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My Recollections of Shevah Weiss

Over the eighteen years I was fortunate enough to know Prof. Shevah Weiss, I watched up close as he engaged in public life in Poland and as we worked together as fellow academics at the University of Warsaw. In my recollections of him, I will focus on this period of his activity and intentionally omit his parallel accomplishments in Israel, as I am certain that these can be presented more aptly by those who witnessed them firsthand. Shevah Weiss – a politician and scholar – will be remembered by many as a marvelous man. His scholarly and professional achievements intersect closely with stories reflecting his personality – it would indeed be difficult not to mention his distinctive presence in public life, so this is how he will be shown here.

Shevah Weiss (or Szewach Weiss, as he is known in Poland) served as the speaker of Israel's Knesset and as Israel's ambassador to Poland. His service in the latter role continued until the end of his life, although he formally held the post for only three years (2001–2003). Over that short time, he became a very important figure in political life in Poland – many considered him one of their own, and he was referred to as “a son of the Jewish nation and of Polish soil.” His separate identities as a Jew, as an Israeli, and as a Pole were intertwined throughout his life. His sensitivities born of this merger yielded fruitful results in Polish-Israeli political relations, or more broadly in Polish-Jewish political relations, and to an even greater extent in societal relations, which are far more difficult to build than political interests. Scarred by war and the Holocaust, Polish-Jewish relations needed an ambassador like him. Polish awareness of World War II grew out of the trauma experienced by the entire nation and realization of the biological threat – it was difficult to deviate from this way of thinking, and the truth about what happened in Jedwabne was painful to accept.¹ It was there that Shevah Weiss stood beside Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski on July 10, 2001, following an act of regret on the part of the Polish side, and gave bilateral relations a future by saying: “I know of other barns, too.” That short sentence, as he later recalled, was the most important statement he had made in his capacity as Israel's ambassador to Poland. In it, he was also referring to how his own family had been rescued during the war by some of the Righteous Among the Nations: the family of Anna and Michał Góral, Julia Lasota, and Maria Potężna.

¹ Leon Kieres, “Rola państwa w procesie kształtowania świadomości historycznej,” in Elzbieta Kossewska (ed.), *Brzemie pamięci. Współczesne stosunki polsko-izraelskie*, Warsaw 2009, p. 91.

Shevah Weiss was born in the city of Borysław, back then part of the Second Polish Republic, in a region rich in oil, culturally diverse, and inhabited by an ethnically mixed population: Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews. He always identified with his hometown, and near the end of his life his thoughts would return even more often to that place, to his childhood, to his family home in Dolna Wolanka, and to his life in hiding during the war, first inside a “double wall,” then in a 60-centimeter high windowless basement from which, as he recalled, he never truly emerged. When the Soviet borders shifted westward and Borysław became part of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, the Weiss family decided to leave for Poland (1945). “We traveled to the south of Poland, to the post-German towns. We traveled in an open wagon, perhaps one earlier used by the Germans to transport Jews to the killing centers – the same railroad tracks, the same train, only the conductor and the destination were different,”² he once recalled in an interview I conducted with him.

He reached Israel by ship, travelling on false papers, in December 1947, at the age of 12. Shevah Weiss was sent to a Hadassim boarding school. Rejecting the diaspora, abandoning the language of their country of origin, and undergoing Hebraization (including by taking Hebrew last names), were some of the ways by which many Holocaust survivors escaped stigmas and attempted to regain their self-worth. This applied in particular to children and adolescents. But Shevah Weiss, for the sake of his family members who had been murdered and lost in the Holocaust, did not change his first or last name. “I know where I come from and where I am going,” he said upon assuming office as Knesset speaker. He had in fact been aware of this ever since he left the windowless basement in Borysław. Shevah Weiss was named after his paternal grandmother, Sheiva, who had died in the first *pogrom* in Borysław. However, like other young people in Israel, he embraced the path of personal development that was seen as essential: improving his physical fitness, working the land, achieving fluency in Hebrew. As a child survivor of the Holocaust, he tried hard to keep pace with those born in Israel, those who had not experienced war. He played athletic sports, practiced long-distance running, worked the land, developed a passion for Hebrew literature, gained popularity in the Israeli media, earned consecutive academic degrees up to full professor, won elections, and climbed the successive rungs of an academic and political career – he served as speaker of the 13th Knesset in 1992–1996. All this happened in the Jewish state, and Shevah Weiss was a sincere patriot, although he disliked this particular word for its possible connotations of nationalism.

² Szewach Weiss, “W drodze,” interview by Elżbieta Kossewska, in Danuta Lalak (ed.), *Dom i ojczyzna: dylematy wielokulturowości*, Warsaw 2008, p. 25.

His first visit to Poland in 1985 brought back childhood memories: “When I landed in Warsaw, I was truly shocked. I felt that I was returning...”³ More visits followed. In 2000, during John Paul II’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Israeli media stressed the Pope’s especially close relations with Yad Vashem Chairman Shevah Weiss: both had experienced the war directly and came from the same country, and they would walk together, holding hands and speaking to one another in Polish. This was, on the one hand, an unusual phenomenon, and on the other, a very characteristic closeness demonstrated by all people who come from Poland: both Jews and non-Jews. Several months later, Shevah Weiss was appointed as Israel’s ambassador to Poland and returned to the country of his childhood. The war and post-war events had left him traumatized, but they were not enough to make him renounce his heritage. He would say, “the Poland of my childhood still lives on in me.”⁴ Émigrés often have an incurable longing for their place of origin (although from the Zionist point of view, Shevah Weiss was not an émigré). Identity molded by the heritage of small towns, “the littlest homelands” remains indelible because a “homeland is organic, deeply rooted in the past, always small, heart-warming, as close to you as your own body,”⁵ as Czesław Miłosz once wrote. Shevah Weiss appeared to have felt this way both about his place of origin and, in parallel, about the State of Israel.

As an ambassador, he was pragmatic and focused on Israel’s existential matters, but the issue of remembrance was central to his service. Shevah Weiss moved within the bounds of historical truth, where a clear distinction should be maintained between the perpetrators of the war and the victims. He spoke out against those who tried to blur those boundaries by relativizing the consequences that the war had entailed for Poland under occupation. Jews were victims of fascism, and extermination knew no exceptions in history. Poles were victims of fascism. There were also victims of the victims – the Jews who died at the hands of the Poles under the conditions of the worst totalitarian system in the world’s history, further burdened by wartime and post-war lawlessness. And there were also the Righteous Among the Nations. He reminded the world of the price – punishment by death – that Poles and their entire families paid for hiding Jews. Shevah Weiss demanded that the righteous be remembered because he himself was righteous. He fought for historical truth, as a prerequisite for a political stance that sought to break and overcome the chain of victimhood. His policy was grounded in relationality: he knew that help comes not necessarily from the strong and the mighty of the

³ Szewach Weiss, Kamila Drecka, *Pamiętam... rozmawia Kamila Drecka*, Kraków 2018, p. 96.

⁴ Szewach Weiss, *Moja polska*, Warsaw 2017, p. 15.

⁵ Czesław Miłosz, “La Combe,” *Kultura*, 10/132 (1958), p. 34.

world, but often from the weak and the wronged. Such relations were what had saved him from the Holocaust, and so he relied on this way of functioning in politics, both in Poland and in Israel.

After his diplomatic service ended, he remained active in the Polish media and became a key commentator, an expert on international affairs, on Polish-Jewish relations, and on remembrance. An authority figure. Polish-Jewish relations bear the stigma of unresolved conflicts. Roles and attitudes have been divided between these national groups: some enjoy official recognition, whereas others remain marginalized and unnoticed. Shevah Weiss could talk about them without needless shouting and angry obstinacy, navigating difficult, complicated, and painful problems in Polish-Jewish history. In Poland, his political sympathies did not lie with any particular party; while his leftwing views facilitated contacts with similar groups, he nevertheless remained open to dialogue with the right wing of the political scene, too. His friends came from a variety of political backgrounds, and I can imagine that they had difficulty talking to one another – but everyone talked to Shevah. He had friends among diplomats, government officials, university professors, as well as in the modest university hotel where he lived and worked. One of the people close to him was Wojtek, who was his driver during the period of his diplomatic service.

In addition to his political experience and savvy, the success and recognition of Shevah Weiss's mission in Poland can be ascribed to his charismatic personality combined with a profound understanding of Polish history and identity, and above all by cultural proximity and the ability to cultivate both the shared and the separate aspects of the Polish-Jewish past. As generations pass, the kind of mutual relations defined by fondness and first-hand knowledge of the same language and culture that Shevah Weiss so earnestly cultivated are gradually becoming a thing of the past. They will be redefined by future generations, but how? This will depend on their education, upbringing, the integration tools they use, their personal experience, and the resentments and prejudices that they harbor. Irrespective of all that, Shevah Weiss's testimony and great legacy have clearly become part of the history of both countries. On the other hand, the legacy he built upon his relations with others is still very much alive and continues to bear fruit. As Maciej Dutkiewicz, director of a biographical film about Szewach Weiss, wrote: "I first met him as an intellectual, I say goodbye to him as someone who has

changed me – he made me better. Because Shevah made others better. He had an aura of irresistibility.”⁶

There are plenty of similar testimonies: the professor educated more than 4,000 students, excluding meetings with his readers in small towns and cities. When Shevah Weiss died, those averse to his engagement in Polish affairs were quick to announce the futility of his efforts. But his achievements were not just a proverbial “drop in the ocean,” because his work went far beyond politics, comprising a broadly-understood humanism that still remains active in people and continues to do good. The professor treated politics and public activity as a profession of public trust, and showed young people the mission they entail, regardless of the rank one holds. In 2018, he received the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański Award, granted for “thinking about the state as a common good”. He was also awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland (2004) and the decoration *Missio Reconciliationis* (2003), given to Polish and foreign citizens who contributed to the reconciliation of nations. He also received the “Bene Merito” Honorary Badge (2009), an award given to Polish citizens and foreign nationals for activities consolidating Poland’s position in the international arena, the Medal “Distinguished for Tolerance” (2003) and the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Award (special award, 2008), conferred for activities promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation among communities, religions, and cultures. In 2017, President Andrzej Duda granted him Poland’s highest order, the Order of the White Eagle, awarded to the most outstanding Poles and the highest-ranking representatives of foreign countries. Shevah Weiss received the order in a place of special importance to him – Yad Vashem, where he served as chairman for many years and where the plaques with the names of the righteous who saved his family are located. He received the award in Jerusalem, in his country.

Shevah Weiss authored popularization books in Polish, including *Z jednej strony, z drugiej strony* [On the One Hand, On the Other Hand] (2005), *Takie buty z cholewami* [High-Topped Boots] (2012), *My Żydzi – Między Izraelem a diasporą* [We Jews: Between Israel and the Diaspora] (2009), a book that received the award of the Raczyński Library in Poznań for “a lesson in patriotism that does not blind people” and for its “excellent Polish.” His writings addressed the affairs of the State of Israel and the Jewish nation, remembrance, his encounters with prominent people and their profiles, but also Jewish folklore and humor. In addition to the aforementioned publications, Prof. Shevah Weiss authored numerous introductions to scientific

⁶ Maciej Dutkiewicz, “Szewach Weiss. Człowiek, który zmieniał innych,” *Rzeczpospolita*, <https://www.rp.pl/publicystyka/art37904861-szewach-weiss-czlowiek-ktory-zmienial-innych>, accessed March 27, 2023.

and popular science books, albums, and articles in weeklies and dailies. His most important autobiographical publications were *Ziemia i chmury* [Earth and Clouds] (2002) and his final book *Pamiętam...* [I Remember...] (2018), written in collaboration with Kamila Drecka. In the latter, he talked about his country of origin and his relationship with the State of Israel, the role of truth in the history of nations, old age, and little crumbs of happiness. Those autobiographical publications were complemented by the documentary directed by Maciej Dutkiewicz *...tak blisko ...tak daleko* [So far away... so close...] (2019). It is a biographical story about Shevah Weiss, intertwined with the history of the State of Israel, but also a very personal account of the final years of his life. Shevah Weiss dreamed of a Jewish state as a place for the creation of unique spiritual goods. He argued that gallows defeatism could not be a platform upon which Israel's future could be built, and he had a deep sense of connection not only with the state, but also with the heritage of the Jewish people living outside its borders. His fascination with the history of Polish Jews did not prevent him from noticing the problems of other ethnic groups living in Israel – they too were *amchu*, or his people.

After the end of his tenure as ambassador, he became a professor at the University of Warsaw, a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies. He was offered the job by Prof. Piotr Węgleński, then the rector of the University of Warsaw, and Prof. Grażyna Ulicka, the dean of the Faculty. In 2008, Shevah Weiss, together with Prof. Stanisław Sulowski and the present author, established the Research Center for Israel and Jewish Diaspora and became its head. In addition, he delivered an open lecture series dedicated to the State of Israel and the Polish-Jewish-Israeli relations. Prof. Weiss held his lectures in the splendid Room 1, at 3 Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, in downtown Warsaw, in the heart of the city's old town. He would arrive in an old, worn-out Volvo – to him, its value was more sentimental than useful. He would deliver lectures every other Tuesday, always starting at 4:45 p.m. An important part of those meetings involved discussions with students. Depending on the intensity of those talks, the lectures could end very late. It quickly became clear that Room 1 was too small to accommodate all those who wanted to attend the professor's lectures. Students would bring extra chairs and sit on the windowsills, but some could still not fit inside, so the authorities of the Faculty prepared a larger room, one that could accommodate about 150 people. The professor did not like change: he had already become accustomed to Room 1, so he found the move difficult to accept. After some time, however, the larger room also proved too small. I suggested that the professor should limit the number of students because it was difficult to find an even larger empty room for the time-slot at which he delivered his lectures. But he was adamant. "Maybe some people will hear about the history of Polish Jews, the Polish-Jewish

relations, and Israel for the first time in their lives. We should give all of them an opportunity to do so.” I agreed. He was very pleased with the very high number of students who attended his lectures. “I have the most amazing students and doctoral candidates at the University’s Center for Contemporary Israel Studies [now: the Research Center for Israel and Jewish Diaspora]. During the lectures, the room is too small, so they sit everywhere – on tables and windowsills. And we engage in dialogue, Korczak style. We also talk during breaks. I feel that if something terrible ever happened, there would be even more Righteous Among the Nations among them.”⁷

Some students attended Prof. Weiss’s lectures every year. In their review questionnaires, they praised not only the interesting content but also the personality of the lecturer – they wanted to listen and talk to Prof. Weiss, to engage in dialogue with him. In recent years, the professor only held remote lectures – we wanted him to be safe, to stay with us as long as possible. Prof. Weiss had one wish: he wanted to remain an active university lecturer until the end of his life. We fulfilled his wish. In the last semester, he held lectures together with the present author. He delivered his last lecture at the end of October 2022, but we closed the semester together three days before his death, at the end of January 2023. A year earlier, with his students in mind, he decided to record some of his lectures. He was not at full strength, so he completed the task with great difficulty. He wanted the recordings to be made available after his death. We will fulfill this posthumous wish, as well. His lectures will also be continued in the form closest to the Professor, just as he delivered them for more than twenty years – on Tuesdays, at 4:45 p.m.

In 2011, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Warsaw by its rector, Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow. He earlier received an honorary doctorate from the University of Wrocław, and in the following years from the Medical University of Łódź, the Maria Grzegorzewska University, the University of Economics in Katowice, and the SWPS University.

At the ceremony of awarding the honorary doctorate from the University of Warsaw, he confessed that the closeness he experienced in Poland had turned him from a Jew who came from Poland into a “Polish Jew.” “Today, on this special day, I can say that I feel first and foremost a Varsovian,” he said. “If I had to permanently live outside Israel, I could only do so

⁷ Olga Figaszewska, “Moje życie jest przypadkiem”. Szewach Weiss kończy 82 lata! Ekskluzywny Wywiad Vivy!,” July 5, 2017, <https://viva.pl/ludzie/wywiady-vivy/szewach-o-wojnie-i-zyciu-niesamowita-historia-vivy-26939-r3/>, accessed March 27, 2023

in my Warsaw. Without a shadow of a doubt,” he added on another occasion.⁸ He felt strongly connected with Warsaw. For reasons related to his teaching duties, Professor Weiss divided his time between Poland and Israel. In recent years, he spent more and more time in Warsaw. He lived in the university hotel “Hera,” where he occupied a two-room apartment. Despite being modest, it had the advantage of having a large window overlooking the most beautiful park in Warsaw – the Royal Baths Park. Early in the morning and in the evening, those walking down Parkowa Street towards Gagarin Street could see Prof. Weiss sitting by the window and smoking a pipe. He routinely watched his strolling neighbors, although he only knew them by sight. Every day, he would write a new piece of history of the people on the same street: “In the evening, I like to sit just here, where we are now talking. With the lights out. And to smoke a pipe. I often reconstruct the past. Prewar Warsaw comes back to me, even though I did not know it. A made-up recollection. So many thousands of Jews lived here. They must have strolled in the park, down the nearby streets. So many Jewish children. And the longing for those times begins.”⁹ Recollections of history, memories, prewar reconstructions, and deeply hidden sadness were an inalienable part of Prof. Weiss’s personality.

In the final years of his life, he was reluctant to leave Warsaw. He turned down even short recreational trips, and lived in the city almost until his death (he left Warsaw on January 5, 2023). The modest apartment in the “Hera” Hotel was his home. His friends cared for him, and the hotel staff were always there to help. For many years, he received medical care from the military hospital on Szaserów Street, where he found not only dedicated doctors, but also friends.

Prof. Shevah Weiss passed away during Shabbat, on February 3, 2023, in Ramat Gan. Reports of his death reached Poland a day later, on Saturday. They opened the newscasts in Poland’s largest television networks and radio stations and were featured in the digital media, in newspapers, and on web portals. We lost someone important and close to us: “Everyone loved Poland [...] but knew only him. It now feels as if everyone died.”¹⁰ That feeling was close to many people who knew Shevah Weiss. He was buried in Jerusalem, on Mount Herzl, in the alley for persons of special merit and leaders of the State of Israel.

⁸ Robert Mazurek, “Szewach Weiss: Cały świat zrzuca na Polskę swoje grzechy,” *Rzeczpospolita (Plus Minus supplement)*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art11506621-szewach-weiss-caly-swiat-zrzuca-na-polske-swoje-grzechy>, accessed March 7, 2023.

⁹ Olga Figaszewska, , op. cit .

¹⁰ Adam Szejnfeld’s comment on the Facebook page of the Israeli Embassy in Poland, February 4, 2023.

Thirty days later, when I was standing at Prof. Weiss's grave, I was joined by a young girl, a guide at the Mount Herzl cemetery. She was preparing for a biographical lecture about the professor that she planned to deliver it in front of Israeli soldiers. She was interested in his life in Poland and asked many questions about his activity. At the end, she wanted to know how we might sum up his life in a few short phrases, a few lines that could be spoken there, over his grave – my answer then may also serve now as an apt encapsulation of my recollections of him, of the most important things in his life, of what created his identity and shaped him:

“Shevah Weiss, born in Borysław (Poland).

Son of his mother, Gienia, and his father, Meir.

Speaker of the 13th Knesset, Israel's ambassador to Poland.”

May his memory be a blessing.