



Polish President Andrzej Duda, and his wife Agata Kornhauser-Duda, during a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial museum in Jerusalem on January 17, 2017. Credit: AFP

Opinion // 'All Mothers in Israel Are Polish'

The state visit to Israel by Polish President Andrzej Duda was harmonious, but he has to admit there was more bad history than just one pogrom in 1946.

By Ofer Aderet | Jan 25, 2017

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Polish President Andrzej Duda's state visit to Israel last week included a fascinating chapter that wasn't brought to the media's attention. Yad Vashem gave Agata Duda, Poland's first lady, documentation on her Jewish relatives who were murdered in the Holocaust.

The Jewish roots of the first lady, the daughter of the half-Jewish Polish poet Julian Kornhauser, are no secret. But the fact that the first wife of her grandfather Jacob was murdered in the Holocaust with their son is not widely known. The fact that Duda has relatives in Israel will certainly surprise many Poles.

Duda's family tree, drawn at Haaretz's request by the genealogist [Gidi Poraz](#), fully reveals the Polish president's Jewish connection. It could explain his statement at the end of one of his speeches in Jerusalem: "By today we cannot know how much Jewish blood flows through Polish veins."

But it's not only the personal element that led to the Polish president's preoccupation with Poland's Jewish past during his visit. Also contributing was the right-wing Polish government's fight against anyone who blackens the country's reputation, in the government's view, by mentioning the Poles' role in persecuting Jews around the time of World War II.

Again and again Duda was asked about this highly charged issue, and he showed great courage in statements that wouldn't please some of his voters. For example, in his speech at President Reuven Rivlin's residence, he denigrated the Poles who

murdered 40 Holocaust survivors and injured dozens more in the 1946 Kielce pogrom. One of them, Baruch Dorfman, whose eye was torn out, died recently in Israel, alone, at the age of 98.

“Not everyone is able to show courage, but human decency must be demanded of every person,” Duda said. The rioters, he said, had “removed themselves from the Polish people,” adding: “Historical truth is not always pleasant, not for the Polish people either. As in every country, we had decent people who showed heroism and saved Jews, endangering their own lives – but there were also mean people who must be denounced.”

In the context of these frank statements, one can only regret that the president declined to mention another stain on Poland’s past, the Jedwabne pogrom in 1941, during which Poles burned alive hundreds of their Jewish neighbors. Does his silence show that he too believes the lie spread by the Polish right wing that Germans, not Poles, were the ones who did this?

Duda is to be admired for his uncompromising stance against manifestations of anti-Semitism in his country (which in any case are few). But a person in whose wife’s veins Jewish blood flows would be expected to admit that this anti-Semitism has been part and parcel of many Poles since long ago. He would be expected not to adopt – as he did in his speeches – the faulty narrative of a thousand-year benign coexistence between Jews and Poles that was only interrupted by the Nazi invasion of 1939.

A few months ago, Tzipora Anbari died in Kfar Yehoshua at the age of 102. In 1937 in Poland, she boarded a train at the start of her journey to prestate Israel. She was received by a group of Poles who shouted: “There are Jews here! We’ll throw their bags out the windows!” She called out to them, “You’re always shouting ‘Jews to Palestine!’ Here we are, going to Palestine. What impression will we have of the country where we were born, educated and grew up?”

Another good memory from Duda’s visit are the courageous words of Rivlin, the only Israeli leader so far to come out against the attempt by some Polish leaders to rewrite history. He said that statesmen shape history, while historians study it.

To slightly ease the visit’s charged atmosphere, Rivlin told his counterpart: “All mothers in Israel are Polish,” a play on the Israeli term “Polish mother,” which in the Diaspora is often “Jewish mother.” Duda, for his part, conveyed to Israelis “the love of the Polish people toward the Polish mothers of Israel,” showing his desire to renew the complex ties between the two peoples.



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