Immigrants from Poland, survivors of the Holocaust, tend to look upon their earlier, pre-Holocaust lives, in the full flower of their youth, ambivalently, as a nostalgic ideal, “a Golden Age,” on the one hand, and a time of persecution and pogroms, on the other. For the Jews, the places left behind are a mix of the good and the bad. Postwar testimonies by Częstochowa Jews tend to display a sentimental yearning for the “good old days” of family, social intimacy, and community. They also confront the past with a hard sense of realism. Survivors are quick to say that Częstochowa was an antisemitic town.

Polish-Jewish relations have grown increasingly strained since World War II. Jews blame Poles for participating in the murder of Jews during and after the Holocaust, and there are Poles who have been quick to deny both, except where the evidence is incontrovertible as in the case of the Kielce massacre in 1946. Poles have argued that Poland was the only country in Europe that did not collaborate with the Germans. In fact, they say that Poles did whatever was possible to give aid, comfort and protection to the Jews. This, they say, is attested by the large number of Righteous Gentiles remembered at Yad Vashem, who — at risk of their and their families’ lives — helped save Jewish lives. Jews agree that there certainly were righteous Poles, many more than are acknowledged in Yad Vashem, but they were a distinct minority of the population. Among those who aided and saved Jews there were citizens of Częstochowa; we only know a few of their names. There certainly were more. The truth, however, is more nuanced. Polish antisemitism was systemic, and some would justifiably argue that it still is. The present government has made it a crime to tell the truth that would put Poles in a bad light. Yet the signs of mutual respect are springing up everywhere. The liberal-progressive element of Polish society now engages in an honest soul searching. In this respect the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw is symbolic of a great sea change in the way many Poles regard Jews, and Jews are quick to recognize and value these new developments.

The inspiring reality of Polish-Jewish relations is growing steadily and is a joint effort by Poles and Jews. This is not the place to review this new chapter in Polish Jewish history. Out of this common effort comes a new way of evaluating our mutual relations. What is important and must be underscored here is that engaging in stereotyping the “other” is insidious and does nothing to shed light on the complex and emotionally laden truth. Liberal minded Poles have taken on the difficult task of uprooting the hateful way Poles look at Jews. And Jews are coming to the realization that there were, and still are, decent Poles who went, against the grain, before, during and after the Holocaust. Jews prospered in adversity, in Częstochowa, as we shall see, in communal and economic
life, and they were able to do so because Poland was their home. Drawing a balance sheet on Polish-Jewish relations, Ezra Mendelsohn writes:

Above all, we owe a debt of gratitude to Polish freedom, which allowed the Jews in the 1920s and 1930s to participate in politics, open schools and write as they pleased. In interwar Poland the Gerer Hasidim could remain Gerer Hasidim, and the pioneers could organize vocational training in anticipation of aliya to Palestine. Polish freedom, allied with Polish anti-semitism and Jewish modernization made possible the emergence and popularization of the new Jewish politics, which, among other things helped to build the state of Israel. . . We owe a debt of gratitude to the interwar Polish state for offering its Jewish citizens a model of heroic, and successful, national struggle, which inspired young Jewish members of the Bund, of Hashomer ha-tsair and of Betar. Interwar Poland was a relatively free country, a highly nationalistic country, and an anti-Jewish country. The experience of Polish Jews between the wars was a combination of suffering, some of which was caused by anti-semitism, and of achievement, made possible by Polish freedom, pluralism and tolerance. Modern Polish nationalism led, inevitably, to anti-semitism, but it also inspired Polish Jewish youth to raise the banner of Jewish nationalism. . . Interwar Poland was good for the Jews because, among other things it provided an environment in which forces were unleashed in which many Jews regarded then, and today as extremely positive.¹

With great courage, Jews in pre-Holocaust times did not make fear of antisemitism their driving force nor for that matter did it always keep them from having Polish friends and living in amicable coexistence. The two groups were not surgically separated on all levels of society. Nevertheless, even as Jews took great pride in their representatives for denouncing antisemitism from the highest parliamentary forum of the land, they were mostly busy getting on with their lives, creating in Częstochowa, under the greatest of adversity – of poverty, antisemitism, class divides, intra-mural partisan rivalries, and religious differences – one of the most beautiful chapters in Jewish history.