

## Mickiewicz and the Holocaust: An Alternative History

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Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) has been gradually made into *the* national symbol of the Poles and their culture. This poet's portraits that adorn schools, monuments devoted to him and his poetry have diligently served in the same capacity for the Polish nation-state founded in 1918. Little attention is given to the fact that Mickiewicz was actually born in the Russian Empire. Yes, three years before his birth, or in 1795, the last remnants of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been wiped out from the political map of Europe by the Habsburgs, Prussia and Russia. Mickiewicz's home village of Zaosie (today's Завосье Zavosie in Belarus) had found itself in Russia. The former dual Commonwealth's constituent Grand Duchy of Lithuania survived within the Russian Empire until 1840, in the administrative guise of the largely autonomous Lithuanian Governorate with Polish as its official language.

Unsurprisingly, Mickiewicz saw this Grand Duchy as his homeland, and consistently identified himself as a citizen of this polity, after he permanently left the Russian Empire in 1829. His renowned epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (*Sir Thaddeus*, 1834) opens with an invocation to Lithuania, *not* Poland:

*Litwo! Ojczyzno moja! ty jesteś jak zdrowie;  
Ile cię trzeba cenić, ten tylko się dowie,  
Kto cię stracił.*

Lithuania, my fatherland! You are like health;  
How much you must be valued, will only discover  
The one who has lost you.  
(translated by Katie Busch-Sorensen)

This is a real mystery to Polish schoolchildren who are required to peruse this novel in verse at the tender age of 12, while still in elementary school. They were born and raised in the Polish nation-state, where language equates nation, and all speakers of the Polish language are believed to constitute the Polish nation. Furthermore, all the members of this Polish nation are expected to live within *their* national polity of Poland. Hence, it appears illogical to them that Mickiewicz explicitly chose Lithuania as his patria, while settled on writing in Polish, which 'rightfully belongs' to today's Poland, *not* Lithuania, where the Baltic language of Lithuanian is official.

But Mickiewicz's sociopolitical reality was still pronouncedly *non*-national. The ethnolinguistic definition of the Polish nation was formulated during the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, implemented after 1918, and accepted as 'normal' by the vast majority of Poland's inhabitants only after World War II. The poet's 'Lithuania' was none other than the aforementioned Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This Grand Duchy is *not* present-day Lithuania, either, as the Grand Duchy's territory overlaps with the two present-day nation-states of Belarus and Lithuania. The Lithuanian nation-state is known as *Lietuva*

in Lithuanian, while the Grand Duchy was known in the then official languages of Polish and Russian as Litwa and Литва *Litva*, respectively. But nowadays the Russian and Polish terms double for referring to the Lithuanian nation-state, as well. Only in Belarusian is the distinction preserved, since the term Літва *Litva* is reserved for referring to the Grand Duchy, while Летува *Lietuva* for today's Lithuania. Obviously, the latter term is a phonetic rendering of the Lithuanian-language name of Lithuania.

The terminological complications and obfuscations apart, the main sociopolitical cleavage in the Grand Duchy of Mickiewicz's times was estate and religion, *not* language. The elite consisted of Polish-Lithuanian nobles, whom St Petersburg also recognized as members of Imperial Russia's multiethnic estate of nobles. (The former Commonwealth's nobility added up to almost two thirds of all Russia's nobles.) By the rule of thumb a typical Polish-Lithuanian noble had to profess Roman Catholicism and be literate in the Polish language and French. Apart from Jews, Armenians and Tatars who retained their non-territorial ethnoreligious autonomies dating back to Poland-Lithuania, the vast majority of the remaining population were unfree serfs. They were predominantly Slavophones (except for the territory of today's Lithuania), either Catholics, Uniates (Greek Catholics), or increasingly Orthodox Christians. Serfs were not slaves, but until 1861 they were tied to land owned by their lords, that is, nobles. A noble landowner could not sell or buy a single serf as a chattel (who then would be indistinguishable from a slave), but nobles and rich burghers were entitled to buy and sell land with villages of serfs located on it. Neither the commonality of religion nor the commonality of language could serve to overcome the estate division, which was paramount. Nobles and serfs belonged to separate sociopolitical worlds. A Russian noble of Polish-Lithuanian origin had more in common with his counterparts in Germany or Britain than with 'his' serfs.

Mickiewicz belonged to the privileged estate of nobles. The serfs on his family estate were mostly Orthodox Slavophones, who spoke in dialects which nowadays would be identified as Belarusian. His world was multilingual. The nobility of the Grand Duchy spoke and wrote Polish, cultivated French, wrote in Latin, and gradually excelled at Russian, which became the preferred language of social distinction for all Russia's nobles. Russian officials and administrators, usually Orthodox nobles after 1840, spoke and wrote Russian exclusively. After this cesure Polish was removed from official use in the Grand Duchy, reduced to a plethora of regular Russian governorates. Jews wrote Hebrew, while spoke Yiddish, and those given to the ideals of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) made the point of acquiring German, too. Armenians wrote Armenian and spoke the Turkic idiom of Kipchak, while Tatars wrote Arabic but spoke Slavic.

In spite of the fact that the common tradition of Poland-Lithuania splintered into the modern separate national traditions of Armenia, Belarus, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, the Polish national master narrative jealously claims Mickiewicz for the Polish nation and its culture only. Ironically, Mickiewicz never had a chance to visit the main cities of today's Poland, be it Warsaw or Cracow. For him these cities were located in a kindred Kingdom of Poland, which nevertheless lay beyond the boundaries of his homeland of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. During his travels, the poet only briefly visited Poznań in 1831, which then was known as Posen in the Kingdom of Prussia. Had Mickiewicz known about this current repossession of his person and writings for the

exclusive ownership of such a Poland and its nation, he would have been most surprised. In the present tense, this surprise is shared by the Belarusians who claim the poet on the territorial basis, while the Lithuanians point to the name of Mickiewicz's homeland as an argument that his poetry also – to a degree – belongs to them. It was not the Polish language alone which made Mickiewicz a world-renowned smith of words.

The Jews also claim the poet, אדאם מיצקעוויטש, as evidenced by the 1955 school edition of his poetry in Yiddish translation, published on the centenary of his death, for the use in early communist Poland's Yiddish-medium minority educational system. This system dwindled after the majority of Holocaust survivors had left the country by the turn of the 1960s, before it was finally killed off through the ethnic cleansing of the few remaining Jews in 1968. It did not matter to the national communist authorities that these Jews felt themselves to be members of the Polish nation. Most did not practice Judaism, either, while the Polish constitution explicitly forbade any discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity. No one in communist Poland thought about demoting high communist officials on account of their parents' religiosity, which could be Catholic, Greek Catholic or Orthodox in its character. But in the case of Poles of Jewish origin, the cultural memory of Judaism, and their ancestors' previous loyalty to this religion were taken as an argument against, that they could never become 'real Poles,' due to this fact. This 'argument' justified the growing sociopolitical exclusion of Jews in communist Poland and their eventual expulsion.

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Centenary portrait of Adam Mickiewicz published in communist Poland's Yiddish-language newspaper *Folks Sztyme*, 26 November 1955 (Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%27#%D7%A0%D7%A1%D7%A2%D7%A3%D7%A4%D7%A5%D7%A6%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA%D7%AB%D7%AC%D7%AD%D7%AE%D7%AF%D7%B0%D7%B1%D7%B2%D7%B3%D7%B4%D7%B5%D7%B6%D7%B7%D7%B8%D7%B9%D7%BA%D7%BB%D7%BC%D7%BD%D7%BE%D7%BF%D7%C0%D7%C1%D7%C2%D7%C3%D7%C4%D7%C5%D7%C6%D7%C7%D7%C8%D7%C9%D7%CA%D7%CB%D7%CC%D7%CD%D7%CE%D7%CF%D7%D0%D7%D1%D7%D2%D7%D3%D7%D4%D7%D5%D7%D6%D7%D7%D7%D8%D7%D9%D7%DA%D7%DB%D7%DC%D7%DD%D7%DE%D7%DF%D7%E0%D7%E1%D7%E2%D7%E3%D7%E4%D7%E5%D7%E6%D7%E7%D7%E8%D7%E9%D7%EA%D7%EB%D7%EC%D7%ED%D7%EE%D7%EF%D7%F0%D7%F1%D7%F2%D7%F3%D7%F4%D7%F5%D7%F6%D7%F7%D7%F8%D7%F9%D7%FA%D7%FB%D7%FC%D7%FD%D7%FE%D7%FF>)

The largely unacknowledged anti-Semitic underpinning of Polish ethnolinguistic nationalism won, reinforced during the Second World War by Germany's anti-Semitic laws and Holocaust. During the war and in its aftermath, it became 'normal' to the average Pole that a Polish-speaker and self-proclaimed Pole could not be a 'real Pole,' if her or his ancestor – irrespective of how distant – ever happened to profess Judaism. One of the most important poet of interwar and postwar Poland, Julian Tuwim, survived, because he managed to leave for the United States by the way of Romania and Brazil. The most beloved children poet, Jan Brzechwa, stayed in wartime Warsaw and his life was saved by the poet's unrequited love that drove him insane. Brzechwa became so careless that Germans believed he could not be a Jew. Poland's Kafka, or Bruno Schulz, was not so lucky, a German soldier shot him to death in a street, jealous that his colleague may enjoy 'possessing' such a talented Jewish artist. Unlike Schulz, whose stories were reprinted and anthologized in communist Poland, the brilliant young female

poet, Zuzanna Gincznka, was forgotten, after her untimely death at the age of 27, until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In her case the 'national disability' of being a Jewess, was heightened by her youth and gender. It was a Polish (and Catholic, obviously) female neighbor, who grassed on Ginczanka to Gestapo, intent on a pecuniary award.

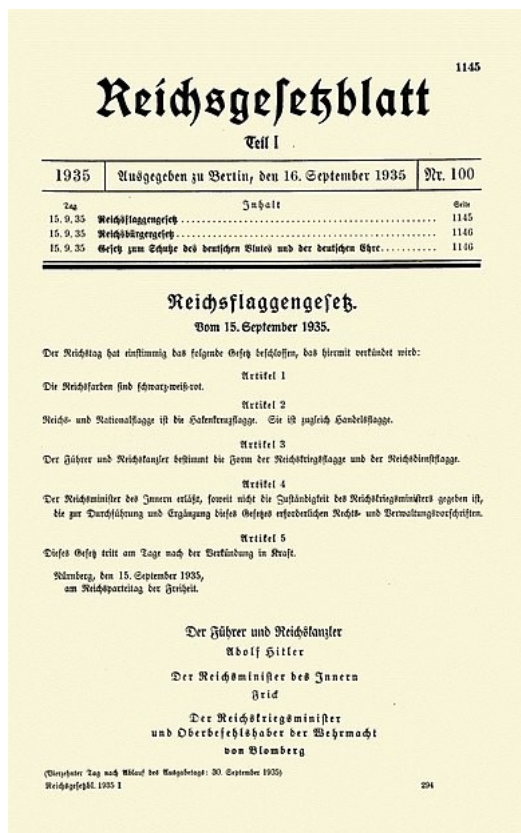


Zuzanna Ginczanka (Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zuzanna\\_Ginczanka.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zuzanna_Ginczanka.jpg))

Despite 'real Poles'' ritualized rejection of the aforementioned Polish writers of Jewish origin as non-Poles, their writings constitute the very core of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Polish literature. Neither the anti-Semitism of Polish nationalism, nor Germany's Nuremberg laws have managed to expel their poetry, prose and plays from this coveted position. According to the Nuremberg laws it was sufficient to become suspected of criminalized Jewishness should one have happened to have at least one Jewish grandparent, even if this grandparent in question had converted to Christianity. The Nuremberg laws were applied with a degree of strictness and with a possibility of administrative appeal in Germany. After the war commenced, rule of law did not matter much for German administrators in occupied Poland or in the Soviet lands under German control. The Germans relied on local Christian populations to identify Jews and give them up to the administration for extermination. In the thick of the industrialized conveyor belt of



death, the Germans often had no time or manpower to check upon false accusations, either. Not infrequently did neighbors settle old scores by reporting their enemy as a Jew to a German policeman.



The German government gazette *Reichsgesetzblatt* proclaiming the Nuremberg Laws (Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RGLB\\_I\\_1935\\_S\\_1145.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RGLB_I_1935_S_1145.jpg))

But why to mix Mickiewicz with the Holocaust? Didn't he die ninety years *before* these tragic events? Yes, he did. But what if he were born a century later, in 1898? Would he enjoy the same lifespan, that is, until 1955, or not? When the poet actually lived, the suspected Jewish origin of his mother did not raise many eyebrows, and neither did it prevent the Russian authorities from acknowledging the noble status of the poet's family. However, the discussion raged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Polish nation-state made Mickiewicz into its paramount national poet. What drove this discussion was the unacknowledged anti-Semitism of the definition of the Polish nation as preferred by Polish ethnolinguistic nationalists, that is, all the Polish-speakers *less* any Polish-speaking Jews (persons professing Judaism, or with ancestors who used to profess this religion). 'Real Poles,' in line with Germany's 'science of race' (*Rassenkunde*) wished to 'cleanse' the poet of any 'accusations' of 'hereditary Jewishness,' to make him *judenfrei* ('free of Jewishness'). On the other hand, their opponents chose to celebrate the possibility of Mickiewicz's Jewish origin as an apt reflection of the polyconfessional and multiethnic character of the population in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

An alternative Mickiewicz, aged 41 when Germany attacked Poland in 1939, would squarely fall into the Nuremberg definition of a Jew. The widespread rumor or knowledge about his mother's Jewish origin would suffice. The German machinery of death would

be unleashed to seize him, also on the account of his contribution to Polish culture and intellectual life. The Germans wanted to turn all Slavs into slave workers, which entailed the liquidation of their nations' intellectual and administrative elites. Mickiewicz would be undoubtedly classified as a member of the Polish elite. The odds would be highly stacked against his survival, given that on average so few Poles of Catholic origin dared to help Poles of Jewish origin during the Holocaust. Most probably the alternative Mickiewicz would be killed in the Auschwitz death camp in 1944, aged 46. After the war, his poetry would be published, but on account of being 'tainted' by his suspected Jewishness, for sure, such a Jewish Mickiewicz would not be accorded the elevated place in the Polish national pantheon, traditionally accorded to him since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

He would be a merely 'prominent Polish' poet of 'doubtful Polishness.' 'Real Poles' would go to lengths in order to remove Mickiewicz's works from school curricula, as they do nowadays in the case of the aforementioned 20<sup>th</sup>-century Polish writers 'of Jewish origin,' who lived through the Holocaust, or did not survive. This exercise in alternative history warns of how much the definition of greatness depends on the accident of a sociopolitical context during the time when a writer happened to live and write. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century espousal of ethnolinguistic nationalism in Poland as the main ideology of statehood legitimation and maintenance, additionally heightens this arbitrariness by anachronistically presenting the non-national past of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as 'national' and exclusively 'belonging to' the Polish nation. However, it is enough to shift the temporal gears to a century later for the 'greatest Polish national poet' to become a mere hunted Jew 'masquerading' as a Pole. What appears to a Polish nationalist an acme of literary genius in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a hundred years later becomes a proof of 'perfidious un-Polishness.' The dynamics of anti-Semitism is illogical, however oftentimes turns out to be lethal, because so many continue believing in this form of xenophobia. Hence, anniversaries of the birth and death of Mickiewicz the nobleman continue to be celebrated, which would *not* be the case of the alternative Mickiewicz branded as a Jew on the strength of the Nuremberg laws. Another typical story of 'modern' Europe and Poland.

*June 2019*