Chapter 6 – The Origin of the Polonsky Surname

Our Polonsky surname dates back many generations, and we can be proud to be the descendants of such an illustrious lineage of distinguished rabbis. But how did these rabbis come to be known by the Polonsky surname, and who was the first rabbi in the lineage to bear this name? Where did the Polonsky name originate, and how common a name is it? This chapter addresses these intriguing questions.

The History of Jewish Surnames in Russia

Considering that Jewish history extends over more than five millennia, the Jewish use of surnames is a relatively recent custom. For centuries, patronymics, with the Hebrew word “ben” to denote “son of” and ‘bat” to denote “daughter of” were the common way by which Jews identified themselves. They were isolated from larger communities, and simply did not develop the need for surnames.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, surname usage by the Sephardim became popular due to the rise of cities and commerce. The isolation of the Ashkenazim postponed their use of surnames until much later. Not until the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century were surnames commonly used among Ashkenazi Jews.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which controlled a substantial part of Europe, was the first country to require Jews to register a permanent family surname, and required that it be German, which explains the frequency of German surnames in Western Europe. Similar laws requiring surnames were enacted in the Russian Empire in 1804 and 1835.

The lack of surnames is a major reason why it is exceedingly difficult to trace Jewish family lineages before the late eighteenth century. Another reason is the repeated destruction of Jewish records that occurred throughout Europe and Russia during numerous expulsions, attacks, and pogroms conducted over the centuries and the widespread destruction of records during the Holocaust.

With the partitions of eastern Poland and the Ukraine in 1772, 1793, and 1795, large numbers of Jews who had been living in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Russian rulers were concerned about the effect that this influx would have on trade and commerce, and they responded to this concern by enacting laws which limited the areas in which Jewish people could live, the professions they could engage in, and the property they could own.

However, in their attempt to impose these rules and edicts, Russian civil authorities soon encountered problems due to the lack of surnames among this large Jewish population. This, combined with people often having the same first name, the frequent use of double-first names, and numerous different spellings of the same name, caused confusion and was simply untenable.

Neither was it advantageous for the Jews, as the Russian civil authorities were both ignorant of, and oblivious to the fact that Moshe, Mojshe, Moisej, Moshka, and Movsha indicated the same person. The government wanted to tax and draft poor Moshe five times over. Hence, for purposes of trade and commerce, employment, leases, landholdings, litigation, passports, taxes, and military service, it soon became apparent that there was a pressing need for the Jews to adopt surnames.

In 1804, Czar Alexander I issued an “Imperial Statute Concerning the Organization of Jews.” Among the many issues addressed by this broad statute were fifty-four specific regulations involving education and civil rights, estates, trades, and taxation, and the rights of farmers, manufactures, merchants, and artisans. It even addressed the position of rabbis, and regulated their sources of income. Under the heading, “Obligation of Jews regarding above-mentioned estates,” the statute also required the adoption of surnames:

During the census every Jew shall have or accept a known inherited family name or surname/nickname that shall be used in all documents and lists without any change, with the addition of a name given by faith or at birth. This measure is necessary for a better establishment of their Citizenship conditions, for better protection of their property and for reviewing litigation between them.

This 1804 edict was followed in 1835 by a second edict which stated that:

Every Jew, in addition to a first name given at a profession of faith or birth, must forever retain, without alteration, a known inherited or legally adopted surname or nickname.

Taken together, these two edicts required Jews to assume permanent surnames that were incapable of being altered or changed. This explains why we see the first reference to the Polonsky surname appear in conjunction with Rabbi Shmuel Mordkovich (son of Mordecai) in the 1816 Ekaterinopol census (Shmuel was mentioned on the 1816 census as having died in 1811, the same year as the previous census). However, it does not explain where the Polonsky surname came from.

147 Czar Alexander I: Imperial Statute Concerning the Organization of Jews, Article 32, December 9, 1804.
149 Cherkasy Archive: 1816 Census for Kiev Gubernia, Zvenigorodka Uezd, Ekaterinopol Jewish community, March 14, 1816. Repository (Fond) 452, Cabinet (Opis) 2, File (Delo) 2, pages 5, 67.
The Derivation of the Polonsky Surname

According to Alexander Beider, an expert on Russian Jewish surnames, the surname Polonski or Polonsky is a toponym (or place name) derived from the villages of Polonsk and Polonna, and the towns of Polonnoye and Polonka, in the Ukraine and Belarus. This same definition of the Polonsky surname is cited in other popular name reference sources.

Polonnoye (also spelled Polonne) is in the Volhynia region of the Ukraine. It was a fortified place in the middle of the seventeenth century, when about 12,000 Jews found a refuge there from the neighboring towns at the time of the Cossacks’ Uprising. It was a Jewish population center in the nineteenth century, and had a Jewish population of close to 8,000 by 1900. The region centered in Polonnoye is known in Polish as “Polonski” and in Russian, “Polonskiy.” In a story about the infamous Babi Yar massacre in Kiev, the author referred to people from the town of Polonnoye as Polonskys: “I am begging you, dear Polonchanins to remember this, remember Polonskys, Babi Yars, forever.”

The Noble Polonsky Surname

Although Polonsky is primarily a Jewish surname, it has also been associated with Christian Polish and Russian nobility. For instance, Yakov Petrovich Polonsky (1819–1898) of noble birth, attended Moscow University, and was a leading Pushkinist poet. Many of his poems were set to music by composers such as Peter Tchaikovsky, Serge Rachmaninoff, Sergei Taneyev, and Anton Rubinstein.

Noted Polish historian, Professor Antony Polonsky, corroborates that the Polonsky surname was used by Polish nobles. The story in his family was that when his ancestors were choosing a surname, they chose the name of a local nobleman. Dr. Polonsky remains in contact with the descendants of this Polish nobleman’s family.

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The surname POLONSKI is listed in a sixteenth century Polish heraldic as an “ancient noble family of Lithuania” under the Leliwa or Polish Coat of Arms, first mentioned in 1324. It was used by several hundred szlachta or Polish noble families during the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and remains in use today by many of their descendants.157

On the shield of the Leliwa coat of arms are the Eastern symbols of the Star of David above the Muslim crescent. Above the shield rests a Polish nobleman’s helm, and crest of a coronet, with a fan of seven peacock feathers. The motto or battle cry is to the Leliwa.158

The following are explanations as to the origin of the non-Jewish version of the Polonsky surname among Polish noble families:

1. It may derive from the word “Polonia,” the Latin name of Poland.

2. It may derive from the word “polon,” meaning bondage or prison. A captured prisoner of war was known as “polonny” or “polonski.”159

The broad “from Polonia” derivation of the Polonsky surname does not apply to Jews because by the time most Jews adopted surnames, in the early 1800s, the country of Poland no longer existed. Three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, and 1795) had culminated in Poland being erased from the map, and its territories divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Poland would not re-emerge as an independent country until after World War I, in 1918.160 (See Appendix 5 – Partition of Poland map).

The First Polonsky in Our Lineage

As discussed in the previous chapter, the progenitor of the Polonsky rabbinical lineage was Rabbi Shmuel Mordkovich Polonsky. In the Hebrew genealogical monograph Shem ve-She’arit, the author states that Sarah Rachel Sheindel Shapira (the daughter of Rabbi Pinchas Shapira of Koretz), married Rabbi Shmuel (the son of Rabbi Mordecai, son of Moses Gelles), one of the scholars of the Brody Kloyz,161 whose epitaph refers to him as “Moses the Servant of God.”162


158 Ibid. Leliwa is a village in central Poland.


160 Shortly after the surrender of Germany in November 1918, Poland regained its independence as the Second Polish Republic. It reaffirmed its independence after a series of military conflicts, the most notable being the Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921).


162 Levi Halevi Grossman, Editor: Shem ve-She’arit (Name and Remnant). Betzalel Printers, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1943.
In his book, *An Ancient Lineage – European Roots of a Jewish Family*, Dr. Edward Gelles states:  

*My ancestor Moses Gelles of Brody turned out to be a man of many names ... I have found a reference to a Rabbi S. Gelles of Brody going back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. His daughter married Rabbi Menachem Levush, who assumed his father-in-law’s name, as was sometimes the custom in those days.*

Rabbi Menachem Levush’s son was Rabbi Mordecai, and Rabbi Mordecai’s son was Rabbi Shmuel. It is not known whether Shmuel was born Shmuel ben Mordecai Gelles, Shmuel ben Mordecai Levush, or simply Shmuel Mordkovich, as his birthplace is uncertain, and there are few, if any surviving Jewish birth records from Brody and its surrounding towns and *shetels* dating back to the 1760s. What is known is that he was not born Shmuel Polonsky. How then did Rabbi Shmuel and his descendants acquire the Polonsky surname?

When Jews acquired surnames in the Russian Empire during the early nineteenth century, their surnames were often toponyms (place names) derived from the communities to which they belonged. But the community to which a person belonged was not necessarily the same one in which they physically resided – rather, it was considered to be the community in which they were originally registered on the tax revision list by Russian officials at the end of the eighteenth century. How then did Rabbi Shmuel, who was most likely born in or near Brody, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, come to be identified with the Polonnoye community in the Russian Empire?

Although the precise nature of Shmuel’s connection to Polonnoye town remains something of a mystery, it is believed that it had something to do with family connections acquired through his marriage to Rabbi Pinchas Shapira’s daughter.

Shmuel was ordained by Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon (Jacob Samson). This famous Rabbi of Shepetovka was a *mechutan* (in-law) of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, his daughter Sarah having married Rabbi Pinchas’ son, Rabbi Yehuda Meir Shapiro.

Rabbi Pinchas Shapira moved to Shepetovka in his later years (1780s), and it may have been through Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon that Shmuel was introduced to him. Rabbi Shimshon may have even helped to arrange the marriage between Shmuel and Rabbi Pinchas’ daughter, Sarah Rachel Sheindel Shapira. Apparently, Rabbi Pinchas thought highly enough of the young rabbi and his yichus to bless the marriage. In addition to the distinction of being the husband of Rabbi Pinchas Shapira’s daughter, Shmuel served as chief rabbi and *Av Beth Din* of Koniow (now called Kunew).

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Kunev was also not far from the ancient town of Polonnoye, which, in the late eighteenth century, had a sizeable Jewish community. As shown on the map below, Brody, Kunev, Korets, Shepetovka, and Polonnoye are in fairly close proximity to one another.  

FIGURE 4

Map showing the locations of Brody, Kunev, Shepetovka, Korets, Polonnoye, and Ekaterinopol

Following their marriage, circa 1785, it is quite possible that Shmuel and Sarah Rachel Sheindel resided in Polonnoye to be closer to her family. Two of her brothers were connected by marriage to daughters of prominent rabbis from Polonnoye – Rabbi Moshe Shapiro’s wife was the daughter of Rabbi Isaac, a dayan (judge) of Polonnoye, and Rabbi Isaac Ezekiel Shapiro’s wife was the daughter of Rabbi Josef, the Maggid (preacher) of Polonnoye.

In 1793, Rabbi Shmuel was appointed Av Beit Din of Kalniblat (which after 1795 became known as Ekaterinopol, now called Katerynopil), with responsibilities in a substantial surrounding area located about one hundred miles south of Kiev. This area included the towns of Ekaterinopol, Mokraya Kaligorka, Shpola, Talnoye, and Zvenigorodka.

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168 Ukraine distance calculator: [http://distancecalculator.globeffect.com/Ukraine_Distance_Calculator.asp](http://distancecalculator.globeffect.com/Ukraine_Distance_Calculator.asp). As shown on the map in Figure 4, Brody (1), where Shmuel Polonsky is believed to have been born, is approximately 55 miles SW of Kunev (2), where he served as chief rabbi. Kunev is approximately 43 miles SW of Korets (3), 40 miles NW of Shepetovka (4), and 70 miles NW of Polonnoye (5). Polonnoye is approximately 175 miles NW of Ekaterinopol (6).

169 Yechezkel Shraga Frankel, Editor: Letters of Appointment of Rabbi Shmuel ben Mordecai (1793), and his grandson Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas (1831) in Imrei Pinchas, Volume 2. Benei Berak, 2003, p. 171; 485.


Shmuel’s appointment was at the behest of his mentor, Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon of Shepetovka, with whom he now shared a family connection.\(^{172}\) Shmuel’s family held this rabbinical post in direct line of succession for five generations.\(^{173}\)

As previously mentioned, Czar Alexander’s Imperial Statute of 1804 stated that: “Every Jew must have or adopt an inherited last name or nickname, which should be used in all official acts and records without change.” As of 1811, Polonsky was Shmuel’s legal surname, and he was referred to by that surname on the 1816 Ekaterinopol census, which stated his full name as Rabbin Shmuel Mordkovich Polonsky, and his age as fifty, at the time of the previous 1811 census.\(^{174}\)

Shmuel passed away shortly after the 1811 census, on November 11, 1811. We don’t know whether he chose the Polonsky surname, or whether it was assigned to him by Russian civil authorities. However, between 1804 and 1811, Shmuel presumably had the opportunity to adopt an inherited last name, but chose not to register either the Levush epithet or the Gelles matronym as his surname. Instead, he either voluntarily selected, or tacitly accepted the assignment of an entirely new surname on the basis of his previous connection to the Polonnyoye community: Polonsky.

Although the reasons for this choice are not entirely clear, one possible explanation is that Jewish surnames were in a state of flux during the late 1700s and early 1800s, and Shmuel may not have considered either the Levush sobriquet or the Gelles matronym, both apparently acquired by his grandfather, Moses Gelles, to be an inherited family name or surname. Commenting on this ambiguity in his book, An Ancient Lineage, Dr. Edward Gelles states:\(^{175}\)

> It appears from the entries [in the Beth Din records] that the names of Levush and Gelles were used interchangeably, and that there was some ambiguity concerning Rabbi Menachem Levush and Rabbi Moses Gelles. They might have been one and the same person.

Further support of the ambiguity and inconsistency in the use of these names may be found among other members of Shmuel’s family. His father, Rabbi Mordecai, is referred to only as Rabbi Mordecai, without any surname, in the rabbinical sources of his day.\(^{176,177}\) This raises the possibility that he may not have used, or been known by the Gelles surname during his lifetime. Moreover, neither of Shmuel’s uncles, Rabbi Michel Levush, or Rabbi Joseph Vaskievonie, adopted the Gelles matronym from their father Rabbi Menakhem Levush (aka Moses Gelles), choosing instead to retain the Levush or Vaskievonie surnames.\(^{178}\)


\(^{176}\) Letter of Appointment of Rabbi Shmuel ben Mordecai (1793), in Imrei Pinchas, p. 486-488.

\(^{177}\) Shem ve-She’arit (Name and Remnant). Levi Halevi Grossman, Editor, Betzalel Printers, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1943.

\(^{178}\) Edward Gelles: An Ancient Lineage, p. 207. Shmuel’s uncle Joseph Gelles Vaskievonie used the Gelles matronym as part of a double-first name, but it did not carry through to his son, who was called Moses Gershon.
It is also important to recognize that surnames were not mandated for Jews in the Russian Empire until 1804. Hence, nearly all Jews in the 1795 Russian census (the first official census after Poland’s last partition) were written without surnames because they simply didn’t have them. This may help to explain why neither Shmuel or his father Mordecai were referred to by any surname in Shmuel’s certificate of rabbinical appointment to the position of Av Beit Din of Kalniblat in 1793.

The Gelles surname appears to have been attached to Rabbi Mordecai posthumously in two contemporary references. The first of these, Chidushei ha-rav mi-Teplik, is a collection of the responsa and commentaries of Rabbi Shimshon Aharon Polonsky.

In his book, which was first published at or near the time of his death in 1948, Rabbi Polonsky presents a descendant chart in which he mentions himself as having the Polonsky surname. Then, starting with his father, he omits the surnames of the ancestors in his lineage leading back to Rabbi Shmuel, indicating that they were all surnamed Polonsky. This Polonsky lineage is confirmed by Russian censuses and vital records. He then mentions Shmuel’s father as Mordecai Gelles, and his grandfather as Moses Gelles.

In the other contemporary reference, The Unbroken Chain, Dr. Neil Rosenstein mentions Shmuel as the son of Mordecai Gellis. However, Dr. Rosenstein indicated that the Gellis name, as used in this context, was not a surname, but rather an appellation or nickname honoring a maternal ancestor by the name of Gela who was a rebetzin (the wife of a rabbi):

As you noted your ancestor was Mordecai “Gellis” and so was a brother of his called Joseph “Gellis.” The name was not a surname but an indication (in this case) that their mother was, probably, as a rebetzin to Menachem Levush, a woman of note. Her name was most likely thus Gela and the name Gellis (or Gela’s) means of/belonging to/acknowledgement of Gela.

It is also noteworthy that although Shmuel’s daughter Treyna named her son Mordecai (most likely after Shmuel’s father), she did not include the Gelles appellation in his name. Neither does the Gelles matronym appear anywhere in the Polonsky lineage, either as a surname, double-first name, or nickname. This absence does not take away from the fact that Shmuel Polonsky descends from a line of esteemed Gelles/Levush rabbis from Brody, including his grandfather, “Moses the Servant of God.”

179 Jeffrey Briskman: Email correspondence with Jeffrey Mark Paull, April 1, 2012.
180 Tracey R. Rich: Judaism 101 -- Jewish Surnames. http://www.jewfaq.org/inames.htm. In 1787, the Austro-Hungarian Empire became the first country in Europe to require Jews to register a permanent family surname. Because Shmuel was residing in the Russian Empire at this time, this decree did not apply to him. However, his father Mordecai may have acquired the Gelles surname later in life, if he was still living in Brody at this time.
183 Neil Rosenstein: “Question regarding information on page 1185 of The Unbroken Chain.” Email correspondence with Jeffrey Mark Paull, March 25, 2012.
In summary, in the absence of birth or death records, it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether Shmuel’s father Mordecai was known by the Gelles surname during his lifetime. What we can say with a much greater degree of confidence is that Shmuel himself was almost certainly not known by it. Instead, during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, he founded a lineage of rabbis in the Russian Empire known by the Polonsky surname.

There is a plethora of official documents, including birth, death, marriage, and census records, referring to Shmuel and his descendants by the Polonsky surname. The 1816, 1834, and 1858 Ekaterinopol and Shpola censuses confirm that the Polonsky surname belonged to all of Shmuel’s descendants, including his son Rabbi Aharon, his grandson Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas, as well as to Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas’ sons and grandsons, including Nathan Polonsky’s father, Aharon David Polonsky.

**Estimating the Prevalence of the Polonsky Surname**

There is a common misconception that Polonsky is a very common Jewish surname. This misconception may arise from the mistaken belief that the broad “from Polonia” derivation of the Polonsky surname applies to a great many Jews from Poland. This misconception has been repeated by at least one Jewish genealogist, who stated: “Many of our family surnames, such as Bernstein, Friedman or Polonsky, are very common.”\(^ {185}\)

It is important to reiterate that during the early 1800s, when Eastern European Jews were required to adopt surnames, Poland did not exist as an independent country. The final partition of Poland took place in 1795, hence, there was no Poland to be “from” at that time. Among Jews, therefore, the Polonsky surname is derived primarily from the towns of Polonnoye and Polonka, and the villages of Polsk and Polonna in the Ukraine and Belarus. Although these towns and villages previously belonged to Poland, obviously they are much smaller geographic areas, with far fewer people, than the entire country of Poland.

In point of fact, Polonsky is actually a relatively unusual Jewish surname, and there are many Jewish surnames that are much more common.\(^ {186}\) Of nearly one million immigrants in the Ellis Island database who are identified as being Jewish, there were 303 immigrants with the Polonsky surname (0.03%) including its spelling variants. These 303 Jewish Polonsky immigrants can be compared to 8,470 Jewish immigrants with the Cohen surname, or 11,357 with the Rosen surname.\(^ {187}\) It is assumed that a similar under-reporting percentage applies to all Jewish immigrants in the Ellis Island database.


\(^ {186}\) Wikipedia: Category: Jewish Surnames. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Jewish_surnames](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Jewish_surnames). The Polonsky surname was not found on a list of 1500 of the most common Jewish surnames.

\(^ {187}\) Of 961,842 immigrants in the Ellis Island database who are identified as being Jewish, there were 303 immigrants with the Polonsky surname (0.03%) including its spelling variants. There were a total of 936 Polonsky immigrants, but only about one-third of them (303 or 32%) are identified as being Jewish. It is assumed that a similar under-reporting percentage applies to all Jewish immigrants in the Ellis Island database.

\(^ {188}\) Of 961,842 immigrants in the Ellis Island database who are identified as being Jewish, there were 8,470 immigrants with the Cohen surname (0.9%) including its spelling variants, and 11,357 immigrants with the Rosen surname (1.2%) including all surnames having the Rosen root. Hence, the Cohen surname was about thirty times more common among Jewish immigrants than the Polonsky surname, and the Rosen surname about forty times more common.
Since the Polonsky surname originated in Russia, it should not be surprising that nearly all Jewish immigrants with the Polonsky surname who immigrated to the United States were from Russia. Of the few who immigrated to the U.S. from other countries (Austria, England, France, Galicia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Turkey), most indicated their ethnicity to be Russian.

The number of people with the Polonsky surname currently living in the United States was estimated using two different statistical data sets. The first estimate is based on the data from a 1997 survey, in which the Polonsky surname appears only 284 times in a sample database of 88.7 million names. Adjusting this number to the current size of the U.S. population of 313.8 million produces 1005 people with the Polonsky surname living in the United States.

The second estimate is based upon recent data from the Public Profiler website for the period 2000 - 2005, in which the Polonsky surname was reported at a frequency of occurrence of 3.27 per million people in the United States. Again, based upon the current size of the U.S. population of 313.8 million, this produces 1,026 people with the Polonsky surname currently living in the U.S. Hence, statistical analyses using two different data sets produced nearly identical estimates of approximately one thousand people with the Polonsky surname currently living in the United States.

Due to the low prevalence rate of 0.03% for the Polonsky surname among Russian Jewish immigrants to America, the rare occurrence of the Polonsky surname among Jewish immigrants from other countries, and the subsequent Americanization of the Polonsky surname, it might be expected that the current prevalence of the Polonsky surname among the Jewish population of the United States is even lower than 0.03%.

That is precisely what was found – a total of one thousand people with the Polonsky surname, out of a total U.S. Jewish population of approximately 7.75 million, yields an estimated prevalence rate of 0.013% – roughly one-third of the prevalence rate among Jewish immigrants to the United States.

Although one thousand is not a very large number when compared with the total population of the United States, there are currently more people with the Polonsky surname living in America than in any other country of the world. Interestingly, the country with the highest prevalence rate of the Polonsky surname is Argentina, with a frequency of occurrence of five per million people. In a country of approximately forty million people, this equates to approximately two hundred people having the Polonsky surname currently living in Argentina.


190 U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. POPClock Projection: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the resident population of the United States projected to June 30, 2012, is 313.8 million. http://www.census.gov/population/www/popclockus.html.


192 A prevalence rate of five per million (PublicProfiler World Names: http://worldnames.publicprofiler.org/Main.aspx) multiplied by the total population of Argentina (40.1 million according to the preliminary results from the 2010 census (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argentina), yields a total of about two hundred people with the Polonsky surname currently living in Argentina.
Some Notable Americans with the Polonsky Surname

In addition to the remarkable people in our own Polonsky family, there have been many other famous and highly accomplished people of Russian Jewish heritage with the Polonsky surname. Presented below are profiles of several outstanding Polonsky contributors to the arts, humanities, and sciences.

Abraham Lincoln Polonsky was born December 5, 1910 in New York City, the eldest son of Russian-American Jewish immigrants, Henry and Rebecca (née Rosoff) Polonsky. He was an American film director, Academy Award-nominated screenwriter, essayist, and novelist blacklisted by the Hollywood movie studios in the 1950s, in the midst of the McCarthy era.

Polonsky graduated from the City College of New York, and earned his law degree from Columbia University. He was a lawyer with a Manhattan firm, and quit to pursue writing; he was signed by Paramount in the late 1930s. He served in Europe with the U.S. Office of Strategic Services during World War II. After the war, he moved to Enterprise Productions, directing his first feature film in 1948. He signed with Twentieth Century Fox in 1950.

Polonsky’s first film as a director, Force of Evil (1948) was not successful when first released in the U.S., but was hailed as a masterpiece by film critics in England. It has since become recognized as one of the great American film noirs and, in 1994, was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

Polonsky’s career as a director and credited writer came to an abrupt halt after he refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1951. Illinois congressman Harold Velde called the director a “very dangerous citizen” at the hearings. After a prolonged absence, Polonsky returned to directing in 1969 with the Western film, Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here. He received the Career Achievement Award of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association in 1999. Polonsky died on October 26, 1999, in Beverly Hills, CA, at the age of eighty-eight.

Abraham Polonsky’s father, Henry Polonsky, was from Minsk, Belarus, which is approximately 480 miles from Shpola, in the central Ukraine. The author had several conversations and email correspondences with Abraham Polonsky’s daughter, Susan Polonsky Epstein, but we were unable to identify any common Polonsky ancestors or towns between our two families.


196 Susan Polonsky Epstein: Email correspondence with Jeffrey Mark Paull, April 7, 2012 and May 13, 2012.
Anna Polonsky made her solo piano debut at the age of seven at the Special Central Music School in Moscow, Russia. She immigrated to the United States in 1990, and attended high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. She received her Bachelor of Music diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music, where she worked with the renowned pianist Peter Serkin, and earned her Master’s degree from the Juilliard School.

Anna is widely in demand as a soloist and chamber musician, and has toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. She has appeared with the Moscow Virtuosi, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, the Memphis Symphony, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, and many others. She also collaborates in a two-piano duo with her husband, pianist Orion Weiss. In addition to performing, Anna serves on the piano faculty of Vassar College and is a Steinway Artist.\(^{197}\)

The author had the opportunity to meet with Anna backstage after one of her chamber music performances at the University of California at Berkeley on April 22, 2012. We discussed the possibility of having a common Polonsky heritage. In a subsequent email message, Anna encouraged me to contact her father, Leonid Polonsky, to further discuss this possibility.\(^{198}\)

Leonid’s grandfather and great-grandfather were born in Dashev or Gaisin, small towns approximately seventy miles west of Katerynopil, where our early Polonsky ancestors settled.\(^{199}\) At the time of this writing, the possibility of our families sharing an ancestral connection is in the process of being researched, and remains an intriguing possibility.

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\(^{198}\) Anna Polonsky: Email correspondence with Jeffrey Mark Paull, May 29, 2012.

\(^{199}\) Leonid Polonsky: Verbal communication with Jeffrey Mark Paull, June 26, 2012.
Antony Polonsky is the Albert Abramson Professor in Holocaust Studies at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. He received a PhD and BA in modern history from Oxford University in the United Kingdom, and a BA in history and political studies from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Dr. Polonsky has published numerous books and articles on Polish and Jewish history, and has recently completed a three-volume history of the Jews in Poland and Russia from 1350 to the present day.

Dr. Polonsky was a founder and is now vice-president of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford and of the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies, Cambridge, MA. He is an honorary research fellow in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College, London, an associate of the Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard University, and a member of many committees and advisory boards.

Dr. Polonsky is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including: Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit of Independent Lithuania (2012), Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit of Polonia Restituta (2011), Oskar Halecki Prize of the Polish American Historical Association (2008), Rafael Scharf Award for outstanding achievement in preserving and making known the heritage of Polish Jewry (2006), and the Knight's Cross, Order of Merit, Republic of Poland, for “outstanding services to studies in Polish Jewry” (1999). The author was deeply honored to have Dr. Polonsky serve as a reviewer of this book, and his kind words of inspiration and encouragement are proudly displayed on the cover.

Kenneth S. Polonsky is a prominent diabetes researcher, physician, and educator. He was born and educated in Johannesburg, South Africa, and graduated cum laude in 1973 from the University of Witwatersrand Medical School. Dr. Polonsky is the dean of the Division of the Biological Sciences and the Pritzker School of Medicine and executive vice-president for Medical Affairs at the University of Chicago. He has served as the chair of the Department of Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis and physician-in-chief at Barnes-Jewish Hospital since 1999. A member since 2006 of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, one of the highest honors medical scientists in the United States can receive, Dr. Polonsky has won multiple awards. In 2009, he was elected an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland.


201 The University of Chicago Medicine: Renowned Diabetes Specialist to Head Biosciences, Medical School and Medical Center at the University of Chicago. http://www.uchospitals.edu/news/2010/20100730-dean.html.