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Studies in Culture, History, and Religion

In Memory of Irene Pipes (1924-2023)

Edited by

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Irene Pipes at the office of the Rector of Jagiellonian University in 2013.
Fot. Anna Wojnar

Antony Polonsky
Brandeis University
Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Irene Pipes and Polish-Jewish Relations

Irene Pipes, who passed away at age 98 on 31 July 2023 made a significant contribution to the development of Polish-Jewish Studies and Polish-Jewish understanding. She did so primarily as President of the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies from the early 1990s and through her support for the Roth Center for the History and Culture of Polish Jews and Polish-Jewish Relations in the Department of Jewish Studies at the Faculty of History at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

Irene came from a family that was well integrated into Polish society while retaining strong Jewish ties. She herself was devoted to her Jewish heritage and was also well acquainted with Polish culture particularly with a love of Polish popular and cabaret songs of the 1930s, which she grew up with. Irene was thus an ideal intermediary in the efforts, starting in the mid-1980s, to ease the tensions and hostility between Poles and Jews – insofar as these are discrete groups, which is not always the case. In her view, the way forward was for both Poles and Jews to look again at their common history and recognize both its positive and negative aspects.

Irene's family miraculously escaped from Poland in 1940. Her father, Marcell was a prominent Polish industrialist involved in the chemical industry, representing the German firm I.G. Farben. He came from Busk in East Galicia, while her mother, Maria, was from Warsaw, where the couple

settled after Polish independence. As a native of Galicia, Marcell had the option in 1923 to choose between Polish or Austrian citizenship. He chose the latter, which meant that after the *Anschluss* in March 1938, he became a German citizen. As a result, he was one of those interned by the Polish government in the concentration camp at Bereza Kartuska in the run-up to the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. The Roth family lived very comfortably and would have normally hoped to survive the Nazi occupation in Warsaw. However, since Marcell Roth had been interned, his wife, Maria, decided to drive eastwards with her two daughters in their Hispano-Sousa, which was something of a phenomenon in pre-war Warsaw. She was certainly one of the first women in interwar Warsaw to obtain a driving license. The car was confiscated when they entered the area of Poland occupied by the Soviets, but they succeeded in making their way to Vilna, which had been incorporated into neutral Lithuania on October 28th 1939. They had agreed to meet Marcell there, should he be released – which, in fact, took place. After several months, the family was reunited and, with the help of Marcell's New York-based brother, they were able to fly to Stockholm and take an ocean liner to New York. Maria, who had behaved heroically throughout the ordeal, retreated to her first class cabin and refused to emerge for the duration of the voyage. As Irene explained, her mother did not have a change of clothing and therefore was not willing to be seen in the dining room.

Irene, who was fifteen when she arrived in the United States, quickly adapted to her new circumstances. After graduating from high school in New York, she began to study architecture at Cornell University. It was there that she met her future husband Richard, who had been drafted into the Army Air Corps and sent to study Russian at Cornell. He came from a similarly acculturated background, and his family had had a similarly miraculous escape from Poland. Dick's father, who had fought in the Piłsudski Legions and who in the 1930s had been a supplier of colonial goods to the Polish army, had acquired Bolivian passports from one of his business contacts. Using these, the Pipes family was able to

make their way to Italy in 1940, from where, after a year, they were able to sail to the United States. As is well known, Dick, who died in 2018, had a distinguished career serving as Chairman of the Russian Research Center at Harvard and spending two years in Washington as a member of the National Security Council advising President Ronald Reagan on the Soviet and East European affairs.

Irene and Dick were devoted to each other throughout the seventy-two years of their marriage, although given that both had extremely strong personalities, they sometimes clashed. In his autobiography *Vixi* Dick wrote of her as follows:

We complemented each other perfectly: to paraphrase Voltaire, she assumed command of the earth, I of the clouds, and between us, kept our little universe in good order. Her charm, beauty, and *joie de vivre* have never faded for me.

My marriage was for me a continuous source of joy and strength. In a book which I dedicated to her after we had celebrated our golden wedding anniversary I thanked her for “having created for me ideal conditions to pursue scholarship.”

Given their own extraordinary escapes and the fact that the majority of their families had perished in the Holocaust, both Irene and Dick were deeply devoted to their Polish-Jewish heritage. As part of the Polonized minority within Polish Jewry, they also had a strong feeling for Polish culture and had many Polish friends. Irene revisited Poland for the first time in the 1950s and, after the end of communism spent a considerable amount of time there, delighting in the language, food, and culture. She was particularly proud of her distinctively elegant pre-war Polish. In her last years, she was devotedly cared for by Agata Bogatek from Warsaw.

As President of the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies from the early 1990s, Irene employed her considerable diplomatic talents to foster dialogue and open discussion on difficult and divisive

issues. She also played an important role in the production of the Association's quarterly newsletter, *Gazeta*, and was a consistent supporter of its yearbook, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*.

Irene also contributed significantly to the establishment in 2013 of the Roth Center for the History and Culture of Polish Jews and Polish-Jewish Relations, in the Department of Jewish Studies at the Faculty of History of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, which is named after her family.

The Jagiellonian University was the first in Poland to open a unit for the interdisciplinary research of the Jewish heritage in Poland, when in 1986 it established the Research Center on the History and Culture of Polish Jews under Prof. Józef. Gierowski, Rector of the Jagiellonian University between 1981 and 1987. The main goal of the Center, then located on Gołębia street, was defined by Prof. Gierowski as the organization of reliable and objective research on the Jewish history in Poland without prejudices and stereotypes. Under his direction the Center became an internationally recognized scholarly body and its structure and activities have been a model for other institutions.

In 2000 the Research Center was transformed into the Department of Jewish Studies within the Faculty of History and was relocated to Kazimierz as a part of the attempt to foster the development of this formerly Jewish district. The Department has continued the scholarly activities of the Center and has also offered BA, MA and PhD programs in history with a specialization in Jewish Studies. In 2012, in the recognition of its achievements, it was transformed into the Institute of Jewish Studies. It was the first university center in Poland to BA and MA programs in Jewish Studies. It conducts research in all areas of Jewish Studies, but the history and culture of Polish Jewry remains one of the most important aspects of its scholarly activities.

The establishment of the Roth Center in 2013 has significantly contributed to the work of the Institute. The Center, as an autonomous body within the Institute, has conducted and promoted research on the Jewish heritage in Poland, the role of Polish Jewry in the Jewish world and

on Polish-Jewish relations through the publication of studies and sources, the organization of national and international conferences as well as through the support of PhD students and post-doctoral scholars from the Jagiellonian University and leading institutions in Poland, Israel and around the world.

One of the most important initiatives in which it has been involved was the establishment, in 2018, of the annual Józef A. Gierowski and Chone Shmeruk Prize for the best scholarly publication on the history and culture of Jews in Poland. This was organized by the Jewish Studies programs at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, with the support of the Marcell and Maria Roth Foundation. The prize, which is named after Professor Józef Gierowski and Professor Chone Shmeruk of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, two eminent academics who made a great contribution to the improvement of Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israel relations and also helped facilitate the development of Jewish studies and research on the history of Polish Jews. In 2023, we awarded it for the sixth time.

Irene Pipes's enormous contribution to Polish-Jewish understanding was recognized by the Polish government with the award of the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland. Even as her strength weakened, she remained committed to the cause of Polish-Jewish understanding and was saddened by the rise of populism in Poland and the threat it posed to an honest and dispassionate evaluation of the complex and sometimes disputed Polish-Jewish past. Until the end she remained optimistic, convinced that people of good will could find common ground and that dialogue and understanding would prevail.

Her son, Daniel, has recalled her oft-stated wish to be buried next to her husband Richard with the simple epitaph on her gravestone: "His Wife". Daniel never agreed to this and has promised that on her tomb there will be a more fitting epitaph: "Irene Eugenia Pipes, née Roth. 1924–2023. Holocaust Survivor. Wife, Mother, Grandmother, Great-grandmother." She is survived by her two sons, four grandchildren and one great grandchild. She will be sorely missed.