Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the chief curator of the permanent exhibition at the Polin Museum. She is not actually a Littman author but how could I pay proper tribute to Antony without asking Barbara to say a few words? She responded immediately, as she always does:

Antony Polonsky is unparalleled among historians today as someone who has tackled the long and complex history of Jews in Poland and Russia. His magisterial three-volume work on the subject is a landmark. But beyond what he himself has written, with a command of the requisite languages and an astonishing breadth of knowledge that extends beyond history proper to encompass literature and more, he has been instrumental in building the entire field. This can be seen in the intellectual leadership and expert editorial skill evidenced in the *Polin* series and the conferences

that launch each new volume. Scholars both junior and senior are the beneficiaries of his generosity, collegiality, and collaborative spirit.

Let me emphasize three of Barbara's main points: Antony's contribution to Polish–Jewish history is unparalleled; he has an astonishing breadth of knowledge that extends beyond history proper to encompass literature and more; and scholars both junior and senior are the beneficiaries of his generosity, collegiality, and collaborative spirit.

The next tribute comes from Professor Shulamit Magnus, the author of *A Woman's Life: Pauline Wengeroff and Memoirs of a Grandmother* (Littman, 2016). She describes Antony as “a giant in the field of Polish Jewish history in our day”, and she continues:

The gargantuan work he invested as editor of *Polin* was on its own pivotal in bringing to light hundreds of studies in dozens of volumes that have revised and defined the field, while encouraging new scholars and promoting innovative scholarship in such areas as the history of women and the family. His own, multi-volume *The Jews in Poland and Russia* has given scholars and lay people a definitive, engagingly written textbook that takes its place among the work of Simon Dubnow, Salo Baron, and others, incorporating much new scholarship and methodological innovations. In a field marked in the past by language delineations and disputes, Antony has done much to bring English into that fold, and an English-reading public into sophisticated, nuanced discourse about Polish Jewish history. Not least is his role, with others, in framing the meaning and direction of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews with the profound historical knowledge and perspective that he carries. As someone who has also experienced Antony's hand as an editor, his unfailing consideration has made working with him a pleasure and a privilege.

Let me again pick out some key points. Antony is “a giant in the field of Polish Jewish history in our day”; he has revised and defined the field, promoting innovative scholarship in such areas as the history of women and the family. His own, multi-volume *The Jews in Poland and Russia* has given scholars and lay people a definitive, engagingly written text that incorporates much new scholarship and methodological innovations, bringing an English-reading public into sophisticated, nuanced discourse about Polish Jewish history. Like the others I have quoted, Shulamit Magnus comments that thanks to Antony's unfailing consideration, working with him is a pleasure and a privilege.

Professor Moshe Rosman's appreciation of Antony is succinct. Moshe has published three books with Littman, and we are currently working on his magnum opus, *Categorically Jewish, Distinctly Polish*. Here is what he had to say:

Antony is the adult in the room in our field. Always ready to entertain fresh vectors in research, new modes of interpretation, but always tempering them with the wisdom of past knowledge, Antony combines unparalleled knowledge of Polish history and literature, profound empathy for the Polish experience and a sharp critical perspective. He stands at the intersections of our field: between Poland and the West; between conventional scholarship and new directions; between scholars, patrons, politicians, students, and the public; between research and its dissemination. He is the master interpreter both in the sense of interpreting Polish history and literature and interpreting the sensibilities of various constituencies to one another: Poles to outsiders, scholars to politicians and patrons, specialists to non-specialists, publishers to writers, etc., etc.

In mentioning "patrons", Moshe touches here on something I alluded to myself that is too often forgotten: Antony's skill in finding patrons to provide financial support. Littman bears the costs of publishing *Polin* once the text is submitted, but year by year Antony has raised the money needed for translation and other aspects of publishing that the author is required to cover. That is no small achievement.

Professor Shaul Stampfer, whose book on the Lithuanian yeshivas that we published in 2012 has become a classic, offers a measured perspective and some rabbinical insights:

I like Antony very much. There are a fair number of rather talented scholars floating around. However, there are very few who are as concerned as Antony is with the advancement of others. Antony has made some truly major contributions, but his true impact on the field is all the students and acquaintances whom he has helped to learn more and to develop. As the rabbis said, *gadol hama'aseh mehaoseh*, which roughly translates as "One who stimulates others to achieve is greater than a person who only has his or her own achievements." The reason is clear. What one person can possibly do is quite finite. But if one puts aside some of one's own work and takes the time and makes the effort to stimulate others and they (or at least some of them?) in turn stimulate yet others, the impact and consequences are immeasurably greater than what one could ever achieve alone. Thus, if one takes into account Antony's impact on the field of Polish-Jewish studies and all of the ancillary fields that he has touched,

it is hard to believe that he is only eighty years old! Indeed, perhaps that is the secret of his youthful appearance. By giving so much he hasn't really had time to get old! I look forward to many more years of his giving – and achieving.

These last few tributes have all come from American-born scholars, but the two final tributes both come from Polish scholars. First, Marek Tuszewicki, whose book on Jewish folk medicine in Eastern Europe, *A Frog Under the Tongue*, we published just this year (2021). This is what he had to say:

It is difficult to overestimate Professor Polonsky's contribution in the development of Jewish studies, especially from the perspective of Eastern Europe. His enormous authority, ability to conduct dialogue and deep humanism were the guideposts thanks to which research on the history and culture of Jews in our region has developed significantly over the last thirty years. Without his kind support, many initiatives in this area would not be successful. International conferences, summer schools, and new research centres could always count on the optimism of Professor Polonsky, who helped build bridges and find sources of funding, as well as encouraging the implementation of the most daring plans.

If I were to compare Professor Polonsky to anyone, I would say he represents a similar cultural formation to Václav Havel or Czesław Miłosz (although, as a historian, he reads the past in a more rational way). It is good to know that this generation of humanists is still with us.

Note again the emphasis on Antony's authority and his ability to conduct dialogue and deep humanism – and indeed his optimism, and his ability to find sources of support – as significant factors in the development of Jewish studies in Poland over the last thirty years.

And finally, Professor Marcin Wodziński, who has published two monographs with us and recently co-edited volume 33 of *Polin*:

Antony is maybe the last scholar in our subfield who reads everything. This in itself is not as surprising as the fact that he also remembers everything he has ever read. And, on top of this, he integrates it into a historical narrative that is up to date with the current state of research globally, compelling, and integral. This is possibly best evidenced in his own three volumes, but it was also his policy with *Polin*.

Moreover, in publishing *Polin*, Antony combined his two strengths, scholarly and managerial. I don't know about the financial background of the enterprise, but the fact that *Polin* has provided a unique platform where Eastern European (mostly Polish) scholars could have their articles

translated and published in a prestigious venue, accompanied by all the *gedolei Yisrael* – the great and the good – of Polish–Jewish studies, and meticulously edited, this was a real miracle and maybe the most important factor in the successful development of Polish–Jewish studies in Poland and abroad.

Last but not least, Antony is the only person I know who can talk to everybody. Not a small thing!

Amazing tributes, I am sure you will agree, but well deserved. To summarize briefly a history of tremendous achievement, Antony is internationally recognized as a giant in the field of Polish Jewish history. Through his role as the founding editor of *Polin* he has facilitated not only the dissemination of knowledge but also the creation of an international network of scholars. His own, multi-volume *The Jews in Poland and Russia* is a definitive, engagingly written text – a much-needed nuanced but accessible presentation of Polish–Jewish history. For all of us, Antony remains the “master interpreter”, but with all this he has maintained great humility. Working with him is a privilege, and I hope to have the pleasure of doing so for many years to come.