



Mediating Polish-Jewish  
Relations after  
the Holocaust

# IMAGINARY NEIGHBORS

Edited by Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska

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after the Holocaust

EDITED BY DOROTA GLOWACKA  
AND JOANNA ZYLINSKA

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## IMAGINARY NEIGHBORS



# Introduction

## *Imaginary Neighbors*

### Toward an Ethical Community

DOROTA GLOWACKA AND

JOANNA ZYLINSKA

In Anna Bikont's book *My z Jedwabnego* (Us from Jedwabne, 2004), an ethnographic-testimonial work on past and present Polish-Jewish relations, we are introduced to one of her interlocutors, Jan Skrodzki, a retired engineer from Gdańsk, whom she describes as "an ordinary Pole." Carrying a memory of the fact that during World War II his life was saved by a Jew, but also suspicious that his father may have taken part in the pogroms against the Jewish neighbors, he confesses to Bikont, "I feel responsible for Jedwabne, Radziłów, for everything that might yet come to light."<sup>1</sup> Skrodzki has made a considerable investment trying to determine the extent of his father's complicity. A well-meaning relative advises him, however, not to waste any money on traveling around Poland to uncover the truth about his father's possible involvement in the murders but instead to "give money in the intention of his father's soul and thus earn himself a clean conscience."<sup>2</sup> This anecdote poignantly illustrates the paradoxes of past and present Polish-Jewish relations. It shows that the (religiously inflected) ethos of neighborly hospitality, responsibility, and courage on which Poles often pride themselves nevertheless remains tainted with hostility, amnesia, and a desire to calculate meticulously all investments, losses, and gains in order to arrive at a "clean slate."

This is not to deny the fact that for centuries Poland was a land of hospitality to the Jews and that Poles were known to have acted as gracious

hosts on numerous occasions. This tradition of hospitality nevertheless found itself on trial during the interwar period, and even more so as the events of the Shoah unfolded. Still, as Michael C. Steinlauf points out, the ambivalence of Polish-Jewish neighborly relations, frequently accompanied by the withdrawal of hospitality on the part of the Poles, must be examined in the broader context of the traumatic wounds that were inflicted on the Polish collective psyche not only during World War II but also before the war and for many decades thereafter. One of the most profound aspects of the war trauma suffered by the Poles was that, apart from being victims of Nazi expansionist politics, they found themselves in the position of “witnesses to the Holocaust, from beginning to end.” It can be argued that this act of involuntary witness to an almost total, carefully planned annihilation of their neighbors “at close range, for such a long time” has not been easily assimilated into Polish collective memory.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it continues to exert a powerful impact on the Polish nation. One can even go so far as to suggest that this unmourned, traumatic loss of the Jewish neighborly presence, combined with a sense of horror and guilt that remain unaccounted for, has contributed to the strengthening of the idea of the monocultural Polish community in the postwar period.

It is this concept of the national community, with all its violent, exclusionary founding mechanisms, that we take in this volume as a starting point for our investigations of Polish-Jewish relations. In his influential study *Imagined Communities* (1991), Benedict Anderson underscores the tremendous power of the idea of the nation *precisely as an idea, or image*, in shaping a community. Taking inspiration from Anderson’s eponymous concept, we have developed the notion of “imaginary neighbors” in order to describe Polish-Jewish coexistence before and during the Holocaust. Neighborliness serves here as more than a description of a material socio-historical community; it is also a politico-ethical concept that will allow us to articulate the difficulties, tasks, and responsibilities involved in the living together of the Poles and the Jews within the space of one fragile nation. According to Anderson, any national community is an imagined cultural and political artifact that provides a collectivity with a sense of

continuity and cohesiveness. The community proclaims itself through myth, which tells the story of the community's inauguration and its continuing existence. Its members identify themselves through their relation to this mythical foundation, as it is continuously repeated in the rituals of remembrance. The idea of the community is so forceful that it is possible for its members "to willingly die for such limited imaginings."<sup>4</sup> What will be of particular interest to us here in the exploration of recent Polish-Jewish history and memory is the myth-making quality of the narratives of Polish nationhood together with the mechanisms of fantasy, occlusion, and foundational violence that lie at the origin of any such myth.

We thus present *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust* as a forum to explore the complexities of Polish-Jewish relations.<sup>5</sup> Without doubt, in the scholarship concerning the memory of the Shoah and its contemporary cultural constructions, this is one of the most important but also most divisive issues. In comparison with the large volume of works on the Holocaust in the West (the United States in particular), the discussion in Poland has been emerging rather belatedly. It has also been occurring within a very different set of parameters, largely because for Poles, unlike for Americans (for whom the Holocaust seems to have a certain mythic quality), the horrors of the war continue to be quite tangible—haunting the domestic landscapes and resonating with familiar names. And yet even in Poland, despite the geographical and historical proximity to the site of the trauma, Holocaust memory is becoming what Marianna Hirsch has dubbed "post-memory"—a vicarious construction predicated on the absence of the historical event. Not unlike in the United States, Polish memory of the Holocaust has been hypermediated by a variety of cultural productions, created by postwar generations and over-determined by the concerns of the present rather than the past. But we do not attempt here to recover some mythical immediacy of the Holocaust experience in Poland—it is rather the complex and often convoluted processes of *mediation* involved in the construction of national history and memory that will be of interest to us.

The original impetus for this collection was provided by the publication of *Neighbors* (Polish edition 2000, U.S. edition 2001)—in which Jan



Tomasz Gross discusses the murders of hundreds of Jews by their Polish neighbors on July 10, 1941, in the town of Jedwabne in northeastern Poland—as well as by the ensuing international debate surrounding Gross’s revelations. Both in Poland and abroad, the “Jedwabne controversy” has shown that Polish and Jewish memories of the war remain in conflict. Polish national narratives of heroism, oppression, and liberation have yielded stories of sacrifice for the fatherland, including tales of the selfless rescue of the Jews. They stand in stark contrast to the Jewish narratives of suffering, senseless death, and betrayal. Thus the debate surrounding Gross’s book has revealed once again the divisive nature of Polish-Jewish memory. It has also drawn attention, on the one hand, to the multiple images of Poland and Polishness circulating on both sides of the Atlantic in diasporic stories of survival, migration, and return and, on the other, to the various representations of Jews and Jewishness in the Polish cultural and historical imaginary.

Since imagination and narrative play a significant role in the emergence of political concepts, we consider it necessary to probe Polish-Jewish neighborliness, its history and memory, in the context of the narratives involved in the construction of Polish national identity. As many of our contributors argue in the volume, the Polish national narrative has been based on the romantic myth of sacrificial love for the fatherland, yet its force has been fueled by a sometimes vicious, even internecine, logic of exclusion. What Gross’s book has demonstrated is that xenophobic rage is a collateral symptom of an affective investment in messianic nationalism and that it may culminate in the murder of the other, as it did in Jedwabne. On July 10, 1941, that xenophobic hatred, which we can perhaps read as the flip side of the Polish love for the fatherland, unleashed its murderous force against the Jewish neighbor, who had been identified with a threat to the imaginary unity of the community. It was a unique “foreign” menace indeed, considering that in a large number of communities in Poland, Jews had lived next door to Poles for centuries. Frequently perceived as an alien and unwanted element in the fabric of Polish society, after 1936 in particular Jews were situated outside the communal bond, sometimes unwilling to participate and more often disallowed participation in the foundational myth.<sup>6</sup>

The national narrative, compounded with aberrations of communist rule in postwar Poland, thus culminated in a particularly skewed story of World War II. The elimination of the Jewish stranger from this narrative has been continually reenacted through the obliteration of the memory of the victim. This has led to what we may describe as a “pathological amnesia” about Jewish life and death. The exclusionary mechanism at work in the construction of historical memory in Poland may explain, at least in part, why what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust did not change Polish attitudes toward their (ex-)neighbors.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that the totalizing and exclusionary impulse of the national myth is even stronger when the idea of the nation is only a phantasm, and when it cannot be projected upon a concrete geopolitical configuration. Such was indeed the case in Poland, which since the end of the eighteenth century had suffered for extended periods under Russian, Prussian, and Austrian occupation. Thus when discussing the obliteration of the Jewish presence from memory in Poland, as well as when evaluating recent attempts at its resurrection, it is important to consider Poland’s history, Polish identity, and the Poles’ neighborly hospitality (or a lack thereof) in the context of their own historical situation. After all, at the time when the idea of nationalism was being consolidated in Europe, from the turn of the eighteenth century until the end of World War I, Poland as a nation-state did not exist on the map. Consequently, Poles’ sense of national identity must have developed as “imagined” in another, less figurative sense of the term—as a projection that compensated for this affective and symbolic void. Considering the unparalleled force of Polish patriotism and nationalist sentiment, we can speculate that the myth of collective “being-in-common”—to use the term of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy—operated even when, or especially when, the country did not exist as a sovereign political entity.

As both Anderson and Nancy point out, the national narrative requires that certain historical facts and certain people, national heroes in particular, be rescued from oblivion. They must be continuously “exhumed,” and their often violent deaths must be remembered as “our own”; others, however, must be forgotten. National narratives thus spring from such

constitutive oblivion as much as they do from what has been immortalized in remembrance. This is why the resurrection of the Jewish martyrs (and here we should consider the symbolic dimension of the exhumation of Jedwabne victims' remains during the inquiry by the Polish Institute of National Memory), as well as of the Jewish cultural memory at large, is vital for the ongoing reevaluation of Polish national identity in Poland's postcommunist "return to Europe" period of the early twenty-first century.

Even though the idea of a national community seems to be based on foundational violence and constitutive exclusion, in *Inoperative Community* Nancy considers the possibility of rethinking community in a nontotalitarian way and of searching for a political space where the communal "we" would not be oppressive to those whom it identifies as its others. Such processes have both political and ethical significance. They are based on the ethical recognition that prior to an identity or substance, we are already "with" others, that we are "in-common." In other words, we always *share* the political space because we are constituted as subjects only as we appear in it with others. We thus remain exposed to others and are "re-sounding onto the outside."<sup>8</sup> This (inevitable) call for an ethical opening and ethical community, which we borrow from Nancy as much as from Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, is one of the driving forces behind this book. Via an engagement with the ethical philosophy of these thinkers, we hope to imagine neighborliness beyond the historical accusations of failed hospitality and to see it instead as an ethical project of living with others, while negotiating the antagonisms implicated in those complex relations of otherness in the transcultural spaces of the "globalized" world.

Christian theologian Henry Knight argues that in order to begin to heal the traumatic wounds inflicted by the Shoah, one must institute a new ethics of unconditional hospitality: "Hospitality heals when it restores alienated and marginalized others to the community."<sup>9</sup> If, even in the darkest moment and amidst the Holocaust horror, instances of such hospitality were recorded—as illustrated by the selfless acts of rescuers who adhered to such ethics with total disregard for their own safety—perhaps it is not

naïve to hope for glimpses of this today. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that Antonina Wyrzykowska, honored as Righteous among the Nations for rescuing seven survivors of Jedwabne in 1941, had to leave her hometown for fear of retribution from her former neighbors and was afraid to show her face to the camera during the interview in Agnieszka Arnold's documentary on Jedwabne, *Neighbors* (1998). Also, we need to ask how such an ethics of hospitality can be concretely implemented in today's Poland, considering that the vast majority of Polish Jews have tragically disappeared. Can a more welcoming and more neighborly *memory* of the Polish Jews be considered as a form of hospitable abode, a phantom space of welcome?

Questions of ethics do not of course exist in a vacuum; they remain tied to specific historical events and memories. One of the basic questions of this volume is to what extent the Polish national narrative before, during, and after the war, as well as in postcommunist Poland, has been consolidated at the cost of eliminating the memory of Jewish life and Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. This leads to further, often uneasy questions about the extent and nature of Polish antisemitism, about the prevalence of antisemitic myths and images in the Polish cultural imaginary, and about the way they have contributed to the pathologies of Holocaust remembrance and commemoration in Poland. Conversely, considering the intransigent nature of the Jewish memory of Polish betrayal, we need to ask whether the Jewish narrative of continuing survival in the diaspora is not also, to an extent, grounded in the foreclosure of the Polish story. It is then likewise important to engage with Jewish representations of Poles and Poland, in which Poland is variously imagined as the place of origin, an absent presence, a site of trauma, or even a graveyard. In the accounts of survivors and their children, Poland tends to appear as an imaginary homeland, reconfigured in terms of narratives of exile and survival, of brotherhood and betrayal, of the possibility and impossibility of return. One needs to ask to what extent the narrative of Jewish identity after the Shoah, which invests in the story of shared suffering and death, is in turn predicated on the erasure of its links to the Polish past.

In that context, how are we to appraise the recent revival of interest in

Jewish culture, history and religion in Poland, including a sudden popularity of Jewish writers and philosophers, courses in Jewish literature and history, conversions to Judaism, Jewish-themed cafés and restaurants in the reconstructed district of Kazimierz (a former Jewish district in Kraków), and the massively popular annual Festival of Jewish Culture? Are these phenomena an expression of fashionable cultural nostalgia, dependent on and arising from historical amnesia? Or do they signal that Poland as a nation is beginning to engage in a more profound work of mourning and to produce different narratives of loss and absence, in which not only historical but also moral justice is at stake?<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps we should also ask whether Poles can bear witness to Jewish suffering at all, and if so, what forms and specific configurations this witnessing can take. Further, to what extent is it necessary for Poles to do so in order to come to terms with the difficult past? Is such witnessing an option for second, third, and subsequent generations of Poles, for those increasingly sympathetic “witnesses without the event”?<sup>11</sup> Another difficult yet necessary question arising is whether such witnessing would have to be reciprocated by a Jewish witness, if only in the form of acknowledgment, to Polish suffering.

One may wonder about the viability of our premise of staging a Polish-Jewish ethical opening and reinstating at least a virtual neighborly community. Specifically, are the forgiveness and reconciliation between Poles and Jews that our contributors discuss possible or even desirable, and what do these terms mean, considering the post-Shoah history of irreconcilable differences? Eugene J. Fisher, of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, once commented: “I believe it is the height of arrogance for Christians to ask Jews to forgive them. On what grounds? We can, as established by evidence of changed teachings and changed behavior, work toward mutual reconciliation with Jews. But we have no right to put Jewish survivors in the impossible moral position of offering forgiveness, implicitly, in the name of six million. Placing a Jew in this anguished position further victimizes him or her.”<sup>12</sup> Would this alleged impossibility of asking for forgiveness invalidate President Kwaśniewski’s symbolic gesture of apologizing to the Jews on the occasion of the unveiling of the new

monument in Jedwabne in July 2001? Would it render null all efforts to instantiate a meaningful Polish-Jewish encounter? Finally, it is important to ask to what extent Poland's recent efforts to come to terms with its difficult past and to account for the disappearance of its Jewish culture may be related to the nation's desire to discard the legacy of the communist era and to become a strong presence in the rapidly changing economic and geopolitical landscape of Europe.

All these questions have been ardently raised, in one form or another, in Poland over the last few years, especially in the aftermath of the publication of Gross's *Neighbors*. The disintegration of the communist bloc and the opening of the archives have prompted reexamination of the narratives of the past. In Poland and abroad some of the "new historians," to use Gross's term, have explored the little-known historical facts, which has allowed them to confront the nation's collective memory, amnesia, and different manifestations of its "pervasive antisemitism." And yet it seems to us that Polish attitudes toward the Jews and Jewish conceptions of Poles and Poland have remained largely *untheorized*. For instance, many questions relating to Polish and Jewish cultural imaginary, the impact of conflicted memory on both individual and collective psyche, and the ethical as well as political implications of past events for the future, have been left in abeyance. Further, little attention has been given to the inscriptions of these questions in works of literature written in Poland, the United States, and elsewhere—even though several excellent critical analyses of "the representation of the figure of the Jew" in Polish literature have been produced in recent years.<sup>13</sup> As a result, not only has literature been disregarded in its ability to offer important insights into historical phenomena, but the aesthetic dimension of cultural representations has also been circumvented. Indeed the animated discussions in the wake of the revelations about Jedwabne have either been situated on the emotive plane or have been dealt with through more traditional historical and sociological analyses, with few attempts to examine critically the involved parties' motives and subject positions. Similarly, not much has been written about the tenuous space where national and religious narratives compete or about the causes of the antagonistic nature of this conjunction.

By picking up these important questions from amidst the current debates and projecting them against a broader theoretical background afforded by different scholarly disciplines, our book is intended to fill these gaps. Drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives, the volume has been conceived as an animated conversation among cultural theorists, philosophers, literary critics, historians, theologians, and writers. Specifically, the authors draw on work in the area of literary theory (poststructuralism, hermeneutics), philosophy (questions of ethics, aesthetics, and axiology), psychoanalysis (Freudian and Lacanian), historiography, cultural anthropology, film studies, and cultural studies (debates around race, ethnicity, national identity, and their representations).

However, scholarly analyses are accompanied here by personal narratives. Bringing together on the pages of *Imaginary Neighbors* theoretical essays and literary and journalistic accounts has proved once again, we believe, that such distinctions are increasingly impossible to maintain and that any writing, be it in the most covert forms of theoretical analysis, engages the questions of individual and collective self-identity. This personal dimension underscores the importance of individual responsibility of *any* writing, which, in the face of crises such as Jedwabne, can no longer hide behind the presuppositions of value-free, scientific objectivity, on the one hand, and subjective experience, free from collective responsibility, on the other. The contributors come from different national, cultural, and religious backgrounds, although many are indeed Polish and Polish-Jewish expatriates of the first and second generation after the Shoah, and their respective commentaries reflect this variety. The book itself can thus be conceived as a form of imagined community of minds—engaged in a conversation, in a writing-in-common, and perhaps also in the performance of an ethics of hospitality and welcome. It is in this sense that it responds to the shattering wrought upon the Polish national myth by the Jedwabne crisis, after which any “imaginings” of national cohesion cannot be upheld in good faith.

In accordance with the themes delineated, we have divided the volume into three sections. The first, “History and Memory,” opens with an essay by Joanna B. Michlic, “The Dark Past: Polish-Jewish Relations in the

Shadow of the Holocaust.” It focuses on the implications of two opposite approaches to the difficult historical past: one claiming that this past has to be forgotten since it can only lead to a conflict-ridden, difficult presence, the other insisting that coming to terms with the historical past is the only way for Polish-Jewish relations to be normalized. The Polish anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir follows up with her piece, “Jedwabne: History as a Fetish,” in which she argues that Polish historians, constrained by the rules of scholarly objectivity, would not often admit to being touched, shaken, or horrified by the events under their investigation. Drawing on psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Tokarska-Bakir examines the consequences of this approach for analyzing traumatic events such as the “Jedwabne case,” and reflects on the possibilities of “doing history otherwise.” Her piece is followed by “Living with Antisemitism,” a poignant testimony by the writer Janina Bauman about her Jewish-Polish identity, which skillfully intertwines the personal and the political to convey her sense of loss, trauma, and mourning. In another personal account, “Notes for a Grave under Snow,” Andrew Jakubowicz explores the relationship between a Jewish family from Łódź, who escaped to Australia (via Lithuania, Russia, Japan, and China), and the Poland that they touched and that touched them in the sixty years after their flight. He draws on documents from Japanese, Polish, and Jewish archives, from original documents held by the refugees, and from interviews with survivors and Poles. A different historical perspective is provided by Erica Lehrer, whose chapter “Bearing False Witness? ‘Vicarious’ Jewish Identity and the Politics of Affinity,” focuses on the recently regained Jewish identity of Kazimierz, the historically Jewish quarter of Kraków and an exceptional place in Poland, where Jewishness emerges as a positive component of Polish self-conception. Lehrer argues that while the Jewish revival was orchestrated by non-Jewish Poles, the “Jewishness” of Kazimierz is an example of vicarious witnessing and an attempt at reconciliation and cultural pluralism rather than cultural appropriation. Terri Ginsberg’s chapter, “St. Korczak of Warsaw,” rounds off this section of the book. Ginsberg engages in a hermeneutic analysis of the film *Korczak*, directed by Andrzej Wajda in 1990, as the cultural artifact that largely defined the Holocaust for Polish audiences. She discusses the



rift between the film's Judaic and Christian aspects and the way it reflected the ideological conflicts in Poland at a crucial moment in the history of postwar Eastern Europe.

The next section of the book, "Literary Encounters," opens with a piece by Geoffrey Hartman, "The Holocaust, Jedwabne, and the Measure of Time." Hartman's essay starts with a description of "the writing of the disaster," inspired by the French writer Maurice Blanchot's book of that title—a form of writing that, after the Holocaust, must convey the altered state of the world. Hartman attempts to situate Gross's *Neighbors* in the "disaster genre." Acknowledging how crude and cruel, how utterly inhuman the details of Gross's narrative are, he poses a provocative question: whether—despite the modern commitment to expose and publish the narratives of trauma—anything redemptive, or simply historically necessary, could come from knowing about this episode. This chapter is followed by "The Ceremony" by Eva Hoffman. It consists of excerpts from a play the author conceived of as a kind of spoken oratorio after the ceremony on July 10, 2001, in Jedwabne commemorating the horrific massacre that took place there sixty years earlier. "It Began with Pleasantries" is a poetic narrative by Anne Karpf about a seemingly innocent encounter between two children at a French village swimming pool. The singular event nevertheless throws up vexed questions about Polish-Jewish relations, commemoration, identification, and shame. In "Imagined Topographies: Visions of Poland in Writings by Descendants of Survivors" Marita Grimwood addresses questions about the role of Poland in the American-Jewish imaginary as constructed by the American descendants of survivors. She examines the memoirs and fictional accounts of authors such as Eva Hoffman, Lisa Appignanesi, Art Spiegelman, and Joseph Skibell and reflects on the way these narratives contribute to forging a productive future for Polish-Jewish relations. Alina Molisak's chapter, "Figures of Memory: Polish Holocaust Literature of the 'Second Generation'" explores the language of memory and of historical amnesia in the texts written by the new post-Shoah generation in Poland. By focusing on the recent novels by Piotr Szewc and Marek Bińczyk and situating them in the context of their German, French, and Israeli counterparts, Molisak traces the evanescent yet

intractable inscriptions of Jewishness in contemporary Polish literature and the Polish language.

As our inquiry into Polish-Jewish relations takes place under the aegis of ethics, the title of the last section, "Religion, Ethics, Politics," articulates more explicitly this ethical commitment. The section starts with a piece by the Polish Catholic priest of Jewish origin, Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel, titled "A Breakthrough in the Teachings of the Church on Jews and Judaism." The author examines the earlier complicity of the Catholic Church in forging the perception of Jews as strangers and enemies but also suggests that the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* No. 4, proclaimed by the Vatican in 1965, initiated a new era in the history of the Church. Underlining the bond between the Church and the Jewish religion, this has made possible to create bridges over the deep chasm produced by the Church's erroneous teachings about the Jews. Jewish theologian Zev Garber's "The Vision and Language of the Other: Jedwabne versus the Auschwitz Convent Controversy" makes a comparison between the controversy surrounding the disclosures about the Jedwabne massacre and the Auschwitz convent controversy (1984–93) in order to discuss the dynamics of (often unconscious) cultural and religious bias as the motivation for prejudice. Garber also analyzes how this bias leads to virulently polarizing language and alienation between neighboring cultures, sometimes despite the best intentions of the parties involved. In "Forgiving, Witnessing, and 'Polish Shame,'" Dorota Glowacka explores the relation between repentance, forgiveness, and bearing witness in the context of the Jedwabne debate. Drawing on the ethical theories of Levinas and Derrida, but also on Jewish and Christian interpretations of both forgiveness and witnessing, she argues that the relation between those two concepts is a necessary one; moreover, as the aftermath of Jedwabne has revealed, thinking it is an intellectual's responsibility today. Her essay is followed by Joanna Zylinska's piece, "'Who Is My Neighbor?': Ethics under Duress," in which she explores the structural ambivalence of the concept of neighborliness. Seen as both a moral concept designating the physical and emotional proximity of dwellers and a political concept used to tie a community together, neighborliness is in fact predicated on the preservation of boundaries and

thus remains threatened by hostility, antagonism, and violence. Focusing on the “Jedwabne case” of neighborly violence, Zylinska discusses a (Levinas- and Derrida-inspired) ethics of alterity and hospitality that is put to the test if the “self” and “other” are found to be inhabiting the same geographic territory, if they share one national discourse. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek’s concluding chapter, “Melancholic Nationalism and the Pathologies of Commemorating the Holocaust in Poland,” looks at the survival of memory of the pogroms in northeastern Poland. Analyzing the issue of “Polish antisemitism” as a case of Freudian melancholia, she considers the possibility of mourning properly the lost Jewish neighbors and of thus providing an ethical response to past events and an ethical opening toward the future.

Significantly, the late Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, a courier of the underground Polish Home Army (AK) during WWII and director of the Polish service of Radio Free Europe from 1951 to 1976, resorts to the metaphor of closure—rather than opening—in his description of Polish-Jewish relations: “The six centuries of the presence of the Jews in Poland are today a closed book. To close the book with dignity, a mutual and straightforward accounting is necessary.”<sup>14</sup> And yet for some of us, the fact that an actual community of Polish and Jewish neighbors belongs in the past, and that this closure is inevitable and already real, is hard to accept. As Konstanty Gebert, editor of the Polish-Jewish monthly *Midrasz* and a prolific commentator on current sociopolitical events in Poland, has remarked, “I am sick and tired of people burying me, even with the best intentions in the world.”<sup>15</sup> Hence it is with the idea of an opening that we would like to provisionally close off this project. The editors of and contributors to this volume believe it is important to keep turning the pages in that “closed book,” to lean over them in reflection and sorrow but also with hope. Perhaps in this way we can add another chapter or at least an important appendix, open to what is yet to come.

## Notes

1. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, 20, translation ours.
2. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, 151.

3. Quote from Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, ix.
4. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
5. While proposing an innovative approach to the problematic of Polish-Jewish relations, this book also follows in the footsteps of several noteworthy publications that have appeared in the last decade. The readers of this volume may be familiar with *My Brother's Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (1990), edited by Antony Polonsky, which offers an overview of the first public discussion, in Poland and abroad, of Poles' responsibility for the fate of their Jewish neighbors during the Shoah. The discussion was prompted by Polish literary critic Jan-Błński's groundbreaking essay "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" (1987), in which the author called on Poles to admit their guilt and confess to the dereliction of duties with respect to their Jewish compatriots. Carol Rittner and John R. Roth's volume *Memory Offended* (1991) provides excellent insight into the conflict between competing Jewish and Polish narratives of World War II, as it unfolded during the controversy surrounding the Carmelite convent in Oświęcim-Auschwitz. Michael Steinlauf's *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (1997) offers an insightful chronological account of Polish-Jewish relations with respect to the memory of the Holocaust, from the prewar years to 1995, the year that marked the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Important in Steinlauf's account is his call for a more nuanced sociological and psychological examination of these relations. Also worth mentioning is the 1998 special English-language publication of the Polish journal *Więź*, titled *Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews*. Because of its small circulation, this work is relatively unknown abroad; considering, however, that *Więź*, a Catholic monthly, has been a leading forum of progressive and conciliatory debate on Polish-Jewish relations, its significance cannot be underestimated.

More recently, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz's *After the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Conflict in the Wake of WWII* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2002), although somewhat narrow in its exclusion of any theoretical models other than the focus on the historical minutiae, sheds light on the events of anti-Jewish violence in the years immediately after the war. An important overview of different aspects of Polish-Jewish relations is offered by the collection *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, edited by Joshua D. Zimmerman (Piscataway NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003). Even though it does engage some questions of identity, Jewish perceptions of Poland and Poles, and issues of post-Holocaust pedagogy, Zimmerman's book favors a more traditional historical approach when discussing these themes. Volumes such as "*Good News' after Auschwitz? Christian Faith Within a Post-Holocaust World* (Macon GA: Mer-

cer University Press, 2001), edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, and *Jews and Christians in Conversation*, edited by E. Kessler, J. Pawlikowski, and J. Banki (Cambridge: Orchard Academic 2002), have engaged questions also relevant for this volume—about the implications of confronting the Shoah for both Christian and Jewish theology, the most pertinent of which has been Christianity’s need to re-examine its history of contempt for Judaism. Over the years, a number of important articles have also appeared in *POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies*, edited by Antony Polonsky. Its authors have commented, in a variety of contexts, on the issue of Polish-Jewish relations and have advanced our knowledge of historical facts that, for many reasons, have often been swept under the carpet or relegated to the margins of predominant historical narratives.

The most important publication to have appeared to date in the wake of the revelations about Jedwabne and the ensuing public debate in Poland and abroad is *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, by Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (2004). Polonsky and Michlic’s volume deals specifically with the Jedwabne massacre and the ensuing debates after its revelation, compiling mostly occasional texts and addresses that appeared in the media in Poland and abroad. The volume’s expressed goal is to enable non-Polish readers to understand the issues involved in the Jedwabne debate and to familiarize them with a variety of positions. All of the books mentioned provide a necessary historical and sociological context for comprehending the complex mechanisms of Polish-Jewish relations before, during, and after the war, and the reasons for the erasure of the Jewish memory from the postwar Polish public consciousness. An excellent Polish-language work, *My z Jedwabnego* (Us from Jedwabne) written by Anna Bikont, is worth mentioning here. Partly an ethnographic study of the shaping of anti-Jewish sentiment in the small towns of northeastern Poland before WWII and partly the author’s personal diary intermixing major developments in the “Jedwabne revelations” that took place after the publication of Gross’s book in Poland with personal conversations and anecdotes, Bikont’s volume is a beautifully illustrated testimony both to the past that is long gone and to the ethical spirit of an engaged inquiry into Polish-Jewish relations. The year 2006 saw the publication of Joanna Michlic’s study, *Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*, and Jan Tomasz Gross’s *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*.

6. As Anna Bikont explains, in 1936 a number of significant changes took place in the treatment of the Jewish minority, which de facto turned Jews into second-class citizens: ritual killing of animals was banned, funding was withdrawn from public schools that taught Yiddish, and Saturday school attendance was made

- compulsory. The nationalist party Endecja became stronger and more aggressive at that time (*My z Jedwabnego*, 42).
7. This question has often been posed to the Poles by the morally shocked, distant Western observers.
  8. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 35.
  9. Knight, "The Holy Ground of Hospitality," 104.
  10. A promise of the transformation of both official and public discourse and of the integration of the Polish-Jewish past into the national narrative can be glimpsed in the widespread support for the construction of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum is now under construction at the site adjacent to the Warsaw Ghetto Monument in central Warsaw. The mandate of the museum is to present a history of one thousand years of Jews in Poland and to help keep the memory of Polish-Jewish history and culture alive.
  11. This phrase comes from *Daughters of Absence* by Mindy Weisel, a second-generation Holocaust artist, and she is in turn responding to Shoshana Felman's reference to the Shoah as "the event without a witness."
  12. In Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 133.
  13. One can mention here Alina Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UW, 1987) and Bożena Umińska, *Postać z cieniem: Portrety Żydów w polskiej literaturze od końca XIX wieku do 1939 roku* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2001).
  14. Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, "A Need for Compensation," in *The Neighbors Respond*, 90.
  15. <http://isurvived.org/InTheNews/JewishMuseum-Poland.html>; accessed July 13, 2004.

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# I

## History and Memory





# 1

## The Dark Past

### *Polish-Jewish Relations in the Shadow of the Holocaust*

JOANNA B. MICHLIC

It has been observed that memory of the past perhaps tells us more about the present society than it does about the past itself: it reveals more about the current condition and self-image of society and its level of reflexivity over its collective history than about the past events. Memory of the past, to draw on Maurice Halbwachs's classic definition, is an interpretive, meaning-making process framed by specific social groups—families, different social classes, ethnic groups, and nations.<sup>1</sup>

In Poland as well as in other Eastern European countries, where the burden of the past has always been overwhelming, the year 1989 opened the free flood of social memory of both the precommunist and communist past. In fact, this “explosion of social memory” was one of the most important aspects of the political and social transformation of Poland that began that year. Facts that had previously been hidden and eliminated from the public discourse and from education, and facts that were presented as vague allusions to be read between the lines, have been brought into the public sphere. This explosion of memory has also proved to be one of the most challenging processes that Polish society has had to face in the modern era. The restoration of memory has not been either simple or socially unifying. Two general and contradictory approaches to the collective past have emerged.

The first approach is based on the ethno-nationalist vision of the past and provides a black and white interpretation of history. It advocates only

the martyrological image of the Polish collective past defined in an ethnic sense. Perhaps ironically, such an image was also advocated in the communist version of the collective past between 1945 and 1989, under very different ideological conditions. Since the 1990s this approach has tended to focus on providing an anticommunist story of what went before. It has produced a large body of narratives of “Polish heroism and patriotism in the face of the communist enemy” and of the nation’s opposition to communism during World War II and in the postwar period.

The second approach, based on nostalgia for the multiethnic past and driven by the need for creating a more civic and pluralist society, has seen the collective past as more complex and not only as the story of the ethnically unified, suffering Polish nation facing its perpetrators. This latter approach has produced “new facts” and new interpretations of the historical facts that had never been presented either in the official communist propaganda or even in the Polish émigré press. Nevertheless, some of those facts had first emerged in various nascent forms in the press of the First Solidarity movement in the early 1980s. One of the main areas of focus in this approach has been the critical evaluation of the fate of ethnic and national minorities in Poland before 1939 (when Poland was a sovereign state), during WWII (when Poland was occupied by the Nazi and Soviet regimes), and after 1945 (when Poland became a communist state). Thus in this approach a self-critical version of the past has been endorsed and advocated, while the ethno-national vision of Polish society has been replaced by a civic conception of Poland as a national community. This approach has been accompanied by acrimonious debates about the dark past of Poland in relation to its minorities, particularly the Jewish minority.

The debate about Polish-Jewish relations during World War II, triggered by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbors*—which first appeared in Polish in May 2000—was one of the most important among such debates.<sup>2</sup> *Neighbors* can be viewed as the most salient example of the second approach to the collective past. In the book, Gross succeeds in critiquing the distorted representation of Polish-Jewish relations that had emerged during the communist period by juxtaposing it with one of the most powerful examples—if not the most powerful one—of the counter-

evidence to this representation. This counter-evidence used to be considered a shameful secret that no one wanted to know about or remember. Furthermore, it was attributed to the German occupier of Poland.

In *Neighbors*, Gross discusses what he himself calls “the heart of darkness” in Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.<sup>3</sup> His use of the metaphor “the heart of darkness,” coined by the well-known British-Polish writer Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), does not seem to be accidental.<sup>4</sup> After all, what happened in the small town of Jedwabne on Thursday July 10, 1941, was another of human history’s examples of the kind of terrible atrocity that exemplifies a total lack of concern for human life and a dehumanizing treatment of the victims. We can thus perhaps say that the Jedwabne massacre signified arrival at the heart of darkness. On that day in Jedwabne, a group of local ethnic Poles, themselves victims of both Soviet and German occupations, carried out the murder of the local Jewish community. The murder took place after earlier manifestations of the growing tensions and hostilities directed at the local Jews. These hostilities occurred during the first week of the German army’s takeover of Jedwabne—which had previously been occupied by the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> The Jedwabne massacre was no doubt committed with the consent of the Germans, in various locations in town, in broad daylight, with other local “ethnic” Poles watching or hearing it from close by. This was a particularly horrific atrocity because it was executed by neighbors whom the victims knew well, at least on a superficial level, through a daily routine of living together in the same locality and encountering one another through economic and social activities. Prewar Jedwabne was a small bi-ethnic local community that numbered less than twenty-five hundred people on the eve of the outbreak of World War II.<sup>6</sup>

The familiarity of the Jewish victims with the ethnic Polish victimizers, an aspect of the crime that shocked Gross and which he discusses in depth, had been mentioned in the statements Polish perpetrators and witnesses made during the postwar investigations and trials.<sup>7</sup> One such chilling statement, cited by Gross at length, reads: “Zdrojewicz said to me, ‘Save me Mister Bardon’. Being afraid of these murderers, I replied, ‘I cannot help you with anything’, and I passed them.”<sup>8</sup>

*Neighbors* is a slim book—the first Polish edition consists of just 119 pages of text, plus forty photographs showing members of the prewar Jewish community in Jedwabne. The English edition, with a new afterword, has 214 pages altogether. For a book of such slender size, *Neighbors* covers a remarkably broad range of topics, the central one being the murder of the Jedwabne Jews. The murder of the Jews is linked with other topics, which can be divided into two groups. The first group includes historical issues such as Polish society and attitudes toward the Jews in eastern Poland under the Soviet occupation, 1939–41; the response of Polish society to the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941; the role of Polish society in the Holocaust; and society's participation (or collaboration) in the communist takeover in 1944. The second group includes topics related to the methodology and historiography of Holocaust studies and twentieth-century Polish history; the role of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors in understanding the genocide; the memory of the dark past and the collective self-image of Polish society; responsibilities of the historian; and truth and its relativization in history writing.

*Neighbors* is a work that can be seen as directed at the community of professional historians as well as at the general public. In a sense, the book constitutes a direct polemic, sometimes an impatient one, challenging the dominant paradigm in postwar Polish historiography of the history of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. Its premise is the conviction that there is no way of escaping the dark past in one's own history. Both the argument in *Neighbors* and its mode of narration are subordinated to this premise. Perhaps this is why Gross does not seem to want to keep the Jedwabne massacre at what is termed "a safe distance" in history writing.<sup>9</sup> Instead he takes the reader on a tour of the massacre—during which one can "hear" and visualize the killing of the Jedwabne Jews. The reader is exposed to minute details of the collective murder and is confronted with extremely disturbing images, such as that of men playing football with a woman's head. Readers are also exposed face to face with individual victims and perpetrators. Thus Gross's mode of narration does not seem to fit easily into the category of conventional history writing about the Holocaust, which is based on the detached scholarly approach, without

including any expressions of emotion.<sup>10</sup> Of course we should be aware that such a detached scholarly approach dominated Polish postwar historiography. At the same time dominant historical accounts either contained false representations of Polish-Jewish relations or ignored these relations altogether.

Gross's main aim in *Neighbors* is thus to spell out historical truth in such a way that its future neutralization and falsification will become impossible. The last paragraph of the chapter "For a New Historiography," which in the Polish version constitutes the end of the book, contains the sharpest and most powerful expression of Gross's refusal to accept any forms of "cleansing" of the memory of the Jedwabne Jews.<sup>11</sup> In this paragraph Gross launches an attack on the inscriptions placed on two monuments in Jedwabne, which were erected in communist and postcommunist times. In different ways both of these monuments represented an insult to the memory of the Jedwabne Jews. The first, erected in the 1960s by the local Łomża section of the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację, ZBOWiD), was supposed to commemorate the murdered Jews. However, its inscription attributed all responsibility for their murder on July 10, 1941, to the Germans and was therefore simply a lie. The second monument, erected at a Catholic cemetery, did not mention the Jedwabne Jews at all, as though they had never lived in the town. Instead it was dedicated: "To the memory of about 180 people, including 2 priests, murdered in the territory of the Jedwabne district in the years 1939–1956 by the NKVD, the Nazis, and the secret police [Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB]. Signed 'society' (*społeczeństwo*)."<sup>12</sup>

Offended by the "cleansing" of the history of the murder of the Jedwabne Jews on July 10, 1941, and also by exclusion of the Jews from the sites of memory and by their disappearance from local history, Gross utters two final sentences. These sentences are full of irony, which is directed at the inscriptions: "For, indeed, the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the NKVD, nor by the Nazis, nor by the Stalinist secret police. Instead, as we now know beyond reasonable doubt, and as Jedwabne citizens knew all along, it was their neighbors who killed them."<sup>13</sup>

It is widely recognized that *Neighbors* generated the most intensive and

long-lasting public debate in postcommunist Poland, which began in the summer of 2000 and lasted until the autumn of 2002. This debate was echoed in France, Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>14</sup> Given the enormous wave of interest in the book, one can in fact speak about the “Gross phenomenon” or “Gross effect.” Simultaneously *Neighbors* succeeded as no other book about Polish-Jewish relations and twentieth-century Polish history had done in sharply splitting its readers in Poland and, to a lesser degree, abroad. Its reception varied from strongly affirmative to lukewarm positive, mildly negative, and openly hostile. A close examination of the huge body of responses, including articles, reviews, and monographs that the book has generated, reveals that many respondents have misread and misinterpreted *Neighbors*. This has occurred despite the fact that the book is written in clear and accessible language that can be understood by specialists in the history of World War II as much as by anyone else interested in this topic.

Gross was accused of a variety of sins, among them a revival of the category of collective guilt, which was seen as potentially inciting ethnic hatred and leading to the degeneration of contemporary Polish-Jewish relations. His book was also perceived by some as presenting a false interpretation of the collective murder of the Jedwabne Jews. Such voices, as Leon Wieselter observed in one of his articles on Jedwabne, were more of a “document of the problem than a discussion of the problem.”<sup>15</sup> They were also a clear exemplification of the difficulty any new approach to historical events is bound to encounter when it runs against the older conceptualizations and interpretations, which—although false and faulty—have acquired a substantial stability in culture and in the literature on the subject.

Nevertheless, the debate about *Neighbors* signaled an important moment in the Polish interrogation of Poland’s dark past. The debate was the most profound of any discussions of Polish-Jewish relations after World War II.<sup>16</sup> It resulted in a major inquiry into the dominant representations of Polish-Jewish relations in World War II as well as into the Polish national self-image and identity. Some went so far as to compare its impact on Polish society to the impact that the debate about Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* had on German society.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most important features of the *Neighbors* debate was the clear polarization of the Polish cultural and scholarly community, as well as of the political elite and society at large, over the Jedwabne massacre. Participants in the debate were divided into two easily distinguishable groups—the self-critical camp, whose chief protagonist was Jan T. Gross himself, and the self-defensive camp. In general terms, the former camp accepted Gross's main thesis about the execution of the Jedwabne massacre by ethnic Poles. Its representatives raised concerns about the moral ramifications of the crime and insisted on the need to include such dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations in Polish social history. They also endorsed Gross's call for a critical reexamination of the national self-image of Poles solely as victims and heroes. Representatives of this group made significant pronouncements on the long silence about the massacre; they also discussed the issue of responsibility, the need for an apology to the Jewish victims of Jedwabne and their families, and possible forms of symbolic reparation. In addition they made compelling observations about more general themes, such as nationalism and the history of xenophobia and antisemitism in prewar, wartime, and postwar Poland and about the past attitudes of the Polish state toward ethnic and religious minorities, in particular its policies of inclusion and exclusion.

In contrast, the self-defensive camp displayed both discomfort over the news of the Jedwabne massacre and major difficulty in accepting Gross's main thesis. Accordingly, this group's efforts concentrated on neutralizing these two facts by using strategies of evasion and revision. However, this is not to say that this group's attitudes and interpretations were entirely homogeneous. We can differentiate between mild and strong self-defensive positions. One major difference between them was that the proponents of the strong self-defensive position used anti-Jewish stereotypes, while adherents of the milder position did not display such prejudices. Another major difference lay in the approach to and evaluation of Gross's main thesis. Adherents of the mild approach accepted some aspects of Gross's proposition about the direct participation of Poles in the Jedwabne massacre but dwelled on the supposedly still vague nature of German participation in the massacre. Their approach can be described as the "Yes,



but . . ." position. Representatives of the strong self-defensive approach in turn either reluctantly accepted that some Poles were unwilling helpers of the Nazis (largely through a desire for retaliation for the various wrongs perpetrated against them by Jews during the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941) or simply rejected Gross's book as a baseless and perfidious conspiracy against Poland.

What the supporters of both forms of the self-defensive position had in common was the shared conviction that Gross lacked any proper scholarly training to carry out historical research. They also rejected or objected to both Gross's proposition to rewrite the history of Polish-Jewish relations and his endorsement of a more complex national self-image for Poland. Thus their reception of *Neighbors* stood in sharp contrast to its reception by the self-critical camp.

To understand the wide discrepancy between the self-defensive and self-critical camps one has to look at the approaches to the collective past and national orientations that were evoked by these two opposing camps. Characteristically, the intellectuals belonging to the self-critical group displayed a commitment to the ideas of civic nationalism and pluralistic culture, a position that values and respects the rights and memories of minorities.<sup>18</sup> The dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations were of particular historical and moral importance to them since the intellectuals viewed these aspects as part of a broader discourse about the kind of national community to which Poles wished to belong. To them, as to a small but important group of intellectuals and politicians of the interwar period, the discussion about the dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations lay at the heart of the discourse about Polish ethnic and civic nationalism; in other words, it represented a litmus test of Polish democracy. Therefore for this group the idea of coming to terms with the dark past assumed a cognitive, social, and moral imperative. Of course, the intellectuals understood this idea as a complete acknowledgment and exposure of the dark past. Such exposure was viewed as the only way of overcoming the dark past, of repairing what went wrong in Polish-Jewish relations and thus of initiating a new era of normalized relations with the Jewish communities in Poland and abroad. Moreover, an apology to the Jewish victims was viewed as an

integral part of this process, one that showed a commitment to eradicating any traces of the attitudes and actions that had led to the creation of the dark past:

It is clear that there is an emptiness in the apology and acknowledgment of wrongdoing which does not include a decision about self-betterment and the struggle against the evil that gave birth to the wrongdoing. The person who acknowledges the wrongdoing should know that s/he takes upon him- or herself the responsibility for opposing a potential return of the wrongdoing. To accomplish such a task, one does not need to put on a “hair shirt,” but one has to eradicate everything that would enable the wrongdoing to come back. This internal evolution of cleansing, though sometimes difficult, is necessary not only on an individual level, but also on a social [collective] one. For the victim of the wrongdoing, this evolution can represent the best compensation.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, telling the truth about the painful and shameful aspects of Polish history was seen by representatives of the self-critical camp to be serving the interests of the present community—rather than being an obstacle to the perpetuation of the heroic narratives of national history. It was believed that telling the truth could lead to an improvement of Poland’s image in the eyes of the Western democratic world, since it would demonstrate “credibility” and a mature commitment to the values of democracy, pluralism, and respect for minorities. Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski professed: “I would like to stress that an apology does not mean an accusation of the Polish nation. The words of apology constitute a reflection over the crime and are an expression of sorrow that a crime was committed by neighbors on their neighbors, by Polish citizens against other Polish citizens. . . . An apology is not an accusation but constitutes a bridge leading toward rapprochement [between Poles and Jews]. We wish to leave the ghostly silence behind, overcome the lies of the past, and not to hide the truth anymore. On July 10 we have been given a chance to overcome the bad past and become better [people].”<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, the contributors to the self-defensive position considered the public exposure of the dark past embarrassing and shameful, leading only to negative consequences in terms of Polish national self-image and self-confidence, both at home and abroad.<sup>21</sup> The self-defensive camp assumed that the revelations about the Jedwabne massacre would completely overshadow and damage the heroic pages of Polish history. In other words, the dark past would somehow destroy the “good past” and bring dishonor upon contemporary society. Because of such convictions, the self-defensive camp aimed to protect the narratives of Poland solely as a community of heroes and victims. Thus in their case coming to terms with the dark past took the form of an attempt—to use the term of the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno—to turn over the page of the Jedwabne massacre and, if possible, wipe it from memory.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, proponents of the self-defensive approach shared a generally positive historical and moral evaluation of the past of the Polish nation, and they therefore did not view the dark past of Polish-Jewish relations as being of any particular significance. Yet this is not to say that this past was not troubling or painful to some of them, particularly to representatives of the milder self-defensive camp.

To those holding the mild self-defensive position, such as Jacek Żakowski, a prominent journalist and cofounder of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the news about the Jedwabne massacre was—to use Żakowski’s own words—shocking and traumatic.<sup>23</sup> The complexity of twentieth-century Polish history seemed to cause Żakowski so much difficulty that he could respond to it only by reaching the alarmist conclusion that this news could lead to nothing but negative consequences for Polish-Jewish relations. As he put it himself, “their deterioration will be the final outcome of Gross’s *Neighbors*.” He made the unfounded statement that *Neighbors* was a tool that could be used to incite ethnic and racial hatred. Moreover, he brought up the concept of collective responsibility—one of the most problematic concepts for ethics and history—in order to claim that *Neighbors* reinforced the image of Poles as just as guilty of the genocide of the Jews as the Germans were. For Żakowski responsibility was a concept applicable solely to concrete actions and specific persons. Therefore, although he absolutely

condemned the Jedwabne crime, he did not look into the difficult issues Gross raised about the sense of moral and cultural burden in a community where such a crime had occurred. The preposterous idea that the entire Polish nation could be responsible for the Jedwabne crime, which Żakowski posited as the most likely interpretation of Gross's argument in the West, served for him as a way of escaping such difficult questions. This strategy implicitly served to allow Żakowski to "defuse the dark past," to use the term of one of Adorno's students, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

The historian Tomasz Szarota used a similar strategy to defuse the dark past. Belonging like Żakowski to the mild self-defensive camp, Szarota responded to *Neighbors* with controversial statements about the book and its impact on society.<sup>24</sup> For example in his second major response to Gross in a long interview, "Jedwabne bez stereotypów" (Jedwabne without stereotypes), published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (April 2002), Szarota claimed that Polish society at its present stage was not yet ready to accept the painful truth about the Jedwabne massacre. He suggested that in order to "face such truth, the community had to have a healthy and balanced awareness of its virtues and vices, a balanced awareness of its heroic past and also of its crimes." In this he failed to recognize that *Neighbors* could, in fact, be seen as a work that contributed to the regaining of "balanced awareness of virtues and vices." The clue to his inconsistencies lay in the final section of the interview, in which he expressed hope that historical evidence would eventually be found to demonstrate that it was the Germans and not the Poles who had conducted the massacre. Szarota's response shows the extent of the psychological need to see the Polish community as virtuous.<sup>25</sup>

Yet the defusing of the dark past by representatives of the mild self-defensive position, such as Żakowski and Szarota, was very different from the defusing of that past by proponents of the strong self-defensive position. The latter process was conducted in a much more explicit, tendentious, prejudicial, and aggressive manner. The system of assumptions and values embraced by this group was entirely of an ethno-nationalist provenance. They absolutely rejected the idea that any wrongs might have been committed by ethnic Poles against others. Their pronouncements contained

anti-Jewish prejudices, ranging from subtle rationalizations of sentiment to more highly charged, emotional anti-Jewish expressions. What was important for this group was not only to show the Poles in a good light but also to present the Jews in a bad light. This goal was realized primarily by the use of the concept of “Judeo-commune” (*Żydokomuna*), which claims that a majority of Jews, if not all of them, actively supported Poland’s chief enemy of the twentieth century—the Soviet regime. According to this position the Jews collaborated with the Soviets against the Poles during the Soviet occupation of the Polish Eastern Territories between 1939 and 1941, and then again in the aftermath of World War II, during the imposition of the communist regime. The general sense of this proposition is that the Jews are doubly guilty of crimes against the Polish nation and that it is the Poles who are the “real victims” vis-à-vis the Jews.

In the case of the Jedwabne massacre this proposition was mainly used as a strategy for rationalizing the involvement of Poles in the crime and thus for neutralizing it. For example, Tomasz Strzembosz, one of the respected historians of the Polish underground during World War II, used such notions and strategies and did not see anything inappropriate in resorting to them. His argumentation lacked sensitivity and revealed his detachment from the issue. In his first article, with the significant title “Przemilczana kolaboracja” (Covered-up collaboration), Strzembosz criticized Gross for presenting an untruthful version of the events and provided his own evaluation of the historical background to the massacre.<sup>26</sup> Characteristically, the article was not concerned directly with the Jedwabne massacre and its Jewish victims—to whom Strzembosz dedicated a single sentence—but served one purpose only: to show ethnic Poles in a good light and Polish Jews in a bad light. Strzembosz applied different categories of judgment toward the two communities; but he also oversimplified or even distorted the history of the German occupation of Poland in relation to the history of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, in order to neutralize the criminal nature of the Jedwabne massacre.

Strzembosz’s main argument was that prior to the German occupation of the eastern territories in June 1941, Polish Jews willingly served as the chief agents of Soviet anti-Polish politics. He categorized them as

“traitors of the Polish state” and “collaborators with Poles’ mortal enemy,” welcoming the invasion of the Soviet army and later being responsible for the suffering of thousands of ethnic Poles who were taken to Siberia in 1940. In contrast, Strzembosz claimed, the ethnic Polish population acted honorably throughout the Soviet occupation. Moreover, the suffering experienced under the Soviet occupation was so enormous that the Poles welcomed the German army in June 1941. This was interpreted by Strzembosz as an understandable act of desperation, which did not reflect negatively on Poles as a community: “Apart from a small group of communists in towns and even smaller ones in the countryside, the Polish population responded to the USSR’s aggression and the Soviet system imposed on those territories in the same way it had reacted to the German aggression. . . . In contrast, the Jewish population, especially youths and poor town dwellers, staged a mass welcome to the invading army and took part in introducing the new order.”<sup>27</sup>

In his next article, “Inny obraz sąsiadów” (A different picture of the neighbors), Strzembosz insisted that it was the Germans and not the ethnic Poles who were responsible for the Jedwabne massacre.<sup>28</sup> He also claimed that individual Jewish testimonies used by Gross were unreliable sources, while at the same time insisting that Polish testimonies were reliable. Finally he dismissed *Neighbors* altogether as a “weak” and “fake” work that could not be taken seriously as historical writing. Four other historians—Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Bogdan Musiał, Leszek Żebrowski, and Piotr Gontarczyk—endorsed and propagated a similar position.<sup>29</sup> The extreme nationalist press came to cite them as the chief historical authorities on both Gross’s book and the Jedwabne massacre.<sup>30</sup>

The position of these professional historians, as well as that of the journalists, shows that they all subscribe to the model of “martyrological historiography” (*historiografia martyrologiczna*), which “sanctifies” the Polish nation understood as an ethnic entity, regardless of its actions. This phenomenon alone provides clues to their dismissive reactions toward *Neighbors*. The murders of the local Jewish communities by their ethnic Polish neighbors in Jedwabne and other towns in northeastern Poland go against the traditional historical conceptualization of Polish society and

therefore constitute a subject that many historians are still far from willing to explore. This perhaps explains why Tomasz Strzembosz, despite his pioneering historical research into the Soviet occupation of northeastern Poland (1939–41), had failed to discuss Polish-Jewish relations in the region prior to the publication of Gross's *Neighbors* and wrote instead a simple heroic history of the ethnic Polish community of this region. This situation, of course, raises an important general question about the writing of history: If the choice of historical narratives reflects only the historian's power to impose a preferred vision of reality on a past that cannot resist him or her, then what is left of history? The golden principles of the work of historians' involve the conviction that any interpretation should be preceded by historical facts and that, when an interpretation is contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned.

Except for a few individuals (such as the historian Andrzej Żbikowski), the majority of professional historians who took an active part in the debate can be classified as representing either the mild or the strong self-defensive position. The key proponents of the self-critical position belonged to the community of social scientists, which included the sociologists Jacek Kurczewski, Paweł Śpiewak, and Hanna Świda-Ziemia; the anthropologists Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Dariusz Czaja; and the psychologist Krystyna Skarżyńska.<sup>31</sup> The two literary critics and literary historians, Michał Głowiński and Marek Zaleski, were also part of this group.

Such an endorsement of opposite perspectives by historians and other intellectuals who did not have any historical training can perhaps be explained by the fact that in Poland the social sciences have a sophisticated and well-respected record of discussing problems of social stereotyping and prejudice. The history of Polish literature also has a long tradition of critical inquiry into national consciousness, morality, and behavior. Key poets and writers from the early nineteenth century up to the contemporary period—Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian K. Norwid, and Czesław Miłosz—have all created critical images of Polish society. Perhaps this situation explains why it was the literary critic Jan Błoński who initiated the Polish reckoning with the dark past in relation to treatment of the Jewish minority during WWII.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Polish historiography, the examination of

public perceptions of the past—a subject that has recently been explored to a great extent in contemporary Western historiography—has been treated rather reservedly. David Engel, a distinguished historian of East European Jewish history, was perhaps the first to note the absence of interest in this field among Polish historians. In his review of Michael Steinlauf's pioneering book on the memory of the Holocaust in Poland Engel states: "Polish historians, however, have for the most part not displayed the same enthusiasm for the study of historical memory as their counterparts to the west—perhaps because they themselves are active agents of the latest post-communist recasting."<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, the debate about the Jedwabne massacre has raised issues that Poles had resisted facing for a long time, questions both about the dark past and about what kind of national community Poland wants to be at present and in the future. The debate has reflected the process of democratization in the political and social life of Poland. As such it could not have taken place before 1989—that is, before the country regained its full sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> The debate has revealed a wider spectrum of national orientations among elites and nonelites than was previously apparent and has raised crucial questions for history and the social sciences. It has also reflected the emergence of a pluralistic culture representing two competing conceptions of Poland: a pluralistic civic model—inclusive of the memory of "others" and acknowledging wrongs done to them; and a model based on ethnicity—exclusive of the memory of "others" and nurturing the narrative of unique (ethnic) Polish suffering.

Although it is impossible to make any long-range historical predictions about how far the polyvocal political culture will develop and how fast the model of civic and pluralistic Poland will gain popularity among large segments of society, one should not forget that the residue of the ethnic nationalist political culture is still to some degree present in mainstream political and cultural life and that it still has a hold on some sections of society. Yet current indications are that important sections of Polish society are capable of developing a more balanced collective self-image. Indeed, many Poles have succeeded in integrating the dark past involving Jewish and other minorities into the memory of collective past. Jan Gross,



together with his predecessors such as Jan Błoński and his various supporters in the debate, should be given credit for these important developments.

## Notes

1. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 83–84.
2. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2000). The first English edition of the book appeared in the spring of 2001 as Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press). The second expanded English edition, including a new afterword, was published by Penguin Books in 2002.
3. Gross, *Neighbors*, 94.
4. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.
5. The first anti-Jewish riots in Jedwabne with the participation of the local ethnically Polish population took place on June 25, 1941.
6. For a detailed study of the demographic aspects of the Jedwabne community see Marcin Urynowicz, “Jedwabne’s Jewish Population: Demographic Changes from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1941 in the Context of the Łomża Region as a Whole,” in Machcewicz and Persak, *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1.
7. For an excellent analysis of the various trials in the years 1949–54 dealing with the Jedwabne massacre see Andrzej Rzepliński, “Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej? Sprawy karne oskarżonych o wymordowanie Żydów w Jedwabnem w świetle zasady rzetelnego procesu,” in Machcewicz and Persak *Wokół Jedwabnego*, 353–460.
8. Gross, *Neighbors*, 60.
9. I borrowed this term from Ulrich Herbert’s excellent analysis of the German historiography of the Holocaust, “Extermination Policy: New Answers and Questions about the History of the ‘Holocaust’ in German Historiography,” in Herbert, *National Socialist Extermination Policies*, 6.
10. For a critical and thought-provoking discussion of the application of the detached approach in writing about the Holocaust, see Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.
11. In the Polish version Gross uses the expression “it was society that killed 1600 Jedwabne Jews.” In the debate this paragraph was one of the most misunderstood sections of *Neighbors*: Gross was wrongly accused of placing collective guilt for the murder of the Jedwabne Jews upon the entire Polish nation.

12. Gross, *Neighbors*, 114.
13. Gross, *Neighbors*, 114.
14. For an analysis of the internal dynamics of the debate and its place in the context of the history of postwar debates about "the Jewish issue" and the memory of the Holocaust, see Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*.
15. Wieselter, "The Righteous."
16. For analysis of the debate and its various stages see Joanna Michlic, "Coming to Terms with the 'Dark Past.'"
17. See John Reed, "Poland's Willing Executioners?" *Financial Times*, February 10, 2001, 6.
18. For a selection of articles by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Hanna Świda-Ziemba, and Stanisław Musiał, which represent the self-critical camp, see Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 75–86, 114–20, 173–80.
19. These words were uttered by the Polish philosopher Barbara Skarga, "Wyznanie."
20. Kwaśniewski, "Co to znaczy przepraszam," 13.
21. For a selection of voices representing the self-defensive camp see Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 93–102, 166–72, 220–37, 304–44.
22. Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" 115.
23. Żakowski, "Każdy sąsiad ma imię," 12–14.
24. Szarota, "Jedwabne bez stereotypów," 1, 8. See also the response by Jan Tomasz Gross, "Trochę szkoda, że 'nie pisze się historii, chodząc po barach . . .'" *Tygodnik Powszechny*, May 5, 2002, 5. Szarota's final response in "this small debate" did not differ from what he said in the earlier interview. See Tomasz Szarota, "Zmarnowana szansa." *Tygodnik Powszechny*, May 12, 2002, 5.
25. Ironically, Szarota himself had dealt with some aspects of the dark past in Polish relations with the Jewish minority in his *U progu Zagłady: Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2000).
26. Strzembosz, "Przemilczana kolaboracja," A6–A7. This article was a critical response to the positive review of *Neighbors* by historian Andrzej Żbikowski of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, who had argued that the accusation of Jewish collaboration with the Soviet regime was commonly manipulated in order to initiate anti-Jewish massacres; see Andrzej Żbikowski, "Nie było rozkazu," *Rzeczpospolita*, January 4, 2001, A6–A7.
27. Strzembosz, "Przemilczana kolaboracja," A6.
28. Strzembosz, "Inny obraz sąsiadów," A6–A7.
29. See, for example, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, "Kłopoty z kuracją szokową," *Rzeczpospolita*, January 5, 2001, A6; Bogdan Musiał, "Historiografia mityczna,"

- Rzeczpospolita*, February 24–25, 2001, A6; Piotr Gontarczyk, “Gross kontra fakty,” *Życie*, January 31, 2001, 4; and Leszek Żebrowski, “Jedwabnym szlakiem kłamstw,” [http://www.geocities.com/jedwabne/english/wywiad\\_z\\_leszkiem\\_zebrowskim\\_2.htm](http://www.geocities.com/jedwabne/english/wywiad_z_leszkiem_zebrowskim_2.htm)
30. See, for example, the following articles by Lech Stępniewski, all in *Najwyższy Czas*: “Krew ich na nas i na dzieci nasze . . .,” March 12, 2001; “Cud Pury-mowy i inne historie,” March 14, 2001; “Prolegomena do matematyki narodowej,” April 25–26, 2001; and “O kanalizacji,” April 29–30, 2001.
31. For a more detailed discussion of this group’s position, see Michlic, “Coming to Terms with the ‘Dark Past,’” 13–14.
32. See the well-known article by Jan Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto.”
33. Engel, Review of Steinlauf’s *Bondage to the Dead*, 485.
34. Ewa K. Czackowska, “Byłem sam, będą nas setki,” *Rzeczpospolita*, no. 159, July 10, 2001.

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## 2

### Jedwabne

#### *History as a Fetish*

JOANNA TOKARSKA-BAKIR

This chapter explores the psychosocial aspects of the Polish debate over Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors* (2000). The defense mechanisms that became apparent in the course of this debate are examined within the larger European context of postwar discussions about the recent historical past. There are two dimensions to this context. On the one hand, it is formed by the guilt complex over the Holocaust, common to all Europeans but irregularly distributed and variably apparent in consciousness. On the other hand, this context is the product of a European cultural tradition, which provides a language for the discussion of this guilt. As one would expect, in the case of the Jedwabne debate—as in the case of similar discussions in Germany or France—the language in which the decisive discussions were being conducted, and the level at which solutions were found, were not prescribed by religion (allegedly so prevalent in Poland), but by academia. It is to this language, and in particular the language of history as an academic discipline, that all the other idiolects (including a church-inflected one) involved in the debate alluded. Contrary to firmly held opinions, it is academic discourse and not religion that constitutes the *lingua franca* of Polish politics as well as of the social, business, and entertainment worlds. This is the case because, despite the impression of strong Catholicism, Poland today is a country experiencing a deep spiritual unease.

This increases the responsibility of historians. This chapter deals with those aspects of their language—not least the local, Polish ones—that did not allow historians to engage themselves fully in the reworking of the past during the debate over Jedwabne. Polish historiography—acting as the guardian of Polish national identity, marked with martyrological sentiments in the years of the partitions and impeded by censorship during the communist era—is rarely prepared to take risks and fulfill the tasks that stand before it within a democratic social dialogue. Meanwhile, as Jürgen Habermas argued during the German *Historikerstreit*, an accurate, critically tested memory concerning events that play crucial roles in a collective past is an important component of a legitimate politics. Moreover, accurate, critically tested memory work is related to an active forgetting of the past (being, of course, a component of, and not an alternative to, remembering and memory work), or letting bygones be bygones.<sup>1</sup> No one is better prepared than historians to fulfill this role. Its significance increases the more the irrational element becomes visible in the European debates. The regularity of these debates, their mass appeal, their clear chronology, permanent division of roles, and most important, their desperate lack of conclusions clearly point toward an element of myth within them, an element that demands recognition.

The chronology of these debates is as follows. The starting point is normally provided by a film (such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Agnieszka Arnold's *Neighbors*), a book (Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* or Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors*), or an exhibition (*The Crimes of the Wehrmacht*, held by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung). The film, book, or exhibition acts as a provocation, highlighting certain facts in a shockingly bold manner. At times the exposition is built upon erroneous premises (for example, the racist connotations of Goldhagen's conception of "innate" German antisemitism), or on too narrowly or even falsely interpreted sources (as in the case of the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition, which contained a series of photographs of massacres perpetrated by the Red Army, among others, and which—scandalously, from a Polish point of view—ignored the crimes carried out by the Wehrmacht in the years

1939–40).<sup>2</sup> “Factual” errors annoy historians, some of whom attempt to discredit the material at all costs; as we saw during the Jedwabne debates, the “lack of methodology” and the “Holocaust industry” arguments kept appearing by turns. This, however, does not work, because the public is very keen to talk. The uproar increases, and artists and intellectuals begin to make their voices heard. (In Germany the most characteristic statement in this context was Jürgen Habermas’s on Goldhagen’s “penetrating and morally powerful book” as a “source of important impulses for the public conscience.”)<sup>3</sup> Such pronouncements eventually infuriate historians to the extent that they become offended and withdraw from the debate.

The irritability of historians is understandable given that these debates usually contain an element of criticism toward traditional historiography. What is worse is that their voices in turn reveal a total lack of understanding of the nature of public discourse and of the role played within it by themselves, on the one hand, and on the other by us, their readers.

Why is this dispute so passionate? In what some take to be a historical epiphenomenon—a side effect of the “trauma-business” and of ideological manipulation—others have a tendency to see nothing less than the “displacement of the sacred.”<sup>4</sup> They explain, after Walter Benjamin, that mass phenomena in our secularized world can become hiding places for the mythical.<sup>5</sup> We have known for a long time that myths appear in cycles of return and repetition. But it is not the rehabilitation of myth as a source of truth that concerns us here. The point is that it is dangerous to disregard myth (Volkism, Nazism, Communism, antisemitism, and others). It is not enough, in the words of Immanuel Kant, to “beware of bad dreams.” Bad dreams have to be recognized.

If, in one country, sixty years after the war, the entire imprint of a book published by an elite publishing house, describing the incineration of people in a barn (Gross), is suddenly sold out; if, in another country, all the copies of a book describing scenes of carnivalesque cruelty and attributing to its readers a kind of an “antisemitic gene” (Goldhagen) are sold out; in other words, if some post-traumatic madness suddenly erupts somewhere after a delay of several decades, the social researcher should think twice before neglecting such a phenomenon.

### Post-Traumatic Culture

What lies beneath the ineradicable presence of a tragedy from sixty years ago, an event that, like a recurring dream, continues to haunt ever new audiences long after the actors have left the theater? Why is it that “time passes, war and annihilation are left further and further behind, but the dead come ever closer to us”?<sup>6</sup> How is it possible that over half a century later, these wounds have not healed? No one will answer these questions on his or her own. Here, one has to “accept, without asking who gives.” The sociologist must observe the psychologist, the anthropologist must review the philosopher, the literary critic must examine the historian. And vice versa.

Each of these disciplines is to some extent reflected within the category of “postmemory” (from which I would like to begin my own answer to this question), as is the world in which nothing is any longer as it was. Today’s memory is no longer memory. “Postmemory,” explains Marianne Hirsch, “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.”<sup>7</sup>

Postmemory is understandable within families burdened by a traumatic past. Why, however, does it wrench itself today beyond the circle of those directly affected? Why, despite the old practice of isolating those “contaminated by unhappiness,” does it spill beyond the hospices and psychiatric institutions and impart itself not only on individual people but also on entire societies? This phenomenon clearly has the character of displacement: it is carried out in a surrogate, symbolic space and time—in a different place and with a marked delay in relation to the events from which it arises. That which really sets it in motion is the gradual departure of the “real” victims of the trauma. The mass character of postmemory, its polyphony—phenomena such as Binjamin Wilkomirski (who convincingly, though it is not clear why, appropriated another’s suffering to himself)—indicate that there is a very particular myth-making element at work.<sup>8</sup> The prominent place of the Holocaust in American public life is another example.<sup>9</sup> It is an appropriated, surrogate memory, a memory not in its



place, and hence also—very much like historicism in Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*—it cannot die its own death. Rather than passing into forgetting, postmemory explodes and, gathering itself back after the explosion, begins anew its Sisyphean labors, which are mythical *par excellence*.

This phenomenon writes itself ideally into the horizon of “post-traumatic culture,” which has been developing impetuously from the end of the 1980s in reaction to the earlier “culture of silence.”<sup>10</sup> With a remarkable ability to reconcile the obsession with the past with shrinking historical consciousness, post-traumatic culture concentrates around a central trauma, ancient and suppressed, which unexpectedly returns and places the whole of current reality under scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> This formation does not want to be cured; rather it derives satisfaction from an obsessive gazing into its festering wound. The trauma becomes its fetish, a mask of “the other,” a secret this culture is not able to communicate otherwise and of which it remains unaware.

#### “A house in which I no longer want to live”

Among the several metaphors used by the investigators of this peculiar trauma is the metaphor of “skeletons in the cupboard” or that of the “haunted house.” “The ghosts of the past,” explains Dominick LaCapra, the author of important books on post-traumatic culture, are “symptomatic revenants who have not been laid to rest because of a disturbance in the symbolic order, a deficit in the ritual process, or death so extreme in its unjustifiability or transgressiveness that in certain ways it exceeds existing modes (perhaps any possible mode) of mourning—roam[ing] the post-traumatic world and . . . not entirely ‘owned’ as ‘one’s own’ by any individual or group. If they haunt a house (a nation, a group), they come to disturb all who live [in]—perhaps even pass through—that house.”<sup>12</sup>

LaCapra surely is not among those who would view post-traumatic culture without suspicion. As a matter of fact, the starting point of LaCapra’s reflections is criticism toward its excesses (the cases of Wilkomirski—the imitator; Goldhagen—the “racist”; Lanzmann—the avenger, intentionally humiliating his Nazi interlocutors) and its falsifications (elements of “savior kitsch” in Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, in Wajda’s *Korczak*, and in

Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*). He is aware of misrepresentations arising from an excess of pain and good intentions, or on the contrary from numbness and excessive caution, and of this culture's propensity for exaggeration (from the uncontrolled identification with the victim through many other varieties of "transference" and "vicarious experience" to the repetitive victimization of the victim).<sup>13</sup> A critical attitude toward traumatic culture is the reason why it is indeed historians whom LaCapra regards as destined to counteract the excesses of recurrent, degenerate postmemory.

But this designation is not unconditional. "A goal of historical understanding," writes LaCapra, "is . . . to develop not only a professionally valid public record of past events but also a critically tested, empirically accurate, accessible memory of significant events which becomes part of the public sphere. A related, problematic, even impossible goal is to assist in the effort to restore to victims (at least symbolically or even posthumously) the dignity perpetrators took from them—a restorative effort in which historical discourse is itself engaged to some extent in the process of mourning and attempts at proper burial (important forms of working through the past)."<sup>14</sup> With the involvement of historians, "accurate, critically tested memory work is related to the kind of active forgetting of the past, or letting bygones be bygones"—so that social energy involved in the banishing of the nightmare could at last be released.

One could agree with LaCapra's position on the obligations befalling students of the past. Accordingly, the argument that bad intentions, insufficient knowledge, and desire for sensationalism underlie diminishing trust in traditional historians would become just as misleading as reducing the idea of post-traumatic culture to the cynical "Holocaust industry" thesis. In this light, the answer to the question of why it is at present endemic to society at large to reject "proper" historiography would be as follows: this happens because historiography has not registered the need for "accurate, critically tested memory work" and certainly has not fulfilled its own role in the process of mourning. The readers of Gross's and Goldhagen's books are searching for what they do not find elsewhere: the "moral oxygen" that is released at the very moment when those unanswerable questions are being asked.

### Taboo at the Source

What happens when the scholar (and indeed anyone else) chooses to ignore the influence of the past, instead of confronting it, especially if it is closely related to his or her own sense of identity? The commonplace view, as expressed in maxims such as “out of sight, out of mind” and “what you don’t know doesn’t hurt you,” is very different from the view held by psychologists. Following Freud, psychologists repeat that psychic reality is indestructible, and its repression not only does not lead to its elimination but in fact signifies an even deeper, more intricate dependence on this reality. This is the focus of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s *The Inability to Mourn*, a critique of the unmourned love that the Germans harbor for men of strength as well as of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gerd Koenen’s observation that the left-wing terrorism in 1960s Germany constituted a reaction to the latent memory of the Nazi past.<sup>15</sup>

A denial of historical trauma can result in two pathological phenomena. On the surface we find postmemory, as already mentioned. At its source, however, we can locate the forbidden territories of historical taboos.<sup>16</sup> Historical taboos come into being around those traces of history that are considered damaging to the nation’s “psychic balance or identity” and that, as a result, become suppressed for as long as it takes for them to disappear into the unconscious.<sup>17</sup> The vehemence with which Gross’s book was rejected in Poland (as was Michał Cichy’s earlier article “The Dark Side of the Uprising”) can be explained by the violation of these taboos, among other factors. During the Jedwabne debate, all four types of relevant defense mechanisms came to the surface: denial, leading to a deliberate ideological suppression; unconscious suppression; cognitive suppression; and mythological suppression.

The last one—mythological suppression—was probably the most apparent. It was famously expressed in Tomasz Strzembosz’s statement that the massacre in Jedwabne was carried out by “outcasts and collaborators,” which insinuated that whoever commits a similar crime becomes an outcast by definition, allowing the nation from which perpetrators hail to remain unblemished. This “hoodlum theory” would also have an obvious relevance to the cases of Poles denouncing Jews to the Germans, a

phenomenon highly suited to historical tabooization. A similar role was played by the compulsive search for the presence of Germans in Jedwabne on July 10, 1941, as yet unsupported by evidence.<sup>18</sup>

The next part of Tomasz Strzembosz's argument, the suggestion that antisemitic feelings in Jedwabne were a result of the collaboration of the local Jews with the NKVD during the Soviet occupation, can be situated between the mythical and cognitive types of repression. As with the attempts to discredit Jan Gross as a "sociologist" and to dismiss Szmul Wasersztajn as a "UB agent," the aim was to reduce the cognitive dissonance between what one knows about one's own past (massacre at the hands of Poles), and one's own self-image (Poles are victims and not murderers) and how one would wish to have this past remembered (the massacre in Jedwabne seen as a bloody revenge on collaborators, and thus partly justified: one should not believe "sociologists" or "agents").<sup>19</sup>

In the category of unconscious repression in the context of the Jedwabne debate, a collective hero was instituted and remained there for the past six decades. Historians who dealt with the Łomża region up to the time of Agnieszka Arnold's film and Gross's book were not interested in the massacres at Jedwabne, Radziłów, or Wąsosz. A similar tone (resulting from an argument drawn from the register of unconscious repression, passing at times into cognitive repression) manifests itself also in a comparative panorama of anti-Jewish pogroms in other European countries, as sketched out in the latest book by Tomasz Szarota.<sup>20</sup> This work allows one to diminish the significance of the Jedwabne massacre by placing it in the context of typical crimes orchestrated by the Nazis.

Yet another type of scholarly argument—which can probably be placed within the same category of repression—can be glimpsed from Szarota's conversation with journalists from the *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Szarota states: "I am not . . . sure whether the support for the League of Polish Families in the last elections was not to some extent a petulant reaction to the Jedwabne debate."<sup>21</sup> Although formulated *ex post facto*, this statement would have a normative (prognostic) strength, similar to that of the Russian proverb *tishe yediosh, dalshe budiesh* ("the more quietly you go, the further you'll get"), which stubbornly reappears in both Polish and

foreign discourses on Jews. It implies a warning against the furies of cross-national discord. Examined in psychoanalytic terms—Freud wrote that the violation of taboo “must be punished or atoned for by all the members of the community if they are not all to suffer injury”—it might lead to the conclusion that because Jan Gross’s punishment was not sufficiently exemplary or unanimous, the consequences of his blasphemy (*Neighbors*) fall onto the whole nation (with the role of the “furies” played by the League of Polish Families).<sup>22</sup>

Ideological repression, although perhaps the least interesting, is represented by the texts of historians published in the right-wing Catholic newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*. They describe the case of Jedwabne as a “falsification of history,” as “foreplay” to “putting pressure on Poland to pay the largest possible reparations for lost Jewish estates.” Some Catholic Church hierarchs have joined these voices and, like the Bishop of Łomża, Stefanek, have asserted that the accusations are related to Jewish property claims. These voices would not merit attention were it not for the fact that they correspond to the old myth of “Jewish perfidy” and “Jewish conspiracy.” This myth found its historical concretization in Jews being frequently accused of poisoning wells, of profaning hosts, and of ritual murder. Eruptions of this polymorphous myth coincide with events that violate their bearers’ feelings of security and are often a dangerous igniter of violence (as was the case during the pogrom of Kielce in 1946).

The four types of repression mentioned constitute an important but relatively underrepresented pathology of thought, maintained by Polish historians in the Jedwabne debate. More common, more serious, and at the same time more difficult to notice was the position of “professional paralysis,” represented by mainstream experts who expressed their views in public. The complex reasons for assuming this stance are rooted in this group’s academic mentality, and they manifest as compliance with peculiarly understood rules of professionalism. The remaining part of this chapter is devoted largely to the examination of that position.

### Poland as the Sick Man of Europe

According to the classical definition, trauma causes the splitting of “affect,” or sensibility, and “cognition,” or the powers of representation. “One

disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel.”<sup>23</sup> When analyzing the history of the debates around the books by Goldhagen and Gross, one can hardly resist the impression that the public and the historians constitute in fact two disconnected aspects of one person suffering from postmemory. With precision, these aspects have been divided into “affect” and “cognition” in such a way that the entirety of the former has found itself on the side of the public, and the entirety of the latter on the side of the historians.

What illness is concealed within the postmemory of this “suffering individual”? It is not enough to suggest that this is the condensed trauma of war, gathering into itself several years before its outbreak and a few dozen years after its end. This illness is in fact a tangle of traumas, and the postmemory of this “individual” consists of several mutually hostile but closely entangled memories.

On the one hand, we have the Jewish memory of antisemitism, intensified in the years immediately preceding the war, as well as the tragedy of the Jews of Poland, assimilated and unassimilated ones, abandoned in the ghetto both by the nation they chose and by the “chosen people,” who at the time were just as unwilling to help. Then we have the Shoah, and after the war a series of expulsions, interrupted only by several periods of illusion.

On the other hand, there is Polish memory, an equally complicated memory of those “betrayed at dawn.” Here the list of betrayals is longer, and those responsible are less inclined to do penance. On this list, apart from the Germans and the Russians, are also Poland’s closest allies from September 1939 and from the Yalta period; allies not only passively accepting the Stalinist annexation of Poland but also, as the story of the “Katyń lie” has proven, actively supporting it. One can debate whether the Jews, at this moment making an appearance on the list of traitors, really were at fault here (first in the autumn of 1939 seen as “welcoming the Bolsheviks with bread and salt,” then perceived as the “Judeo-commune” and the “torturers from the UB”). The vehemence with which Jews are often accused suggests that other grievances, incommensurably greater and much more difficult to articulate, might also be vented in these accusations.

What is striking here is the symmetry between the “two memories” and “two truths” mentioned and their sneering denials. As much as the “memory/truth” position is mobilized by the “Auschwitz lie,” its denial is affected and nourished by the “Katyń lie.”

In the debate over *Neighbors*, these separate memories collided and mutually displaced each other, with each loudly claiming exclusivity. The “individual” within whom this collision took place fell ill, and the illness was expressed in the fissure of affect and cognition, which as noted have now become so fundamentally split between the public and the historians. As much as the public identified either with the victims or with the perpetrators of the Jedwabne massacre, the position of professional historians resembled post-traumatic paralysis.

If we were to extend further this comparison of the Jedwabne debate with the psyche of a traumatized individual and ask about the possibility of therapy for the patient, the prognosis would likely depend on delivering a cure that could jolt the patient out of a stupor and instill a capacity for critical thinking. If we were suddenly to imagine another, better world, this cure could take the form of what may sound like a joke in the context of the present historical discourse: empathy.<sup>24</sup>

Let us first establish what such empathy is not. It is not a full identification, some kind of unconditional “sympathy” through which, however noble the intentions, the other is forfeited in order to be replaced by a sympathetic doctor, unwittingly appropriating someone else’s voice and attributes. In contrast to this kind of “sympathy,” empathy would be a commonality of feeling, in which no one would play the part of the doctor, and the healing factor, that which repairs the traumatic fissure, would involve caution and respect as well as the awareness that someone else’s overwhelming feeling will never become our own. By no means an automatic compromise, such empathy might consider the claims of both sides of the debate, while never leveling the differences between them.<sup>25</sup>

This could be the happy end of postmemory. Thanks to the mediation of empathy, the affectation of the public and the cognitive powers of historians could communicate with each other once again. The public would be enriched with a “critically tested, empirically accurate, accessible memory,”

and historians would regain their lost feeling. Unfortunately, this sounds rather like a well-known verse from the Psalms (“Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed each other,” Psalm 85, 11) and is no doubt just as difficult to put into practice.

### Silencing the (Voice of the) Victims

All this is related above all to the power of our ideas as to what exactly the practice of history should entail. The view that “the historian should be at the same time a critical intellectual,” that the “truth claims are necessary but not sufficient conditions that must be cogently related to other dimensions of historiography,” and indeed that the search for truth should be accompanied by an “empathetic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of the language,” might, in Poland, provoke laughter rather than interest.<sup>26</sup> Scholars put a considerable methodical effort into *not knowing what they know* and *not feeling what they feel*. If their sensitivity is indeed “suppressed,” this is definitely because they try to meet the requirements of their profession to the best of their ability.

Andrzej Paczkowski’s instructive article entitled “The *Neighbors* Debate: An Attempt at an Introductory Typology” might provide an instructive example.<sup>27</sup> This typology, listing the four main positions around which the debate over Gross’s book was conducted, is irreproachable in the sense that the scholar does not reveal his own passions. The views of the author, one of the most important Polish historians of the contemporary world, remain concealed. He applies this strange technique of invisibility also to the very subject matter of the debate he is engaged in classifying. Because it is discussed in such a way that the source from which the voice itself arrives cannot be perceived, it is impossible to know what the debate is about: there are some Poles, some Jews, some Germans, and their motives, yet nothing is referred to by its name. Only once does the author decide to speak for himself—in a clarification concerning . . . the ethnic background of the author of *Neighbors*. This departure from the rules governing the text seems to be a slip of the tongue—but as often happens with slips of the tongue—it touches the very heart of the matter.

In Poland, a public clarification of whether someone is Jewish or not is



still hugely significant. When Paczkowski “defends” Gross, in the same way as Archbishop Gocłowski once “defended” then Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, he behaves according to the rules of this discourse. I do not intend to impute bad intentions to Paczkowski. I would only like to show that despite the best of intentions, even the most restrained historian is subject to social conditioning. The more he disputes this, the greater a role this conditioning plays.

Dominick LaCapra sheds interesting light on a similar kind of negation. In his view the aim of self-censorship evident in the work of historians with formalist and positivist tendencies is to “deny one’s transferenceal implication in the problems one treats—and attempt to create maximal distance from them and those involved in them—through extreme objectification.”<sup>28</sup> In the classical Freudian understanding, transference is expressed through repetition or playing out in one’s own language of the processes occurring in the sphere of the subject of study. However shocking this might sound to Polish ears untrained in the ways of psychoanalysis, in historiography such relations of transference take place not only between the scholars themselves but also between the scholars and historical figures and processes that occurred in the past. On a certain level—we can think here, for example, of legal experts and historians—“there’s that tendency to repeat which, if not confronted, tends to take place in a blind and unchecked manner—to return as the repressed or to recur as the dissociated.”<sup>29</sup> This is an inevitable phenomenon, beyond anyone’s conscious control. The problem lies not in the fact that it occurs at all but in how it must be contested.<sup>30</sup>

In the sphere of historical taboo, the human psyche demonstrates an almost telepathic neglect of distance and a resistance on the level of consciousness. It treats all past situations as simultaneously present, all the more so the more forcefully they are repressed.<sup>31</sup> In the stories told by even the most dispassionate historians of the Holocaust, echoes of the analyzed horrors resound ceaselessly, and stray words, value judgments, and allusions surface throughout the text. Historians take part in these seances, alternating between two roles: that of the witness, scourged by guilty feelings (and attempting to drive them out, the four strategies of countering

historical taboos being useful here), and that of the perpetrator of evil, the demon or trifle in the hands of the “dictate of history.” Even if historians take the rare step of identifying with the victims, in order to avoid accusations of partiality (it is interesting that only foregrounding the voice of the victims is regarded as biased), they are unable either to accept or to reveal their intentions, so that the points of view that remained unrepresented in their accounts are filtered into ever new arenas of postmemory, while the mills of myth turn on relentlessly.

Neglecting the voice of the victims, according to LaCapra, is a pathological expression of otherwise understandable defense mechanisms, unconsciously applied by historians. These mechanisms play an important role, protecting the scholar’s territory from the invasion of substance that exceeds his or her levels of resistance. However, when scholars do not realize in time that they are approaching a breaking point, the process takes on the characteristics of a pathology, metamorphosing into the “silencing” of the victims and other narrative techniques, which are dealt with later in this chapter.

Suppressing the voice of the victims is not only a routine characteristic of historiography but perforce also that of the justice system. This can be clearly seen in the postwar trial of the murderers from Jedwabne, during which, as Andrzej Rzepliński says, “the victims make no appearance whatsoever . . . , the surnames and names of these people receive no mention. Even when one of the victims is in the courtroom, he is not treated like a victim.” “The avoidance of bias” and the “quest for absolute objectivity” have their price. In the course of the same trial, the “neglect of the victim’s voice” is not only a linguistic maneuver; it becomes quite simply the “neglect of the victim.” Rzepliński writes: “There was no exhumation. In this trial, there were no victims. The crime supposedly consisted simply in the inhabitants of Jedwabne chasing the Jews into the market square, and detaining them for a little while. The burning of the Jews is not mentioned in the verdict.”<sup>32</sup>

Suppressing the (voice of) the victims, especially when they belong to an ethnic minority, is not a characteristic of Polish historiography alone. The conservative schools of historiography developed over the course of

the nineteenth century in Germany and other European countries, engaged as they were in the building and consolidation of respective national identities, never allowed victims to have a voice. Only writers of Walter Benjamin's stature could bring themselves to criticize history's identification with the strong. In his seminal work "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin proposes to ask "with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. . . . There is no document of civilization which is not at the same a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to the other."<sup>33</sup>

### **"You don't write history by going on pub-crawls"**

LaCapra notes that to some degree, as historians dispute the fact of transference and reject the affective component in understanding in the form of empathy, they also object to the suggestion that in relation to the past they themselves play the part of witnesses.<sup>34</sup> They will be all the more reluctant to encourage, collect, and co-create oral testimonies.

As the following statement demonstrates, the reason oral testimonies were neglected by Polish historians for so long can indeed be found in a peculiar idea about professional standards: "Gross couldn't understand," writes Tomasz Szarota, "why no one had previously dealt with the issue of Jedwabne—it was enough, he said, to make your way there, go to a bar and talk to people. To this, I answer: you don't write history by going on pub-crawls. It is in fact a question of professional standards."<sup>35</sup>

It is not difficult to reconstruct the reasons for the scholar's aversion to a pub version of *oral history*. Everyone who has gone on pub-crawls knows that participating in the formation of oral testimony engages us to a far greater degree than is allowed by the standard model of historical investigation. Historians are reluctant to engage in a conversation because all its forms, even an interview or an examination (not to mention a chat over a glass of vodka), expose *both* participants. Under no circumstances should one stop at this form of historical investigation, but the self-righteous rejection of an opportunity to become acquainted with what people in a pub

chat about and, by extension, with the freely expressed self-consciousness of a group, cannot be rationally explained.

Krzysztof Czyżewski told me of the expression “*czarshiya zna*,” popular in postwar Yugoslavia, which broadly translates as “the word on the street is . . . .” You don’t have to be an ethnographer to appreciate *czarshiya*. Reading crime novels will do.

Someone who talks to a victim, a perpetrator, or even a witness to a crime is much less likely to emerge from this conversation unchanged than someone who sits in the silence of the archives, reading the minutes of an interrogation written in the third person. Even someone who merely listens in cannot help but discover the huge significance of the way in which questions are asked, and from there it is not that hard to grasp and appreciate the “affective component in understanding, . . . in the form of empathy.” Just as it is possible to cajole certain answers and information from interlocutors by posing carefully chosen, competent questions, it is also easy to intimidate them and discourage them from revealing the facts, especially the facts that carry psychological weight. The words of Leon Kieres, the former director of the Institute of National Memory, are illustrative here: “My own professional experience allows me to ascertain that what witnesses are willing to reveal depends in large part on the personality of the individual collecting their stories.”<sup>36</sup> Those who neglect to ask certain questions of themselves will never see these questions answered.

### Is the Sensitivity of Historians Suppressed?

How does all this relate to the professional self-consciousness of historians? Hayden White’s statement that professional historians constitute an “extreme example of repressed sensibility” continues to be regarded in Poland as a sneer not worthy of serious attention.<sup>37</sup> If, however, we were to get used to the idea that some phenomena elude our conscious control, that there are forces that we can overcome only when we are willing to acquaint ourselves with them, many would agree with White’s provocative statement, after giving it some thought. Dominick LaCapra describes the state of affairs in which the discipline of history today can be described as a continuum, with radical constructivists such as White or F. Ankersmith

at one end—whose supporters are rather difficult to find in Poland—and historians subscribing to the “self-sufficient research model” at the other. The latter category represents the bulk of Polish historians. LaCapra attributes five distinguishing characteristics to those belonging to the latter category (which, for the purposes of simplicity, we will call “positivist”):

- Sharp demarcation between the subject and the object of study;
- A tendency to conflate objectivity with objectivism;
- Identification of historical understanding with causal explanation;
- Denial of transference (i.e., of the implications of the events described for the scholar’s own circumstances, both personal and professional) as well as of the potential for the observer to influence the subject of study; and
- “The exclusion or downplaying of a dialogic relation to the other recognized as having a voice or perspective that question the observer or even place him or her in question by generating problems about his or her assumptions, affective investments, and values.”<sup>38</sup>

I have already referred to LaCapra’s hypothesis that the fear of reflection, the methodological circumspection, and the detachment observed in traditional historiography derive from a fear of trauma, to which the scholar is inevitably exposed. Just as a surgeon puts on scrubs before performing an operation, so does the historian don a kind of armor, which protects the individual’s personal space from the invasion of threatening information.<sup>39</sup> Another attribute of a similar stance would be the quest for maximum objectivity, as expressed in:

- Reification of the subject studied, with the desire to place it at a maximum distance (tabooization of language, unwitting adoption of the perpetrators’ language);
- Elimination of the voice of the victims (in the context of the Jedwabne debate their language was referred to as the “language of misery”);<sup>40</sup>
- A preference for the “self-explanatory” testimonies left behind by the perpetrators (cf. the intensive search in the archives of Ludwigsburg

for a film allegedly shot by the Nazis in Jedwabne, or for the traces of Birkner's "Schaper's commando," which was operational in the area, or in fact of any other commando); and Focusing on the perpetrators.

It becomes relevant to ask how much of a chance scholars have of attaining objectivity if they are engaged in a supposedly "objective" selection of sources and decide to isolate themselves from at least half of what constitutes reality. There is also the question of whether, had scholars not so quickly switched off all "feeling," they would really be satisfied with the formation of the unconscious *fascination*—which arises as a result of the proportion of voices allowed to be heard—between themselves and their readers, on the one hand, and the perpetrators of evil on the other.

### Heroic and Nonheroic Death

As a demonstration of the costs incurred in suppressing sensibility, as well as of the fact that the "return of the repressed" touches even the most conscientious of investigators, let us offer one striking example from a conversation between Jacek Żakowski and Tomasz Szarota. It begins with an assertion by Żakowski: "It's obviously very difficult to imagine, but one thing that might make us think a lot about the concentration of terror and fear is the fact that in the first days—before the Gestapo arrived—it was not only the Poles who looked on idly as crimes were being committed against the Jews. Other Jews did as well."

Szarota's answer: "I'm not going to try and explain this. One can, of course, refer to negative stereotypes. But stereotypes never explain history, though they often falsify it. Nevertheless it's difficult to imagine—and Gross also doesn't attempt to explain this in his book—why 1,500 healthy able-bodied persons didn't try to defend themselves, or even escape, when being led to their deaths by less than one hundred people armed only with clubs." And further: "In his book, Gross describes a situation that might shed some light on this mystery. This is the story of Michał Kuropatwa, a Jewish coachman, who during the Soviet days sheltered a Polish officer. Before the gate of the barn someone pulled him from the crowd to save his life. He chose death with the others. Gross compares Kuropatwa's

decision to the stance taken by Janusz Korczak without reporting the words, which, according to the witnesses, Kuropatwa uttered at that time: ‘Where the Rabbi goes, I go too.’<sup>41</sup> It would be worth grasping fully these words in order to understand the phenomenon of Jedwabne.”<sup>42</sup>

Szarota seems to suggest that “to understand the phenomenon of Jedwabne,” it must first be clarified that Jews were themselves responsible for the fact that they died in such large numbers, and that the deed of Michał Kuropatwa should not be compared to that of Janusz Korczak, because someone who blindly follows his rabbi does not deserve such a comparison. In his interpretation of the “Jedwabne phenomenon,” Szarota follows in the footsteps of those who—sometimes out of malice but more often from self-pity—have been accusing and stigmatizing the victims. Similar accusations have appeared from time to time from within our Christian tradition, a tradition of the people who, after all, were never victims themselves. Excluding the others, differentiating between heroic and nonheroic death, our compatriots have determinedly excluded themselves and their own historical tragedies, thus unconsciously repeating the act of segregation that once gave rise to the ghetto and the Holocaust. It is not a good sign if today’s historians also give in to a similar “repetition compulsion.”

Many years ago Marcei Handelsman placed upon the scholar the “duty of omniscience,” advising “introspection” and recommending “psychology and logic” as methodologically indispensable.<sup>43</sup> Today the duty of omniscience has gone astray somewhere, introspection has been subordinated to common sense, and historians know so-called psychological truths and stereotypes from their own experience. They do not bother to consult books either by LaCapra or by Sander L. Gilman, a distinguished scholar of stereotypes. In this situation it is hardly a surprise that they should move from the position of the scholar to that of the informer.

### Historians’ Club

The ideas of historians about what it is that should constitute veracity in the conduct of their discipline often coincide with what Hans-Georg Gadamer identified as the most treacherous of illusions: the illusion of cognitive neutrality. It becomes a factor that leads scholars to succumb as much to the influence of historical taboos as to their personal prejudices

and stereotypes, effectively exposing them time and again to the temptation of cynicism. Ostensible neutrality, depending on the suppression of that which one really thinks and feels, leads to a surprise attack. Prejudices return, only strengthened, and the forces that might be used to recognize them are now engaged in the masking and rationalizing of opinions with which the scholar does not wish to part. The European philosophical tradition knows this danger well and terms it *vis a tergo*—a blow from the least expected direction. It is indeed under its influence that the stance recommended by Tacitus—*sine ira atque studio*—turns into its opposite—into abandonment of the critical stance and semiconscious rationalizations of wrongdoing.

Historians have incredible power in Poland. They are held in high esteem, alongside the Romantic poets, whose significance has been rightly compared to the importance of the prophets in ancient Israel (Józef Czap-ski). Great indeed is the responsibility of the Polish historian.

The historian is someone who has been entrusted with the treasure of identity, who has to carry it through the tumult and be its savior. For this treasure not to be lost, however, it is not enough to hide it carefully. Buried money molders away, the currency is devalued, and the metal parts of jewelry become covered in rust. Our historians so rarely examine the deposit that—as a person of little faith—I have begun to doubt that during my lifetime one of them might ever bring himself to perform this task. And the thought has not even crossed my mind that they could not only abandon the historical taboo but also question the very “rule of discretion” operating in their club. Within the framework of this rule, to admit that the events with which the scholar deals exercise any influence on him—move, terrify, or haunt him, lead him to abandon his subject of study or, God forbid, to change his methodology—is fundamentally unimaginable. All these things are left to sociologists and women, because the sociologist is to the historian what woman is to man.

Jan Gross’s contribution consists in having had the courage to grasp the role that the historian plays today in freeing the experiences trapped in the realm of postmemory, and in following with the deed that it was his duty to perform. For this, one can either eject him from the historians’ club or change the club’s rules.



On the matter of the rules I will also add that the rule of discretion (“let us rather not say anything about ourselves”; attributed to Paul Natorp) originally appeared in Europe as a signifier of the aristocratic ethic, as opposed to the bourgeois *savoir-vivre*. Its function was to temper narcissism, rather than to avoid risk or to conceal that which one has in one’s mind or conscience. In the two later examples it would in fact conflict with the higher code of veracity. Meanwhile, in the bourgeois version of this code, what the ethic of the previous eras had regarded as worthy of reproach has begun to be regarded as honorable: the concealment of what one really thinks and who one really is. In combination with the ideology of positivism this rule of discretion thus understood became a veritable poison of the soul (not to mention the body). The permanent splitting of affect and cognition is its product.

I have heard a number of times that discretion has been unmasked as a “product of the male ascetic tradition,” a symptom of a “desire to surpass the body in the search for the truth.”<sup>44</sup> Never before, however, has it come to me with such force as when it is applied to the relation between freedom and knowledge. I can understand now how someone who “surpasses the body” in the search for truth can trip over a corpse without even noticing it is there. And how, turning professional paralysis into a norm, he changes history into a “tale told by an idiot—full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”<sup>45</sup> When a book like *Neighbors* appears in a world dominated by such a vision of history, and in its wake comes post-traumatic madness, this should be interpreted not as a symptom of illness but as a sign of health or even, in the sense of the term used by the writer Hanna Krall, as “proof of existence.”<sup>46</sup>

TRANSLATED BY MICHAŁ MURAWSKI

## Notes

A German version of this paper appeared in the journal *Transit—Europäische Revue* 25 (Spring 2003). A version in Polish and a different version in English appeared in the e-journal *eurozine* (May 2003).

1. Paraphrased after Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 96. The parenthetical aside is mine. The *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) refers to a public debate in West Germany that took place between 1986 and 1989 over the way the Holocaust should be interpreted and about Germans' responsibility for the Nazi past. Jürgen Habermas played an active role in this debate. He called attention to the new conservative revisionism of right-wing historians such as Ernst Nolte, who attempted to diminish the uniqueness of Nazism by comparing its crimes with those of Stalinism.
2. See Z. Krasnodębski's statement in Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć*, 301 ff.
3. Excerpts from Habermas's *laudatio* to Goldhagen on the occasion of the awarding to Goldhagen of the Democracy Prize by the monthly *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, quotation from Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć*, 131.
4. See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 23.
5. The explanation of the sense of this formulation is my own; LaCapra would probably not allude to Benjamin but rather directly to Freud.
6. K. Happrechts, quoted in Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć*, 146.
7. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22. I widen Hirsch's category, originally used to describe the psychological situation of the children of Holocaust victims. Postmemory so understood would be a phenomenon in the category of "pseudomorphosis," about which O. Spengler wrote in *The Decline of the West*.
8. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 207–9.
9. See Peter Novick, *Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).
10. A critical discussion of these questions can be found in the work of Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); see also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
11. On shrinking historical consciousness see Antoon Van den Braembussche, "The Silenced Past: On the Nature of Historical Taboos," in Wrzosek, *Świat historii*, 98.
12. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 215.
13. On pain and good intentions see Anna Bikont, "Ja, Szmul Wasersztajn, ostrzegam," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 12, 2002.
14. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 95.
15. Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt*; Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1984).
16. I borrow the theories of historical taboos from Antoon Van den Braembussche, in Wrzosek, *Świat historii*, 103.

17. Wrzosek, *Świat historii*, 101.
18. See R. J. Ignatiew, "Komunikat o końcowych ustaleniach śledztwa w sprawie udziału w zabójstwach obywateli polskich narodowości żydowskiej w Jedwabnem, 10 lipca 1941 r," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 10, 2002.
19. See Bikont, "Ja, Szmul." Translator's note: Urząd Bezpieczeństwa or UB were the secret police in the communist era.
20. Szarota, *Pogromy antyżydowskie*.
21. "Jedwabne bez stereotypów," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 17, April 28, 2002.
22. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:33.
23. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 42.
24. In his postulates regarding both "writing about trauma" and "writing trauma," LaCapra alludes to the understanding of empathy in terms of "heteropathic identification" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 40).
25. "With respect to historical trauma and its representation," writes LaCapra, "the distinction between victims, perpetrators and bystanders is crucial. 'Victim' is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political and ethical category" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 79).
26. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, XII,
27. Paczkowski, "Debata wokół Sądów."
28. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78–79.
29. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 143.
30. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 36.
31. This is what Freud says about the return of repressed psychological content: "Distance is of no importance in thinking . . . what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act of consciousness" (*Totem and Taboo*, 85).
32. "Ciszej nad tą zbrodnią," conversation between Piotr Lipiński and Andrzej Rzepliński, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 20–21, 2002.
33. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 248.
34. See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 97.
35. "Jedwabne bez stereotypów."
36. Leon Kieres, "Introduction" to Żakowski, *Rewanż pamięci*, 5.
37. See M. Ptaszyński, "Historycy na stos? Polemika z Joanną Tokarską-Bakir," *Krytyka Polityczna*, no. 1, 2002, p. Y1.
38. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 5.
39. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 40.
40. Żakowski, *Rewanż pamięci*, 133.
41. Janusz Korczak was the director of the orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto, who

- chose to follow the children under his care to the extermination camp; see chapter 6 of this volume, "St. Korczak of Warsaw" by Terri Ginsberg).
42. Żakowski, *Rewanż pamięci*, 12–13.
  43. Handelsman, *Historyka*, 1, 21, 34.
  44. See Robin Schott, "Whose Home Is It Anyway? A Feminist Response to Gadamer's Hermeneutics," in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1991), 203.
  45. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, 6.
  46. Editor's note: Krall, in *Dowody na istnienie* (Proofs of existence) (Poznań: Wydawnictwo a5, 1996).

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# 3

## Living with Antisemitism

JANINA BAUMAN

I am grateful for the invitation to take part in a survey on Polish-Jewish relations. This matter lies deep in my heart, and I have given expression to this in my books, especially the most recent one, *Powroty* (Returns).

But still I harbor doubts as to whether I am an appropriate addressee of such a survey. After all I don't "belong to two different cultures." I belong either to many cultures or to just one, Polish culture. I say *many*, because raised on European art and literature I have undoubtedly absorbed European culture and, during the past twenty-five years particularly, English culture. I also say *only one*, Polish culture, because the Polish language is my mother tongue, as Polish history, literature, and tradition are mine. I lived with them for forty years in Poland and have been living with them for twenty-eight years outside Poland.

And I am also Jewish, despite the fact that I don't practice the religion or cultivate the Judaic tradition. I am Jewish because I was born a Jew, and it was drummed into me even in my early childhood that I must never, under any circumstances, renounce this, even if I don't understand what it means to be a Jew. I understood it only in the Warsaw Ghetto, hiding from the transports to Treblinka. And just in case I'd forgotten, I was reminded of it again in March 1968.

I survived the occupation largely thanks to innumerable Polish compatriots, who in various ways and directed by various motives, often entirely

selflessly putting their lives at risk, helped me, my mother, and my sister to avoid death. And so, even though in those days I had many bad experiences, I feel duty-bound to write and speak about my positive experiences and, as far as I can, to fight the opinion that one sometimes encounters in the West and that is so harmful to Poles: that the entire Polish nation is antisemitic, that it's in the blood.

After leaving the country in 1968, for twenty years I couldn't dream of a return or even a visit to my native Warsaw. From 1989 I have been going there, with increasing frequency and for ever longer periods. On every visit I feel surrounded by a sea of friendship. Old friendships are revitalized, new ones are formed. My circle of friends grows from one trip to the next. So I'd like to come back. But I won't.

I won't come back because antisemitism exists in Poland—we can state this openly to each other. For several years it screamed out from walls and fences, from the columns of the right-wing press and from television screens; it whispered in queues, in shops, and on the trams. Recently it has calmed down. But it hasn't disappeared.

Antisemitism is not a specifically Polish phenomenon. It exists in every country. Also in England. I know about this, although over the course of many years I have never encountered it in person. It's one manifestation of English xenophobia. The English don't like the Irish, Scots, Pakistanis, or any other foreigners, so why would they like Jews? But this doesn't bother me.

It's different in Poland. There it hurts me, it wounds me to the core. That's why I can't return. Because I would have nowhere to run to if I ever heard that I was a stranger, that I was unwanted in my native country. And this is something I wouldn't be able to live with from day to day.

TRANSLATED BY MICHAŁ MURAWSKI

**Note**

This article was originally published in Polish as “Życ z antysemityzmem,” as a response to a survey on Polish-Jewish relations conducted by the journal *Znak* (March 1996): 6–7.

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# 4

## Notes for a Grave under Snow

ANDREW JAKUBOWICZ

As an Australian Jew of Polish parents, I have childhood memories that are filled with narratives of the events surrounding my late parents' traumatic escape from the Holocaust that engulfed many members of their families. They had lived in Łódź, Poland, until September 1939, when, in the face of the Nazi invasion, they had fled to the east, and then north to Lithuania to avoid the Soviet invasion.<sup>1</sup> I visited Łódź for the first time during the martial law year of 1983. At that time I was taken by a friend to the grave of my grandfather in the Jewish cemetery. It was a wartime marvel, a slab of concrete with my grandfather's name and that of my ("tragically murdered") grandmother on it, somehow cared for through forty years of various occupations.

### The Graves under Snow

I returned to Łódź with my partner Mara Moustafine in the icy spring of 2003, but I was not able to find the grave. The cemetery lay under many centimeters of new snow, and my memory could not discern where the grave should have been, even if it had not crumbled in the twenty years of communist and postcommunist neglect.

A few days later we stood on a platform in Koluszki, a railway junction, staring at the graffiti blasted across the waiting shelter wall: "Żydy do gazu"—"Jews to the gas." Whatever serendipity had brought us there (we had just missed the train to Piotrków Trybunalski, my grandfather's



birthplace), the words and their accompaniment of swastikas, Jewish stars, nooses, and football team logos, made a startling montage in front of us. We wandered into Koluszki, tried to work out whether the names on the local war memorial contained the names of any of Koluszki's 1939 Jews, and finally headed back to Łódź. I resolved then to explore how memories of the times before might influence how we talk today about "the still open wound" of relations between Poles and their Jewish brethren.<sup>2</sup>

My parents' voyage demonstrated to me some of the ways in which identities can change, and how elements of complex life histories are sometimes brought to the fore, while at other times they become suppressed, often at the whim of external powers. While in Poland, my parents saw themselves as Poles of the Jewish faith—middle class, urban, educated, and part of Polish modernity. Even though the *numerus clausus* limitations on Jewish entry into universities had driven my mother's sister to study in Belgium, and my father in his mother's hometown of Vienna, and even though my mother had experienced the antagonism of Polish nationalists while attending the University of Warsaw, their identity remained fully Polish. Yet the advent of war forced them to flee, my mother recognizing that it was their Jewishness that would expose them to danger.

In Lithuania they were protected as Poles under identity documents issued by the British consulate on behalf of the Polish government in exile. They escaped from Lithuania to Japan through Russia on visas issued only to refugee Jews by the Japanese consul Sugihara; yet they were allowed to leave the USSR because they were Poles, and thus at the time notionally not citizens of the USSR (as all Lithuanians had then become under force).<sup>3</sup> When they lived in Shanghai, it was as Poles on papers provided by the Polish Residents' Association, while they are named in Polish government documents of the day as both Polish citizens and Jews (even though Poland no longer existed). When the Japanese interned them in 1943, it was as stateless refugees—they were denied the status as enemy civilians many had sought. When they entered Australia, they were once more Polish citizens, though they had managed to get visas because they were Jewish refugees. While their personal identities remained unchanged, their sur-

vival rested serendipitously on whatever particular constellation of their lives' parameters was salient for the administering power.

### **Jewish Possibilities in Łódź, 1939**

In 1939 there were several alternative visions of Jewish futures alive in the culture of Jewish Poland.<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines what happened to these visions in the wake of the Holocaust, as expressed in the writing and reflections of three writers, former Łódź residents who migrated to Australia after the war, and a Polish historian who is attempting to hold onto and resurrect the Polish memory of Jewish Łódź. I have chosen Jews whose work is differentiated by their orientation to Poland and Israel, ranging from a secular Polish patriot to a Bundist and a committed Zionist activist.

Łódź in 1939 was a metropolis of 900,000, established as an industrial center for the textile trade. The Tsarist government after 1864 opened up opportunities for immigration, and the city became a magnet for Jews from Alsace, from Wielkopolska, and from other parts of both the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. A recent Polish history of the Jewish population describes Łódź as a thriving city of Jews, Poles, and Germans, with the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe, built by the industrial magnate Prince Poznański.<sup>5</sup> The Poznański palace, factory, and workers' tenements still stand as symbols of an economic, social, and cultural order, in which political power in the city was shared among the three major groups. The Jewish community reflected the many tendencies—religious and political—that existed in Poland. The Kehillah (Jewish community council) was run by Chassidic Jews in the organization Agudas Israel from nearby Aleksandrów, with somewhat dubious legitimacy derived from a deal with the Polish nationalists. Their political organizing skills outflanked those of the left- and right-wing Zionists and the Bundists who also participated in the city council.<sup>6</sup>

Following the Nazi invasion of September 1939, the Bałuty market area in the north of the town—the Jewish working-class quarter—was defined as a ghetto. Forced removals into the area began in November 1939, and the ghetto wall was sealed in May 1940. The so-called Litzmannstadt Ghetto

was an industrial concentration camp, producing goods for many German firms. Anyone who could not work was selected for transportation to the death camps, though some people left as “volunteers” for slave labor elsewhere. The last remaining ghetto residents were transported to the death camps in August 1944.<sup>7</sup>

The interviews discussed here, two of which are with survivors of that ghetto, were undertaken in 2003, triggered by the debate about the massacre of Jews by Poles in Jedwabne in July 1941.

### **Łódź's Memory of Its Jews**

Łódź has sought to recover some of its Jewish history. Marek Szukalak, a Polish publisher, has taken on the task of rebuilding the city's knowledge of its Jewish community through the development of a website devoted to recording its members, events, buildings, and rituals.<sup>8</sup> He argues that the loss of memory has to be overcome, so that peace can be made with the past and a realization can be embedded that the future cannot allow these patterns ever to be replicated. He proposes that no society can progress if it hides its own past from itself and denies both the achievements and the horrors that happened there. It is this motivation that drives his involvement in organizations such as the Monumentum Iudaicum Lodzense Foundation.<sup>9</sup>

My interview with Szukalak took place the day after our exposure to the Koluszki graffiti—and I asked him what it represented. He said antisemitism was part of Polish society, particularly the ultranationalist skinheads, who were the followers of soccer teams and demonstrated many of the same tendencies that attracted some young British men to the National Front, and some French to Le Pen. The question was not, he said, what the graffiti shows but rather whether the authorities would act to remove it and, if so, how quickly. That afternoon we walked near the Poznański palace, photographing the graffiti of the ŁKS (Łódź Sporting Club—the local soccer team) with a Star of David in a noose where it had been sprayed on the side of a Poznański tenement.

Across the road the palace held an art display and materials about the lives of great Jewish artists of Łódź—Artur Rubinstein, the pianist (his

house is also a museum), a replica of writer Julian Tuwim's study, a collection of Jerzy Kosinski's memorabilia, and other pieces. In the basement there is a small corner recalling the Łódź Ghetto, and the name of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, *der Alteste der Juden*, as he was named by the Nazis. Outside again, and in the main street Piotrkowska, a bronze statue of Rubinstein plays a grand piano on the sidewalk, while a park across the way has a memorial to Tuwim (who now also has a street named after him). One part of the sidewalk is inlaid with brass stars—including one in the name of Roman Polański, another Łódź boy.

So we cannot say that Łódź is without a Jewish memory—and indeed the battle for recovery of Jewish property allowed the Jewish community to reclaim a building on Pomorska street for its headquarters. The New Cemetery has received international funds for its restoration (including the marking of the 40,000 remains in the Ghetto Field), while memorial plaques from descendants line the main wall. There is an awareness of the city's multicultural history—such as in the continuing attempts to sustain the festival of four cultures; the Festiwal Dialogu Czterech Kultur held in Łódź in 2002 was advertised in Polish, Russian, German, and Hebrew (but not Yiddish).

While these attempts to bridge the divide embedded in the bloody history of the country reflect a desire by more progressive groups to address the past, one of the other characteristics of contemporary Poland has been the rise of extreme right-wing political groups such as National Revival of Poland (NRP). Parliamentarians of right-wing groups have served in the government (e.g., Krzysztof Kawecki, as the deputy minister of education responsible for sports). Their base lies in part in the expanding masculine and violent subcultures of football fanaticism. The NRP is active among football supporters and has a strong cadre in clubs that may be apparent opponents.

In Łódź this is manifest in the intense hostility between ŁKS and Widzew Łódź, clubs whose battles extend through the graffitied walls of the region. As an ŁKS supporters' website indicates, "We hate Widzew Łódź and we call them 'Żydzew'" (meaning Jews).<sup>10</sup> ŁKS does more than hate Widzew—it screams that they should be fed to the gas.

It is indicative of the embedded nature of antisemitic imagery in right-wing popular culture in Poland that the Koluszki sprays appeared and seemed to remain even after a critical event in recent Łódź history that might have shaken local officials into some sort of action to clean off the graffiti. In March 2000 members of a visiting delegation of Israeli Łódź ghetto survivors were horrified by the widespread graffiti and complained to the city government.<sup>11</sup> In the face of this public shaming, the government and media organized a day of cleansing on March 21 (the international day to eradicate racism)—at the end of which, apparently to show their contempt, skinheads attacked the home of the well-known local Jewish personage Marek Edelman, leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and sprayed it with “Juden Raus” (“Jews out”). While apologies were issued, no action was taken against the perpetrators, nor was any wider action taken to outlaw neo-Nazi groups.<sup>12</sup> As a Canadian human rights report has indicated, the ideas of neo-Nazis “translated into chants heard on the terraces, such as ‘We will do to you what Hitler did to the Jews.’”<sup>13</sup>

Thus even with only a few hundred Jews left in Łódź, antisemitic imagery continues to be omnipresent, a taken-for-granted urban art form as widely common as the gang graffiti tags on the walls of cities in other countries. Memory then can work to remember, commemorate, and celebrate; or it can work to condemn, denigrate, and malign.

### **The Jews of Łódź in Australia: Rendering Memory**

Personal memoirs of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust have become an important repository of the details of human savagery and human resilience and sources for systematic historical research that moves beyond the emotion-saturated rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> These memoirs can take many forms—a first-person narrative, poetry, short stories, plays, films, novels, and articles. They can be recounted directly by the person who had the experience, or they can be carried in the reworking of their stories by those closest to them or through their own creative and interpretative work.

I want to introduce here three Łódź Jews and their reflections on their work about the Jewish experience of Łódź: journalist and playwright Abraham Cykiert, poet and short story writer Jacob Rosenberg, and translator

and poet Marcel Weyland.<sup>15</sup> They were chosen as artists who actively engage with the question of Polishness within Jewish identity (though they may not describe it in this way).

### The Playwright

Abraham Cykiert was born in 1926 into an Orthodox religious family. A graduate of cheder and yeshivah, he had been committed to Zionist ideals from his youth, much of which was spent in the Łódź Ghetto and later in Auschwitz.<sup>16</sup> In the ghetto he was attached to the Statistics unit, which had the responsibility of providing the head of the Łódź Ghetto Judenrat, Rumkowski, with the information he needed to report to his Nazi overlords. Drawing on Rumkowski's diary, notes, and other hidden records, Cykiert would later write a graphic account of Rumkowski's ghetto life, structured as an address by the man on the last train from Łódź to Auschwitz in 1944, on which *der Alteste* was a passenger.

Cykiert survived Auschwitz and, after working as a slave laborer in Germany, found himself in Buchenwald. After liberation he headed to Switzerland and the Zionist headquarters in Geneva.

Despite his desire to go to Palestine, he was sent to Australia. It appears that the Zionist movement feared the arrival in Australia of Polish Jewish Bundists released from incarceration in Shanghai, who could have gained control of the Yiddish pages of the Jewish newspaper. Cykiert went on to become a Zionist Yiddish writer, generating hundreds of articles, stories, and other work promoting Zionism. In Australia at the time this was an extremely important role, as the established Australian Jews tended to be supportive of the British mandate in Palestine, while Bundists were arguing against a Jewish homeland. Cykiert was disenchanted with Bundism, arguing that its demand that Jews express a Polish nationalism had been shown to be a useless exercise.

Over the years, Cykiert became a formidable figure in the Melbourne Jewish community, arguing his cause and developing his study of Rumkowski. He was fascinated with Rumkowski's moral complexity. As his character declaims near the beginning of the play, "If the Soviets had not stopped at the Vistula so that the Łódź Ghetto could be liquidated I would

have been a hero for saving the last 60,000 Jews—rather than a villain for organizing the transportation of so many hundred thousand more.” At the center of the play lies an examination of the meaning of life—the clamor for life marks each horrible decision that Rumkowski is called upon to make, from the first massacre of his council of advisers when he tries to resign to his own extermination after so many years of holding off or responding to the Nazis.

In the play the Poles barely feature, serving as an external backdrop that makes the city beyond the ghetto a dangerous place, inhabited by beings anxious to identify Jews to the SS, yet also containing a smattering of saints who saved Jews. This sense of the tortured moral landscape of Poland infuses Cykier’s views today—he argues that little has changed. Yet he celebrates those Poles who took the impossible moral choices to save Jews, and shared the torture and death, as he indicates in his discussion of a visit to Belzec in 2001.<sup>17</sup>

He has returned to Poland a number of times—first in 1988. He told me he had returned “first to the Jews, and then to see the Poles on behalf of the Jews.” The first return was to mark the forty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; toward the end of the communist era, he had been invited there by the Yiddish newspaper *Forward*. Polish TV interviewed him, but the sequence was never shown, due, he says, to his acerbic criticism of Poland.

The second visit was at the invitation of the Center for Jewish Studies in Kraków to speak about “The sanctity of the Human Soul in the Face of the Abyss.” “There were four thousand saints in Poland, those simple Polish souls who put their lives in jeopardy to save a Jewish life, for whom there are four thousand trees at Yad Vashem. . . . Not a single Polish tree has yet been proven to be a fake. . . . It was Yitzhak Shamir who said that antisemitism is sucked with the mother’s milk, but there are other Jews of a different mind.”

Cykier’s memories of Łódź before the war remain sharp and critical. He uses them to analyze today’s interactions: “In Łódź, I heard a group of young boys talking about Jews. I think they were ŁKS . . . and they had it in for Widzew they were playing. So one was drawing on the wall a hang-

ing noose, with a Star of David. I started speaking to him . . . His question was ‘Where do you live?’ ‘I live in Australia.’ ‘And you speak Polish?’ ‘Yes, I was born in Łódź, at Narowodice 10.’ ‘Have you known Jews?’ ‘What would you say if I were to say that I am a Jew?’ ‘I don’t believe you!’ This is how much they know about Jews. Can you take that sort of knowledge to be a background to history? It took quite a long time for them to believe that I was Jewish.”

In 1990 as Polish communism was in the throes of the collapse that would transform the old Soviet empire, Cykiert was once more in Warsaw. This time he had accepted an invitation to visit Lublin to talk with students at the Catholic University. He traveled there by train accompanied by his host, a priest. In Poland Cykiert chooses to wear a yarmulke, signifying that he is a Jew. On this trip he pretended to speak no Polish, and after a while he was abused by a Pole for being a Jew. He remained silent throughout the tirade, watching a younger Polish woman castigating his abuser, while another older woman sat silently, pretending not to notice, not wishing to be involved. For Cykiert the trip became a story that drew in stark simplicity the triangle between a Jew, a good Pole, and an antisemitic Pole.

Cykiert’s long involvement as a Zionist has focused his attention on Jewish culture and morality—for him the Bundist concern with a secular Yiddish nation within Poland was always problematic, and an ideology to be opposed. His migration to Australia in 1947 to edit a Yiddish paper and ensure that it was “rescued” from Bundists set the tone for his longer-term orientation to Jewish homeland nationalism. For him the Poles were people from a past, with whom no peace was necessary or possible.

### The Poet

Jacob Rosenberg sees himself as a Bundist even today—though one for whom the old struggles with the Zionists have outlived their purpose.<sup>18</sup> He reflects that Israel clearly has not resolved, and may not ever resolve, the problems of the Jewish people but that the more important moral issues have to be addressed within the culture—“Jews didn’t build museums or



monuments, we built literature and books.”<sup>19</sup> He writes mainly in Yiddish, though more recently he has begun writing in English as well.

Rosenberg was born in 1922; he was seventeen when the Nazis enclosed the area in which his family lived and called it the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. His father was an industrial worker, a carpenter, and a unionist. The family was heavily involved in the Bund. Being Jewish in Poland was a cultural rather than a religious matter:

We were not Jewish but *Yidden*; it is different anyway. We were Yiddish totally. We never looked at Jews as a religion but as a nationality. . . . If the Chassidic community was attacked, we stood up. We fought for our brothers, because we felt this was a national thing to do. Something to do with our brethren . . . to understand life in Poland; the Jews wherever they were, they managed to create a country in a country. A land in the land. And perhaps it's worth stating that a ghetto made by goyim for Jews is a terrible ghetto. But a ghetto made by Jews for Jews is a wonderful ghetto. Because you have a sense of identity, you feel more secure, and this life of ours we lived like equal citizens. We never had any doubt about our belonging there. We had books, our house was full of books, we had many Polish books.

Rosenberg's sister was a communist who insisted on speaking Polish at home. He was schooled in a Bundist school, where Yiddish was the language of instruction. Bundism was a way of life, an ethnopolitical culture expressing the struggle of an oppressed community to make a place for itself within Poland but separate from Poland.

Rosenberg describes a sense of national solidarity at the outbreak of the war—he says that despite everything Poland was the common land of Poles and Jews. His enemies were the home-grown right-wingers similar to the street thugs of the Nazis, as much anticommunist as anti-Jewish. The most actively antisemitic Poles were involved in nationalist parties such as the National Democracy, known as *Endecja*. He describes the first few days of September 1939: “Prior to the invasion there was a tremendous brotherhood between the Poles and the Jews. We never experienced such

tremendous unity; we dug trenches; you know, Chassidic Jews with *peyot* [sideburns] and shovels on their shoulders marched in the morning with songs to defend Poland. Two days later the Poles made a pogrom in Łódź when the Germans marched in.” He expresses the sense of betrayal that underpins much of the contemporary discussion of Polish-Jewish relations: “The sense of betrayal was strongest among the more secular and progressive political Jews, because we felt a very strong brotherhood. We felt we belonged to one sort—it was our cause. And all of a sudden they turned against us. To the Chassidic Jews it didn’t matter so much because they knew—this was their attitude. A goy is a goy. But not to us—not to my father and not to me.”

After the Nazis arrived in Łódź, some Poles offered to identify Jews to the Germans. “The Poles knew who were the Jews. When we queued up for bread they pointed us out. And the other Poles joined in.”

By May 1940 the ghetto wall was closed. For Rosenberg, Rumkowski was a *bobbe-myseh* (a nonsense), “not worth a cracker.” Rosenberg stayed in the ghetto until August 1944—when he was transported to Birkenau. He was liberated by the Americans, two of whom entered the camp and asked in Polish whether there were Jews there—they were from New York and spoke Yiddish.

Rosenberg did not return to Poland. He married in a camp in Italy and moved to Australia soon after. He would never go back. “Even my childhood that lives on in my dreams had disappeared [in Poland]. I am not prepared to lose them. If I go back I will lose my memories and my dreams.” Poland no longer has any meaning for him; he might just as well be an exile from France or Spain. He can however still quote the whole of the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* by heart, while his democratic orientation owes much to the liberatory narratives of Polish nationalism. He also retains his socialist commitment—for him Passover (Pesach) is a celebration of cultural resistance against oppression.

Yet as with the others, Rosenberg believes that Jewish history continues to be a “dark place” for Poles: “The problem of the Poles is that they haven’t come to terms with the reality that they slept with the Germans in one bed. The Poles are out to prove the myth of the righteous gentiles.

And they are using our people to do it. They are creating the lie that they want us to support. . . . The dialogue can only begin when the Poles say ‘we are guilty.’”

His wife, Esther, comments: “They suffered too . . . but the Germans wouldn’t know if I was Jewish, *Yidden*; the Poles pointed me out of the breadline—I could not even take a piece of bread home.” From the corner of the room in which we had been speaking, Rosenberg’s friend Issy, who had been there through the interview, whispered in a sad and mocking echo of the Polish louts of 1939: “Czekaj, czekaj [wait, wait], Hitler’s coming!”

### The Translator

The epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* appears as an icon of Polishness in the national cultural consciousness of Poles in the interwar period. Adam Mickiewicz wrote it while in exile in Paris in the 1830s, after one of the futile revolts against the imperial suzerainty of the three empires. It celebrates Tadeusz as nationalist hero, who fought together with Napoleon for Polish freedom. It is set at the moment when Tadeusz thought his hopes would be realized—with the liberation of Lithuania and a French-Polish army just about to enter Russia proper and free Poland from the tsar. The reader (like Mickiewicz) is aware of the futility of this hope. The poem evokes the exile’s passionate love for the lost country and the nostalgic exploration of a fantasized golden age of freedom, democracy (under the May 3 constitution that liberated the serfs), and national self-esteem.

Marcel Weyland, my mother’s half brother, began working on the translation of the poem sometime in the 1950s, soon after a family friend brought a number of copies of the illustrated Polish edition to the refugee and émigré community in Sydney in 1952.<sup>20</sup> Weyland had fled with his parents and mine from Poland in 1939. His early schooling had been at the Chamber of Commerce Gymnasium (now part of the University of Łódź), where about one quarter of the class was Jewish. He describes himself as having been a patriotic Polish child, living in a secular household in a fine apartment on Piotrkowska Street (in April 2003, the apartment housed the British consulate). The family was uninvolved in politics and

lived a comfortable life. They had a Polish cook and did not keep a kosher kitchen or observe a ritual Sabbath. There was a male attendant who took care of other household tasks. Marcel was cared for by a German governess named Irma from a Lutheran family of embroiderers. Irma herself was a Jehovah's Witness, who took the young Marcel to the Witnesses' annual picnic. At school his two best friends were Catholic, and he knew no Yiddish or Hebrew. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, his father took him to the synagogue (near Plac Wolności), later destroyed by the Nazis. He always described himself as a Jew—but also as a patriotic Pole. He was imbued with Piłsudski's dream for a multiethnic Poland, despite his awareness that "Jews had a place but not a land in Poland."

His socialization into Polish nationalism was marked by a subtle but constant awareness that history can be written in many ways. Polish history taught that Chmielnicki's rebellion and the uprisings of the Ukrainian gentry were attacks on Poland, while for the Jews they mark moments of the most intense pogroms. Yet these latter aspects remained barely mentioned in classroom lessons.

As a child Weyland read relentlessly—especially Polish historical novels that were the staple of popular literature after Poland's newly regained independence. These novels were a vital part of the cultural revolution of Polish nationalism, manufacturing the history and mythology yearned for by the population. With the Nazi invasion, Marcel was torn from this supportive and greatly loved environment—and thrust into years of exile and the transitory settlement of a refugee. In Vilna he attended Jewish, Polish, and Russian schools; he joined Jewish and then Soviet youth groups and learned nationalist, Zionist, and Soviet songs. By 1942 he was settled in Shanghai, where he attended the Shanghai Jewish School (SJS), an upper-middle-class academy teaching in English. He continued at SJS even when the Japanese forced the family into the restricted area of the Jewish settlement across Soochow creek. He would then cycle out of the area on a city pass every day, crossing into Shanghai from Hongkew, and returning each evening.

The family arrived in Australia in 1946. Marcel married into an Australian Catholic family and began his career as an architect. *Pan Tadeusz*

served a number of purposes—it sustained his links to Poland, maintained his reading of Polish, and provided material for his stories to his children of their Polish heritage and culture. Over a period of fifty years he has worked on the manuscript irregularly, focusing on it more intensely in the past decade. He read the text at least one hundred times over that period, consistently impressed by its wonderful poetry and uplifting moral, and also its criticisms of the national failings of disunity, vengefulness, and quarrelsomeness, and the gentle fun it poked at the slavish adoption of foreign fashions in thought and dress.

He has returned to Poland a number of times over the past twenty years, taking his children to show them the world from which he came. In expectation, he felt very positively toward the Poles, then soaking up the history, the architecture, and the countryside, feeling the sad sweetness of the loss of childhood. Yet as he traveled in Poland he felt a change come over him—as though he were acting some sort of role. He could find his way easily around Łódź but did so as though it had come from another life. He loved the city of Kraków and the mountain town of Zakopane, yet he discovered he was ambivalent about the Poles as people. “I am pretending to be part of you,” he said of his feelings, “as though I was a foreigner who had learnt the language and can pass.”

We discussed the way in which *Pan Tadeusz* sits within Polish and Jewish memory and its symbolic as well as literary qualities. There is a section where Tadeusz is at a wedding when he frees the serfs on his land. Zosia calls on a Jewish musician to play a tune—“Dear Jankiel, play . . .” When Jankiel finishes he addresses General Dąbrowski, a Polish patriotic leader:

“General,” said he, “long Litva awaited the news  
Of your coming, as of the Messiah we Jews,” . . .  
and his tears thickly fell,  
The good Jew, good Pole also, his homeland loved well . . .

Weyland paused in his narrative and said, “This is a very interesting question of translation. How should it be? ‘Jankiel loved his country just like a

Pole,' or 'the Good Jew loves his country like a Pole?'" The subtle implications are everything here—is this a Polish claim that this was the rare Jew who loved Poland? Or a definition of the good Jew as one who imitates the assumed Polish love of country? Or does the poem imply that the land is equally Polish and Jewish?

In examining the text again Weyland concluded that Mickiewicz (whose uncle was said to be Jewish and his mother a convert from Judaism) "is saying there that a Jew *can*, and *should*, be simultaneously a patriotic Pole, and I think that, until the war, our family fitted that description." Weyland argues poignantly that the divisions over the Polish-Jewish relationship are most vivid in those who fled Poland: "The thirty-thousand-odd Jews who survived in Poland are not the ones who feel like that; virtually each one of them owed his life to one or more Poles . . . and I personally resisted any sweeping generalization which would have cut me off from my real roots. This would be cutting off my nose to spite my face. You could say that all this, if not consciously reasoned out, contributed to involvement with *Pan Tadeusz*."

## Conclusion

These three case studies, together with Szukalak's memory project, hardly exhaust the ways in which Jewish-Polish identity can be recalled and expressed. However, they do indicate that the Zionist pathway was not the only one available to Jews in Poland and was in no way the majority viewpoint. There were many who wanted to be part of Poland and to live in what they saw could become a multinational country under conditions of democracy. They wanted a socialist and egalitarian Poland in which Jews and Catholics could both be true to themselves in their religious and cultural practices and share the space in political and social terms—not unlike the vision of those who at one time thought that a secular Israel with two peoples could be realized in Palestine.

One often unrecognized tragedy of the Holocaust was that three million Catholic Poles, many of whom shared such aspirations, died along with the three million Polish Jews at the hands of the Nazis. It is as much their deaths as those of the Jews that prevented these aspirations from ever being fulfilled.

## Notes

1. Editors' note: The Polish spelling of Łódź (which means "boat") is used throughout this volume; most English-language sources on the Jewish history of the town use the anglicized spelling Lodz.
2. See Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*.
3. See Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*.
4. See Shapiro, "Aspects of Jewish Self-Government in Lodz, 1914–1939," in *From Shtetl to Socialism*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilizations, 1993).
5. Dylewski, "Where the Tailor Was a Poet."
6. Baranowski, *The Lodz Ghetto*; Shapiro, "Aspects of Jewish Self-Government."
7. Adelson and Lapides, *Lodz Ghetto*.
8. Interview with Marek Szukalak, Lodz, April 15, 2003.
9. <http://www.lodzjews.org>.
10. <http://www.geocities.com/lkslodzfans/england/ukabcfans.htm>, accessed February 1, 2004.
11. <http://www.jewhoo.com/editor/columns/103100c.html>, accessed February 1, 2004.
12. <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/updates/100004.html>, accessed February 1, 2004.
13. <http://www.hri.ca/racism/Submitted/Theme/poland.shtml>, accessed February 1, 2004.
14. Biderman, *The World of My Past*; Hoffman, *Keep Yelling!*; Engelking-Boni and Paulsson, *Holocaust and Memory*.
15. See Rosenberg, *Lives and Embers*; Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*.
16. Interview with Abraham Cykiert, Melbourne, August 28, 2003.
17. Abraham Cykiert, "Letter from Poland"; Tomaszewski and Werbowski, *Żegota*.
18. Editors' note: "Bund was a Jewish party founded in 1897 in Vilna. . . . In 1930, it joined the Socialist Workers' International. The Bund's program supported a Jewish form of social democracy. The Bund saw the Jews as a diaspora—deprived of their own territory, but having their own culture. It opposed the domination of both the Orthodox Jews and the Zionist program of emigration and the creation of a national homeland outside of Europe. It proposed the introduction of cultural autonomy in areas inhabited by Jews, advocated secular schools and saw Yiddish as the Jews' national language. In Poland, there was mass support for the Bund, particularly in the areas of the former Russian partition (during the 1930's, its membership was estimated at 50,000)." Source: [http://www.diapozytyw.pl/en/site/slownik\\_terminow](http://www.diapozytyw.pl/en/site/slownik_terminow), using text from Alina Cała, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Gabriela Zalewska, *Historia i kultura Żydów polskich. Słownik*.

19. Interview with Jacob Rosenberg, Melbourne, August 29, 2003.

20. Interview with Marcel Weyland, Sydney, October 28, 2003.

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# 5

## Bearing False Witness?

### *“Vicarious” Jewish Identity and the Politics of Affinity*

ERICA LEHRER

For our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will. CZESŁAW MIŁOŚZ, *“Ars Poetica?”*

The identity of any man or woman is, after all, or often is, a palimpsest composed of fragmentary memories, imprints, of those he or she has loved. BERNARD HARRISON, *Talking Like a Jew*.

One is of the nation one can feel ashamed for. ADAM MICHNIK, *quoted in Gebert, “Jewish Identities in Poland.”*

*Dekalog 8: Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness* was a highly praised segment in a ten-part film series made by the esteemed Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski, each part of which references one of the ten biblical commandments.<sup>1</sup> *Dekalog 8* grapples with the problem of Polish-Jewish reconciliation vis-à-vis the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup>

The film tells the story of choice in an ethical hell. Zofia, an ethics professor in late 1980s Warsaw, meets Elisabeth, the New York-based translator of her work who has come to audit Zofia's classes. In 1943, in the thick of the Nazi occupation of Poland, Elisabeth, a Jewish child of six, had been refused shelter by the Catholic Zofia on the grounds that Zofia could not break the eighth commandment by pretending the child was a Christian. Elisabeth, now grown, seeks an explanation from the woman who denied her refuge so many years before.

The film presents this confrontation in the context of Zofia's undergraduate ethics class, where Elisabeth offers her own story (made anonymous) in response to Zofia's request for examples of ethical dilemmas, in this way revealing herself (to Zofia only) as the Jewish child the professor once rejected. A student responds to the case by easily pointing out its central flaw—had the woman described truly been acting according to Christian ethics, there would have been no dilemma at all. Rejecting the Jewish child on grounds of bearing false witness would have meant unjustifiably stressing the letter of the law over its spirit. The problem seems solved. And yet, as the film has just begun, we are drawn deeper into a consideration of bearing witness and to a realization that witnessing remains a central problem that separates and binds Jews and Poles today.

This essay is an attempt to understand bearing witness as a kind of moral remembering that, as many Poles I met illustrate, is deeply intertwined with individual and group identification. Just as Kieślowski's *Dekalog* presents stories loosely related to each commandment, my task here is to stimulate thinking around "bearing witness" as a metaphor with multiple valences. The question at the center is: Who can remember?

### The Demand for Witness

In the postsocialist era Poles have been confronted with previously suppressed aspects of their nation's history concerning Jews. Poland has also been scrutinized by the West (and by the Jewish establishment in particular) for its willingness and ability to re-reckon its collective "rachunek sumienia," or bill of conscience, and to revise its national self-image accordingly.

These confrontations have sent shocks through Polish society, and the public response has been notable for the intensity of debate about the extent of Polish responsibility for historical events, both at the time they occurred and in relation to present-day recollection and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> Results have included a substantial revision in the presentation of Nazi extermination camp memorial sites, especially Auschwitz (for Poles, Oświęcim). This meant not only a radical revision of mortality statistics but a reoriented narrative presentation making clear that the vast majority

of the victims in these camps were Jews—a reality that was grossly elided by Soviet officials in favor of an “internationalist” perspective, and one that nevertheless catered to the strong Polish ethno-national discourse highlighting their own suffering.<sup>4</sup> The “War of the Crosses” that began in 1989 (and included the 1992 vacating of the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz) “ended” in 1999 with something of a stalemate and awaits a next move or sociopolitical rumble.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Jan Gross’s book *Sąsiedzi* (*Neighbors*)—a “revelation” regarding Polish complicity in Jewish genocide, recounting the massacre of the Jewish half of the small eastern Polish town of Jedwabne by their non-Jewish neighbors—has ignited a particularly fervent wave of national self-scrutiny (and self-defense) and has forced a reconsideration of the core myth of Polish “martyrology” that has yet to subside.<sup>6</sup> On the diplomatic level, this was dealt with unequivocally in an international commemoration that included a speech of collective national contrition by the Polish president (accompanied by a protest from some Polish groups against the idea that there was anything for which to apologize).<sup>7</sup>

Throughout these upheavals the notion of witness—false or otherwise—has been prominent and has in some ways come to define the public discourse on Polish-Jewish reconciliation. The term “witness” (or occasionally “bystander”) is widely used to categorize the Polish position regarding the Holocaust, as distinct from “perpetrators” (Nazis/Germans) or “victims” (Jews).<sup>8</sup> Polish-Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and Polish-Jewish writer Henryk Grynberg have emphasized the trauma experienced by Poles because of what they were witnesses to.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the specific terminology or perspective, the *problem* of bearing witness has taken center stage.

*Dekalog 8* artfully registers the problematic. While represented in many significant ways as an insider (shared Polish language, dress, tastes, intellectual milieu, biblically based ethical context), the translator—the source of the demand for the professor to bear witness—is depicted as coming from elsewhere, from outside. Her return brings dialogue and transformation, but only after some basic misperceptions about the Polish wartime experience have been resolved. Zofia, we learn, was part of the Polish resistance, and she received (false) information that a Jewish child was caught

up in a scheme of Nazi collaborators; if the plans for shelter had been carried out, it would have endangered resistance operations.

Indeed, Jewish travel to Poland today enacts a constant repetition of this confrontation. The Jewish demand for Poles to own up to their past choices—individual and societal—and thus to see themselves for who they “really” are, often accompanies Jewish visits to Poland, whether or not it is made explicit. As the “accused” professor in the film states to the translator she once turned away, “and you traveled so far to watch my face when you told the story.”

### Kazimierz as “Cultural Appropriation”

Enter Kazimierz. Until the early 1990s it was a largely empty, dilapidated part of Kraków where the most obvious evidence of hundreds of years of Jewish habitation consisted of many crumbling synagogues and door frames with visible impressions of mezuzahs wrenched away during the brutal removal of the Jews by the Nazis. Kazimierz’s proximity to Auschwitz, the major Jewish travel destination in Poland, has transformed the quarter into a kind of way station through which Jews pass, leading up to and descending from the pivotal experience of visiting the Holocaust’s central symbol. At present, fashionable Jewish-themed cafés and shops line the main square in Kazimierz; beckoning customers with signs in Hebrew and Yiddish, they offer Jewish food, decor, and music, with the occasional waiter or musicians wearing Jewish ritual garments. Kazimierz is a special place in which to consider the theme of bearing witness to the Polish-Jewish past. Due to a constellation of forces, Kazimierz has engendered a particularly robust landscape of individuals whom I describe as “Jewish-identified”: culture brokers, local entrepreneurs, public intellectuals, and various fellow travelers who have taken as their task the perpetuation of Jewish heritage. Yet, the “industry” is not singularly commercial but rather, as Richard Kurin suggests, “an honor, a responsibility, and something that can sometimes be turned to personal advantage and profit.”<sup>10</sup>

Of these, tour guides form a kind of “front line” in relation to Jewish visitors in Kazimierz. Their experiences reveal both the Jewish demand for—and the Jewish incredulity toward—positive Polish engagement with

Jewishness: for bearing witness. Janina, a tour guide for the Jarden Jewish bookshop, was twenty-five years old at the time of our interview and would become a doctoral student in Polish-Jewish history at a major U.S. university. She told me that the question of when and why she started to be interested in Jewish history “is a question I’ve heard a hundred times” from Jewish tourists, and she laughed. She talked about how some Jews “don’t really listen to me, they don’t treat [as] serious what I’m saying, because they think I can’t know what I’m saying because I’m not Jewish.” Marta, an ethnology student and one of Janina’s colleagues, said: “Basically there is a difference between Jewish and non-Jewish [tourists]. . . . I think non-Jewish tourists, they basically listen to me, whatever I tell them. They believe it—Jewish tourists . . . very often, especially people from Israel, and America, Jewish people, they’re very anti-Polish. And the only thing they ‘know’ [she gestures quotation marks in the air] about Poland, or they think they know, is Polish antisemitism, and those Poles collaborating with Nazis through the whole war.”

The experiences recounted by Polish tour guides, and similar tourist-guide interactions I witnessed directly, illustrate a Jewish sense of ownership of Jewish heritage and history in Poland, and suspicion or indignation toward what are perceived as ethnic Polish attempts to interpret this history in a way that might be at odds with the collective memory of Poland that Jews bring with them. Such sentiments can be seen as rejections of the possibility of a legitimate Polish engagement with or perspective on Jewish heritage.

### Cultural Appropriation as False Witness

For many Jewish visitors, the mere participation of non-Jewish Poles in commerce relating to Jewish tourism is distasteful. But beyond the common accusation of crass, mercenary self-interest—that Poles are now profiting from the Jewish tragedy toward which they were inadequately empathetic in the first place—there is a more abstract level, a particular kind of discomfort caused by the confusion that occurs when Poles step into what is seen as ethnically Jewish territory. The widespread sense among visiting Jews that doing “Jewish things” is something only Jews *do*, and further

that doing such things is something that only Jews *should* do, is deep; it is revealed by a comment made by a thirty-five-year-old Californian convert to Judaism (and the daughter-in-law of a Polish Holocaust survivor). Referring to wooden figurines of Jews traditionally made by non-Jews in Poland, she said, “Did you see the figurines? The little, mournful-looking fiddlers with long sad faces and beards? It’s just sick! These people are dead, were killed! And you want to buy a little statuette? It makes my stomach turn! I mean, *unless there’s some Jewish person making these in some artistic way.*”

The sense of ethnic boundaries—of memory, of representation, of identity—is a central challenge confronting those who participate in Kazimierz. Who owns the Jewish past, Jewish culture, the right to mourn Jewishness lost, the right to act Jewish, to feel Jewish, to define Jewish, to “be” Jewish? The constraints individuals impose on others through their answers to these questions are a matter of daily concern in Kazimierz. Exploring the answers some local people in Kazimierz are formulating has implications regarding what we understand not only Jews but also a larger concept of “identity” to be. But my immediate goal is to consider how these ethnic boundaries are asserted or transgressed in relation to bearing witness, an act that Poles stand accused of being unable to do faithfully.

I use the notion of witnessing here to highlight two interconnected functions of identification: namely, that representations of identity can be both (1) ways of grappling with history—or remembering—and (2) attempts at truth-telling about subjectivity—that is, about the self, relative to history. Representations of identity can be seen as acts of witnessing because they make claims to historical truth. Coming to terms with history, I suggest, requires bearing witness to the subjective truth of one’s identity as much as to the categories of identity imposed by official and unofficial sources external to the self. Witnessing, then, is a commitment to the truth both about oneself and about history. And identification, inversely, can be a form of witnessing.

*Dekalog 8* also suggests this subtler—while no less significant—tie between witnessing and identity. Not incidentally, in two separate scenes, the film suggests that the identity of Elisabeth, the translator (who speaks

fluent, accentless Polish), has been deeply affected by her wartime experiences. In the first scene, she prominently fingers her gold chain, on which hang two charms: a gold cross and a somewhat smaller (and shadowed) gold *chai* (the Hebrew word for “life” and a common charm). In the second, Zofia catches a glimpse of Elisabeth at bedtime, leaning on the mantle in her guestroom praying, hands clasped and eyes shut in what appears to be a characteristically Christian pose of prayer. We learn only that the Jewish girl had finally been sheltered by another Polish family, but it is never stated that the adult translator she became is now a Jewish woman—her identity as a grown woman is not portrayed as a simply “Jewish” one. Elisabeth thus seems to represent a kind of disquiet, a Polish alter ego coming back to confront a more comfortable, familiar, and unproblematic identification of Polishness and Catholicism.

This ambiguity opens onto my central concern. Especially given the profound wartime pressures to conceal, assert, demand allegiance to, suffer from, and resist the attribution of certain Jewish identities, how could a person’s sense of self with respect to Jewishness not be influenced in the process, leaving a palimpsest far richer than the conventional, seemingly unitary, and dehistoricized identity categories of “Pole” and “Jew” seem to proclaim? Testifying to these layers, honoring and representing their coexistence, bears witness to what history has wrought with the self.

### “Thou Shalt Not . . .”: Ethnicity, the Self, and the Grounds of Legitimate Witness

Claude Lanzmann’s documentary film *Shoah* makes clear the accusation of Polish false witness and connects it to the Polish = Catholic equation.<sup>11</sup> In a scene in which Lanzmann asks Polish villagers assembled outside their church to recount their memory of the wartime events, during which the local Jews were herded into the same church before being gassed in vans waiting outside, he lets the Poles appear to condemn themselves as unreliable or tainted witnesses. They offer two fantastical “recollections.” The first is that the Jews, in their agony, “called on Jesus and Mary and God”—a clearly *Christian* evocation. The second is that the confiscated suitcases of the Jews—though unseen by these Poles—had been filled with gold.<sup>12</sup>

In Shoshana Felman's tour-de-force analysis of the film, she states how in this scene "the Poles in effect bear false witness."<sup>13</sup> She notes: "Out of empathy in the first case, with respect to the imagined moaning of the Jewish prisoners of the church, out of hostile jealousy and of competitive aggression in the second case, with respect to the imaginary hidden treasures and envied possessions, the Poles distort the facts and *dream their memory*."<sup>14</sup> The message here is that even when Poles attempt to empathize with Jewish suffering, they are trapped by their own fantasy. Felman continues, reaching a deeper problematic. She interprets the Polish failure to bear faithful witness as "exemplifying both their utter failure to imagine Otherness and their simplified negotiation of the inside and the outside, by merely projecting their inside on the outside. It is to their own fantasy, to their own (self-)mystification that the Poles bear witness, in attempting to account for historical reality."<sup>15</sup>

What traps Poles, then, is their utter "outsideness," the profundity of their difference from Jews. With this, Felman seems to suggest that there are *constraints to witnessing based on subject position or group identity* that encumber the attempt to imagine a position apart from one's own—in this case to the extent that the attempt to witness for the other is false.

But proprietors of Jewish-themed establishments in Kazimierz tend to be Poles, who have a sense of being caretakers of Jewish heritage in the absence of a robust local Jewish community.<sup>16</sup> And here we see the sense of being an outsider custodian of Jewishness beginning to blur with a sense of insidedness—of having, attempting to have, or being relegated to the status of group member. Indeed, as I will illustrate, many of the "non-Jewish Poles" involved in Jewish cultural production in Kazimierz are not quite as "non-Jewish" as they seem at first glance. They fall between conventional categories of "Jew" and "Pole," either in their self-representations or as others identify them.

### "Jewish Like an Adjective": Truths of Jewish Identity in Contemporary Poland

The question of Jewish identity in Poland is tortured and often tangled, and the now-grown Jewish girl in *Dekalog 8* is a familiar type in the post-war (and more publicly in the postcommunist) Polish social landscape.



The number of Polish Jews who survived the war was slim (about 10 percent of the prewar population of three and a half million), and many Poles have mixed heritage that is often just now coming to light (i.e., the “Madeleine Albright syndrome”).<sup>17</sup>

One of the more striking is the Catholic priest Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel (he changed his name in 1992 from Romuald Waszkinel). Only twelve years after his entrance into the priesthood did his mother reveal to him that he had been born to the Jewish couple Yaacov and Batya Weksler, and was adopted by the only parents he had known, the Catholic Piotr and Emilia Waszkinel, just before his Jewish birth parents were deported to the Vilna ghetto. A shelf in his home displays a scale and a samovar that belonged to his biological parents, along with a picture of his adoptive parents, a set of tefillin, a Hanukkah menorah, and the prayer “Sh’mā Yisroel”—along with a picture of Jesus, bleeding on the cross.<sup>18</sup> Despite deep and abiding stereotypes, intolerances, and essentialism regarding Jews in Poland, *the logic* of Jewish identity in Poland allows for the existence of particular types of “hybrid” or non-normative Jewishnesses that the larger—that is the non-Polish—“Jewish world” does not. As Weksler-Waszkinel puts it, “I can be a Jew in Poland, but as a priest, I cannot be a Jew in Israel.”<sup>19</sup>

Kazimierz is a place to which many such “Jewish-identified” people gravitate, as it offers a conducive atmosphere for exploring and identifying with Jewishness. The quarter draws category-defying individuals, people “sort of ‘on the edge’ between being Jewish and not-Jewish,” as Jarden bookshop owner Zdzisław designated himself and his wife Lucyna.<sup>20</sup> Such in-between, Jewish-identified people find their own ways to represent their sense of self. Marta, an employee in the Jarden Jewish bookshop and a tour guide to Jewish Kazimierz whom we have already met briefly, has dyed black hair and a large Hebrew *chai* tattooed on her right shoulder.<sup>21</sup> She told me:

The first question [tourists] ask me is if I’m Jewish. And recently, since I wear [the] *chai*, they usually don’t ask me this question any more. They think that I’m Jewish, they figure it out from my *chai*. So

instead they say, “Since you’re Jewish, what are you doing here? Why didn’t you move to Israel or America? Why are you still here? What is your family doing, and how did they survive the war?” And then I really don’t know what to answer. Because sometimes I’m so sorry for them, because they’re so sure that I’m Jewish, so sometimes I just don’t want to tell them, “You know, listen, it’s not that simple, I’m not really Jewish.” I try to get out of this question somehow, because I feel like they would feel, kind of like hurt if I told them I’m not Jewish.

Marta suggests that if she were to tell visitors she is *not* Jewish, they might perceive her as somehow traitorous, as falsifying her identity. But her wording also suggests that she feels this answer would be not merely wrong but *inadequate*. It would be too facile to capture the complexity of her situation. “It’s not that simple,” she says.

Marta has a longstanding involvement with Jewishness:

It’s been probably half of my life—I’m twenty-three—that I remember I’ve been interested in that. And I remember my biggest dream was going to Israel and learning Hebrew, for the longest time. And there was always this something that was pulling me to Judaism and Jews, and there was always this deep feeling inside of me that I couldn’t explain. And I finally managed to go to Israel when I was nineteen, and right before I was going there, really it was maybe two days before that, my grandmother, my mother’s mother, she told me, “Oh, you know, it could be interesting for you, I never told you that before because I thought it was nothing important, but since you’re going to Israel, I guess it could be interesting for you, but you see your grandfather was Jewish.”<sup>22</sup>

Working at the high-traffic Jewish bookshop, Marta is often called on to articulate her identity, as are Zdzisław and Lucyna, and the sense of self and Jewishness they express have been subject to the ongoing scrutiny and feedback of foreign Jewish visitors. But there is much more hidden Jewishness in Poland—and particularly in Kazimierz—that reveals a very different logic of Jewishness and of identification than either mainstream Jewish or Polish notions of Jewishness.

Brother Stefan is a Catholic monk and the director of a shelter and soup kitchen in Kazimierz. I met him through his mother, a woman with whom I struck up a conversation on a city bus in Tel Aviv some months earlier when I noticed her reading a Polish-language magazine. She found out when she was thirty that her father had been Jewish. We met in a café where she told me her story and then suggested I contact her son, Brother Stefan, when I returned to Kraków. Stefan's father had also been Jewish, and Stefan expressed his identity in this way:

We don't feel like Jews, but rather Jewish. Like an adjective. I feel my mother has a lot of Jewishness in her, but she isn't a Jew. Jewishness—it's different from being a Jew.

We feel an atmosphere, the problems of Jewishness. We feel near, a closeness. As a boy I had an intuitive feeling of connection to Jewishness. It felt like something mine. I read a lot about it. But we grew up Catholic. This can be a dilemma, but also a synthesis. The situation in Poland made many people creative. . . .

Many people involved in the development of Kazimierz have Jewish roots but can't say this aloud because of the intolerant atmosphere [in Poland]. So they work on Kazimierz's development as a way of doing something Jewish. . . .

American Jews have to understand that Polish conditions are different. To be a Catholic doesn't mean to lose one's Jewishness. . . . [Such people] also carry Jewishness. Such people are also chosen. They feel themselves chosen as Jews. Their hearts are Jewish.

In normal conditions, my family should have lost our Jewishness. But my grandmother spoke well of Jews. And that we are different, even though we're Catholic. So something must be there. It's a very mystical phenomenon. One cannot scorn this phenomenon. In Poland there are 1 percent real Jews, and 99 percent of these others. A lot of these others developed Catholic culture in Poland—but in a very special way, original, with something of Jewishness. Tuwim, Słonimski, Lechoń—they were Jews, but built, contributed to Catholic culture.<sup>23</sup> Agnieszka Holland in the U.S. is a Jew, but also Catholic.

Daniel Rufeisen, a Carmelite priest in Israel, wanted to invent Jewish rites within the Catholic liturgy. . . .

I think Polish Jews have a special task. If they survived so much—the Holocaust, communism—it can’t be for nothing. Somehow Kazimierz exists in that current. Maybe thus there is the conflict between American Jews—with their need for speed, for effectiveness. People here have a different pace. Another way. American Jews want to give money, push a button, and see results. I know Polish Jews who gather with their families on Saturday. No Torah. They don’t even say it’s Shabbat. But it’s important.

Brother Stefan suggests a grammar of identity, in which the kind of Jewishness he possesses has the function of an adjective, suggesting that feelings of closeness to and engagement with the “problems of Jewishness” *inflect* but do not form the essence of one’s self. He contrasts this with the state of being “a Jew,” even “a true” or “a real Jew,” an alternate identity Brother Stefan attributes to others. This latter state—communicated as a noun—seems to imply something more fundamental. Here identification intersects again with witnessing, in the sense of “truth-telling,” as Stefan raises the problem of expressing his felt Jewishness in the face of mainstream categories.<sup>24</sup> He also suggests that merely engaging oneself with the reestablishment of life in Kazimierz—a place so intensely coded as Jewish—is itself *a way of being Jewish*.<sup>25</sup>

### “Vicarious Identity” as Cultural Critique

The Jewish-identified Poles I met in Kazimierz do not identify themselves *as* Jewish in conventional terms. But they clearly identify *with* Jewishness in a variety of ways that deserve attention. I would like to go one step further and suggest that these Jewish-identified Poles, in the confusion and consternation they create (whether actively or passively), also function as a form of cultural education and cultural critique. This notion derives in part from Naomi Seidman’s provocative concept of a “politics of vicarious identity.”<sup>26</sup> Her concept recognizes that expressions of ethnicity can take unexpected forms, most specifically in asserting the self by “resisting

a straightforward identity politics in exchange for participation in the struggle of ‘someone else.’”<sup>27</sup>

Here I suggest that Poles identifying with or passing as Jewish work more or less explicitly against both the racist distortions of identity once enforced by the Nazis and the ethno-national constraints still placed on identity by Polish national mythology today. These identifiers/passers use “strategic provisionality (rather than . . . strategic essentialism)” to disrupt entrenched notions of what difference *is*—and what forms it can take.<sup>28</sup>

While some Jewish-identified Poles may pass as Jewish, and thus only on occasion educate Jewish visitors that their assumptions about Jewishness need revision, other people actively “represent” Jewishness, publicly asserting that they are Jewish as a means of “cultural protest” against exclusivist Polish nationalism and antisemitism. Zdzisław, the owner of the Jewish bookshop, told me he gave his son the conspicuously Jewish middle name David for this reason, as well as once proclaiming that he is “Żydokomuna” (a Jewish communist, or “Judeo-commune”) to a platitudinous priest who presumed both his Jewish ethnicity and an accompanying religious faith.<sup>29</sup> A similar standpoint has been expressed by Krzysztof Czyżewski, the founding director of the Pogranicze (Borderlands) Foundation in Sejny, Poland, an organization that uses the arts to support intermingling and dialogue among cultural communities.<sup>30</sup> He told the audience at a recent Jewish conference that *on principle*, he does not deny it when Polish people ask him if he is Jewish.<sup>31</sup> He added that he would not, of course, claim this identity among Jews.<sup>32</sup>

Agnieszka, another Jewish-identified Pole and a born-again Pentecostal Christian who is deeply involved in Jewish community life, recounted an activist moment of her own in the following incident:

There is a shop on the corner, a milk shop, they sell all these milk products. And a man came, he was just before me, so he came and he said to this woman, [shouting] “And all these things are because of Jewish people!” You know, “It is horrible that Jewish people are doing this and this and this!” And he was complaining to this *sprzedawczyni* [salesperson]—about the prices, that prices are growing, and some-

thing about butter, that butter, that the price of butter was growing—stupid things! Which it usually is—in blaming Jews . . .

And then I said, “Panie! Ma pan coś przeciwko Żydom?!” I told him, “Hey! Do you have anything against Jews?” And he was *so* terrified, you know? That he was just *silent*, and the *woman* who was *selling* was also—you know, there was just a silence. They didn’t say *anything*. [Maybe] they *do* have something [against Jews], or they have *nothing*. But I was so angry you know, *ugh*—I left this shop, and I didn’t even *realize* what I did. But then I was *proud*, you know! *What* is this, you know? What, am I going to tell them *nothing*? Because of that, because there was such a silence, so many people died.

Agnieszka represents Poles who are demanding recognition of Jewishness as a legitimate way of being Polish if Poland is to be a democratic polity. Those who have taken it as their task to “represent” Jewish culture are also “representing” *for* Jews, in the sense of “speaking for (*and as one of*) those commonly left unrepresented in public forums” (emphasis mine).<sup>33</sup>

### Faithful Witness and the Politics of Identification

If demands to bear witness to history have an impact on (national) self-conception, perhaps the inverse is also true—that one’s self-conception guides and constrains one’s latitude to bear witness. As John Gillis suggests, “The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and *what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity*” (emphasis mine).<sup>34</sup> If who one feels one *is* affects one’s ability to witness—and if who others believe one to be affects their willingness to accept one’s witnessing—then a central problematic in Polish-Jewish reconciliation might be the narrow categories in which one’s identity—and thus one’s stance toward the past—is so often presumed and encouraged to fit.

In the end, then, it may be that Felman is not entirely wrong in her suggestion that who one is—or perhaps better, who one thinks one is—constrains one’s ability to bear witness. This possibility is illustrated by Adam

Michnik, Polish former dissident, journalist, parliamentarian, and current editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of Poland's major papers, in a widely republished meditation addressing the revelations about the Polish wartime slaughter of Jews at Jedwabne.

By coincidence I am a Pole with Jewish roots. Almost my whole family was devoured by the Holocaust. My relatives *could have* perished in Jedwabne. Some of them were Communists or relatives of Communists, some were craftsmen, some merchants, perhaps some rabbis. But *all were Jews, according to the Nuremberg laws of the Third Reich*. All of them could have been herded into that barn, which was set on fire by Polish criminals. I do not feel guilty for those murdered, but I do feel responsible. Not that they were murdered—I could not have stopped that. *I feel guilty that after they died they were murdered again, denied a decent burial, denied tears, denied truth about this hideous crime, and that for decades a lie was repeated. . . .*

Writing these words, I feel a specific schizophrenia: I am a Pole, and my shame about the Jedwabne murder is a Polish shame. At the same time, I know that if I had been there in Jedwabne, I would have been killed as a Jew. Who am I then, as I write these words? Thanks to nature, I am a man, and I am responsible to other people for what I do and what I do not do. Thanks to my choice, *I am a Pole*, and I am responsible to the world for the evil inflicted by my countrymen. I do so out of my free will, by my own choice, and by the deep urging of my conscience. *But I am also a Jew* who feels a deep brotherhood with those who were murdered as Jews. (Emphasis mine)<sup>35</sup>

Michnik does not hide the *difficulty of witnessing* he faces due to the fluidity, the time-sensitive nature, and the resulting historical discontinuity in the ascribed aspects of Jewish identity. He is a Pole, but he feels a brotherhood with Jews—even that he *is* a Jew—by virtue of the Jewish identity he would have been ascribed by the Nazis.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps this kind of open struggling with the shifting circumstances that make us who we are is a form of witness itself—to the injustices of history perpetrated by those who would remove choice.

And yet even a categorical identity that one chooses (to the extent that any such category is ever freely chosen) can be a constraint to bearing faithful witness. I asked Lucyna, the non-Jewish co-owner of the Jarden bookshop, how she feels when visiting the ruins of Polish Jewish cemeteries she helps the Jew from London, Max Rogers, restore. Her response eloquently expresses the bonds of singular identity:

Oh, it's a very difficult question—inside I feel a mixture of feelings, because I'm very sorry for everything that happened. And I know why mostly these cemeteries are looking like this. Not because of World War II time, and German occupation here. They look like that because of everything that happened after the war [at the hands of Polish people].

But this is from one side. On the second side, because of my knowledge I understand what happened, and how it worked, that it looks like this now. That World War II completely destroyed people's morality. Jewish life [wasn't worth] anything. And people got used to that Jews could be killed any time and that Jewish property doesn't belong to [Jews]. It belongs to Germans and the rest to Poles.

I think for people who were born after the war, it's very difficult to understand what the wartime meant. How people lived. Especially in Poland, you know. Where if you wanted to help a Jew, you should be very strong, and very—it was a big responsibility to help a Jew to survive. It was like a game, gambling, you know. You play not only on your life, but on the life of your neighbors, your family. It was a big responsibility. And I don't think people can understand what heroes these [Polish] people were who were trying to help Jewish people. And even nowadays, you know. How many people like them can you find? It's impossible. People are rather afraid, they are cowards.

And this is the second feeling that I have. I'm mostly sorry because I'm looking at Max's face. I'm trying to understand what *he* is feeling, exactly. What I could feel if it happened to a cemetery where my parents' graves are. And this is very difficult even to describe. This is the very sad part of this work. *Because as a Pole I'm trying to find an*



*excuse. As a human sometimes I cannot find any excuse. This is very difficult.*

It is this kind of witnessing that Jews demand from individual Poles, the only kind that will be taken as faithful and thus fulfilling: Polish acceptance of some responsibility for the fate of the Jews during the war, a Polish statement that, as Jan Błoński plainly put it, “Yes, we are guilty.”<sup>37</sup> And yet precisely at issue is the content of that “we.”

Brian Porter suggests a framework in which the attempt to blur identity categories between “Poles” and “Jews” can indeed be central to a Polish “apology” for historical wrongs against Jews. For Poles to say, even with the most heartfelt sorrow, “we did it,” might sound very nice, and indeed this is probably an important part of any process of historical reconciliation. But ultimately the apology needs to go something like this:

We did it, because the very conception of ourselves that pervaded Poland in the interwar and war years drew sharp lines around “us” and “you,” and made it impossible for us to perceive you as neighbors and compatriots, and equally impossible for you to view us in this way. Instead we saw you—and you saw us—as aliens, and at best we watched silently as you were killed, at worst participated in the killing. But we recognize that these self-conceptualizations, these cultural forms of identity, are mutable—that they arose in a specific time, under specific circumstances—and we are working to change them. We recognize that these forms of identity are not the only ones available to us. They never were. And we are working towards a new fluidity of identity that will allow us to start to blur the lines between “us” and “you,” to recognize that in many ways “you” are also “us.”<sup>38</sup>

Jewish rejection of “Jewish-identified Poles”—and thus a Jewish attempt to constrain or impose identity categories on Poles—may make Jews appear regressive, and indeed almost perversely embracing the very identity categories under which they suffered in the past. But such rejection must be understood in the context of a seminal event of identification—the Holocaust—during which the boundaries were inflexible, utterly imposed

from without, and determined who would live and who would die. And not only that. Jews today live within a consciousness of the centuries prior to the Holocaust, throughout which Jewish identity was not only not chosen, but it was imposed with particular force and narrowness—and too often with cruelty, humiliation, and persecution. In Poland in particular, Jewish attempts to become Polish, to blur identity when *they* desired, were available—(when possible at all) only at the cost of the total resignation from one's Jewishness. The unevenly distributed privilege to assume and cast off identities at will lacks the burden of *inalienability* that typically accompanies a socially stigmatized identity.

Still, Jews also experience and “use” their Jewishness situationally, and their Jewishness changes according to the social and political context in which they find themselves. And if, as it seems it must be, the right to self-definition is centrally at issue (for Jews as well as for everyone else), Jewish employment of extreme racist logic of identity as the measure of a person's “true” Jewishness—an “if you had been in Europe during the war you would have been killed” measure of Jewish authenticity—seems like a particularly cruel irony of history.

A final explanation of the lure of Jewishness for contemporary Poles goes to Anna, a twenty-three-year-old Polish woman who had been studying religious practice and participating intensively in the Lauder Foundation Jewish Youth Club in Kazimierz. She had begun by pursuing a degree in Jewish religion and culture at university but became convinced that her interest and identification was not only intellectual, but spiritual as well, and while she herself was sure she was of Jewish ancestry—“I'm 80 percent certain that I'm Jewish, but the papers were burned. . . . I can't document it”—she felt compelled to convert. Despite pursuing the most traditionally enshrined trajectory for identification with Jewishness—namely the halakhic procedures for conversion to Judaism—Anna's self-explanation seemed to center on precisely the “escapist” motivation that troubles scholars considering the appropriate limits to empathy and identification. For Anna told me, “There is a wise saying: A Jew after WWII said if Christians had died in gas chambers, he would have felt morally compelled to convert to Christianity. *I feel most strongly that I'm not on the side that was bad.*”

It seems that Anna, in her relation to her (real or imagined) Jewish ancestry, has made the opposite choice from the one Michnik described—she seeks to escape, rather than embrace, a “Polish shame” in exchange for a kind of Jewish valor. The behavior of many Polish “new Jews” I observed seems to reflect this desired exchange, and in doing so, they replicate the deep identification of Polishness with Christianity (and its counterpart vision of Jewishness as a kind of anti-Polishness).<sup>39</sup>

Empathy, we are told, “is not a full identification, some kind of unconditional ‘sympathy’ through which, however noble the intentions, the other is forfeited in order to be replaced by a sympathetic doctor, unwittingly appropriating someone else’s voice and attributes.”<sup>40</sup> Empathy, rather, is a form of “caution and respect” accompanied by an “awareness that someone else’s overwhelming feeling will never become our own.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps in this historical context, conversion to Judaism constitutes, via total incorporation, a more troublesome “refusal of loss” than do the other, more ambivalent identifications that are common in Kazimierz.<sup>42</sup> As Judith Butler suggests, when a particular set of identifications is “threatened by the violence of public erasure . . . the decision to counter that violence must be careful not to reinstall another in its place . . . [instead] to make use of a category that can be called into question, made to account for what it excludes.”<sup>43</sup>

Polish antisemitism, as perhaps every antisemitism, is deeply based in concepts of self and other, of rejection and desire, in the very attempt to delineate the borders that separate self from other. To the extent that “new Jews”—or any Jews—attempt to reject what is Polish in them in pursuit of some idealized, pure Jewishness, they set the stage to replicate what has been perpetrated against them. It is the opposite of what I understood the late Rafael Scharf, a Jew from Kraków, to have meant when he advised Jews to embrace the accusation of “dual loyalty” that has so often been flung at them—indeed, he said, they should even multiply those identifications, for these allow the bounds of one’s empathy for others to expand.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, it is when the bookshop owner Lucyna steps outside her Polishness—indeed, outside of any category smaller than the one that contains us all—that she seems able to bear unambiguous witness.

As is unfortunately illustrated by the reticence of many Christian Poles who helped Jews during the war (or even those who attempt to memorialize Jewish suffering today) to be identified and celebrated for their actions in front of their neighbors, once a Pole has allied herself or himself with Jewishness in some way—blood or no blood—that Pole is already suspect. Again, the presence of Jewish “blood” is not the significant element in being treated as marked by Jewishness. Jewish identification in Poland is a risk for *all* who engage in it.

Extreme trauma, LaCapra recognizes, may “exceed existing modes . . . of mourning,” and the ghosts such trauma produces “are not entirely ‘owned’ as ‘one’s own’ by any individual or group. If they haunt a house (a nation, a group), they come to disturb all who live in . . . that house.”<sup>45</sup> In Kazimierz the need for bearing witness to the tragedies of others comes face to face with what Daniel Boyarin calls “our terrifying bleedings into each other.”<sup>46</sup> Whatever else may be said about Kazimierz, in important ways it should be recognized as the product of a Polish desire to bear witness to its own Jewishness, through what bell hooks calls a “cultural space where boundaries can be transgressed, where new and alternative relationships can be formed.”<sup>47</sup>

## Notes

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1. The numbering of the commandments varies according to religious tradition. While the Polish film *Dekalog*, unsurprisingly, follows the Catholic numbering, in Judaism the prohibition against false witness is assigned the number nine.
2. Paul Coates notes the significance of the fact that all of the ethical quandaries of the *Dekalog* series are “distilled in this particular story”; see his “Walls and Frontiers: Polish Cinema’s Portrayal of Polish-Jewish Relations,” in *Polin*:

- Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 10: *Jews in Early Modern Poland* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 240.
3. See the special English-language issue of the Polish Catholic monthly journal *Więź* titled *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne*, ed. Jacek Borkowicz (Warsaw, Poland: Towarzystwo Więź, 2001), <http://www.polandembassy.org/Links/p7-10.htm>.
  4. According to figures provided by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the overall number of victims of Auschwitz in the years 1940–45 is estimated at between 1,100,000 and 1,500,000 people. Of these, 90 percent—over a million—were Jews from across Europe. Some 140,000 ethnic Poles (mostly political prisoners) died at Auschwitz. See Długoborski and Piper, *Central Issues in the History of the Camp Auschwitz 1940–45*.
  5. Genviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
  6. Gross, *Neighbors*.
  7. The text of the president's speech can be found at [http://www.president.pl/ser/index.php3?tem\\_ID=980&kategoria=Last+month](http://www.president.pl/ser/index.php3?tem_ID=980&kategoria=Last+month).
  8. The messy reality behind these apparently clean categories extends, of course, not only to Jewish public sentiment, which has been given new fuel by the discussions around Jedwabne. Indeed, Kugelmass's statement continues, "Jews see Poles as witnesses, if not outright accomplices, to murder; Poles see Jews as ingrates." Jack Kugelmass, "Bloody Memories: Encountering the Past in Contemporary Poland," *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (1995): 295. The canonized Polish self-image, in turn, sees Poles as "heroes and victims"; see Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic (eds.), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 33. Polish judgment of Jews can even extend as far as accusing the Jews themselves of being perpetrators, whether through the Judenrat's wartime collaboration in the ghettos or through Jewish participation in the postwar Polish communist government, which can even be linked to notions of Jewish collaborations with the Nazis to dominate Poland.
  9. Henryk Grynberg, "Poles Inherited Some of the Jewish Tragedy," *Midrasz* 2 (June 1997); reprinted in *The Best of Midrasz* (1997): 37–38. Bauman, review of Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, "A Social Analysis of Postwar Polish Jewry," 39.
  10. There are clearly more and less superficial ways of enacting identification with Jewishness, some more temporary, situational, and "low cost" than others. I became interested in those individuals who revealed to me identifications that seem intensive or longstanding.
  11. *Shoah* was released in Poland in 1985 after earlier government accusations that

- it was an anti-Polish provocation. As Polonsky and Michlic remark, "Most Poles rejected Lanzmann's division of European society during the Holocaust (particularly in Poland) into the murderers, their victims, and the bystanders, largely unsympathetic to the fate of the Jews. Yet many were shocked by his interviews with Polish peasants living in the vicinity of the death camps, which revealed the persistence of crude anti-Semitic stereotypes in the Polish countryside. For Catholics, which of course meant the overwhelming majority of Poles, Lanzmann's argument that Nazi anti-Semitism was the logical culmination of Christian anti-Semitism was also unacceptable. But it, too, forced a reexamination of many strongly held attitudes." Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 14.
12. Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 260.
  13. Felman, "The Return of the Voice," 261.
  14. Felman, "The Return of the Voice," 261.
  15. Felman, "The Return of the Voice," 261.
  16. I have used the term *shabbos goyim* to describe these cultural intermediaries. For a portrait of one such individual, see my essay "The Only Jewish Bookshop in Poland," *Pakn Treger* 36 (2001): 34–37, <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/story.php?n=101>.
  17. Ari Goldman, "Albright Finds Her Place among History's Victims," *New York Times*, February 9, 1997, section 4, p. 4, col. 1.
  18. See the film *The Secret*, directed by Ronit Kertsner, Israel, 2001.
  19. Robert Cohen, "For a Priest and for Poland, a Tangled Identity," *New York Times*, October 10, 1999, 1.
  20. While the notion of an "edge" recognizes the social solidity of the normative categories of Pole and Jew (and thus in a way validates them), it also insists that this binary does not capture the full range of experience.
  21. Tattooing of any kind is forbidden by halakhah (Jewish law). See Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not scrape your flesh for a (dead) soul, and tattoos do not put upon you, I am the Lord." It has accrued a further negative valence for Jews due to the Nazi practice of tattooing concentration camp inmates. None of this, of course, prevents many (especially young) American and Israeli Jews from getting tattoos or even from using tattoos to proclaim their Jewishness. (See for example Dora Apel's chapter "The Tattooed Jew" in her *Memory Effects*.) As Marta's story suggests, I suspect that most Jews today are unaware of the prohibition.
  22. The sense of being Jewish according to a different logic of identity than that which holds for more conventional claims to Jewishness, which I am suggesting is prevalent in Kazimierz, is also very fragile. This kind of Jewishness, to the extent

that it makes itself public, is likely to be overwhelmed by the inroads of mainstream, Western logic of Jewishness brought in by Jewish tourists and Western Jewish foundations dedicated to resurrecting Jewish life in Eastern Europe. These work on a model of Jewishness as centrally a matter of religious practice, and the lack of choice due to the small numbers and resources means the model is a hierarchical one, with orthodoxy as the standard for authenticity.

When I made a return visit to Kazimierz in December 2003, Marta had converted to Judaism (after a year in New York with an Israeli boyfriend), and was considering making the aliyah.

23. Tuwim, Słonimski, and Lechoń are classic Polish poets of Jewish descent.
24. As Konstanty Gebert notes, "Jews who are Christians often find themselves in a void between two communities. They often experience mistrust or hostility from Christians as well as an equally painful rejection from Jews" ("Divided by a Common Book," *The Best of Midrasz*, 21).
25. One might argue that these are "safe" examples of "vicarious" identification with Jewishness. First, both Marta and Brother Stefan seem to have "biological" grounds on which to make a claim to that "one drop of Jewish blood." But what about those "pseudo" Jews who cannot make even that claim? My response to such an inquiry would be simply that it is the *claim* to blood, and not the drop of it that may or may not course through one's veins (to use the language of the Western popular conception of genetic relatedness), that is significant here. There is no one who cannot *make a claim* to Jewish "blood." Indeed many do, and the absence of documentation is a problem only for Orthodox Jewish authorities and the State of Israel (each with different criteria to select and define which aspects of Jewishness—nationality, religion, ethnicity—are the ones that form their boundaries). Tellingly, it is examples to the contrary—when a Pole attempts to *disavow* even one drop of Jewish blood—that seem doomed to fail in the Polish context. Imputing Jewishness to someone—or claiming it for the self—is extraordinarily effective to define a person socially as such. (Despite 1990 Polish presidential candidate Tadeusz Mazowiecki's formal documentation of Catholic baptismal certification back through twelve ancestral generations, the Polish public was not convinced. His opponent, Lech Wałęsa, had intimated that Mazowiecki was hiding his Jewish ancestry. The suggestion was enough to destroy citizen confidence, and he was forced out of the race.) That said—and I will return to this problem later in this essay—one might suggest there *is* a distinction to be made if the "drop" of Jewish blood one claims today would have been sufficient for Jewish racial classification by the Nazis, thus consigning one to the "Jewish" rather than the "Polish" fate. I thank Dorota Glowacka for raising this question.
26. Naomi Seidman, "Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews: Toward a (Jewish) Politics of Vicarious

- Identity,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 254–68.
27. Seidman, “Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews,” 266.
  28. Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 305.
  29. Some knowledge of Polish sociopolitical history is necessary to grasp the particular negative valence of this term—and thus the particular mocking and daring quality of Zdzisław’s comment. The term “Żydokomuna” refers to the widespread, nationalistic Polish notion that communism was a Jewish plot and that Jews collaborated with Soviets to oppress Poles in eastern Poland in the early war years (where Jews were said to have “welcomed the Soviets with bread and salt”), and particularly in the harsh security forces (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB) in the early Polish postwar communist regime.
  30. <http://www.pogranicze.sejny.pl>.
  31. The Future of Jewish Heritage in Europe: An International Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, May 24–27, 2004.
  32. A rabbi in the audience replied, in a tone of profound discomfort, demanding that identities be more discrete. He began in Yiddish, “Vos, bistu meshuge gevorn?” (Have you gone crazy, or what?), and continued that just as he does not want synagogues to lose their identity, he does not want people to mix their identities. “I want people to be comfortable in their identities. I am comfortable with who I am, and I want you to be comfortable with who you are,” he said.
  33. John L. Jackson, Jr., “The Soles of Black Folk: These Reeboks Were Made for Runnin’ from the White Man,” in *Race Consciousness: African American Studies in the Next Century*, ed. Judith J. Fossett (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 179.
  34. John Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” in *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.
  35. Adam Michnik, “Poles and the Jews: How Deep the Guilt?” trans. Ewa Zadrzyńska, *New York Times*, March 17, 2001, A17.
  36. And indeed, by many Poles today. Despite his lack of identification as a Jew throughout most of his life, the paper of which he is editor is often identified by right-wing elements in Poland as “Jewish” or controlled by Jews.
  37. Jan Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” in Polonsky, *My Brother’s Keeper?* 44 (originally in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, January 11, 1987).



38. Porter, "Explaining Jedwabne," 26.
39. For many "new Jews" such as Anna, reinventing themselves as Jews in this way means distancing themselves from most of their life experiences. As Anna explains, "I spent my youth as a *Pole*, so I didn't have to deal with being different. I have no experience with that." Their discovery of, identification with, and cultivation of Jewishness is also often accompanied with expressions of disgust with Poland—with its culture and often with its very concrete manifestations. "This is a disgusting country," I've heard some say, pointing at dirt, dilapidation, or delinquency.
40. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, chapter 2, "Jedwabne: History as a Fetish," in this volume. bell hooks suggests that this kind of practice likely "assuages the guilt of the past," "denies accountability and historical connection," and "establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other"; hooks, *Black Looks*, 22. There is also no shortage of criticism of what has come to be called "philosemitism" (or occasionally "judeophilia" or a Jewish-oriented "xenophilia"), generally defined as an exaggerated love for Jews on the part of non-Jews, often accompanied by a pathological over-identification with them rooted in unresolved post-Holocaust guilt (see Thomas Altfelix, "The 'Post-Holocaust Jew' and the Instrumentalization of Philosemitism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 34, no. 2 (2000): 41–56; Helga Embacher, "Belated Reparations? Philosemitism in the Second Generation," paper presented at the Fourth European Social Science History Conference, February 27–March 2, 2002, The Hague; Joachim Schlör, "From Remnants to Realities: Is There Something beyond 'Jewish Disneyland' in Eastern Europe?" *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2, no. 2 (2003): 148–58.
41. Tokarska-Bakir, "Jedwabne: History as a Fetish."
42. I am indebted to Judith Butler's discussion of Freud's "melancholic incorporation" for this idea; Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 311.
43. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 305.
44. Rafael E. Scharf, *Poland, What Have I to Do with Thee . . . : Essays without Prejudice* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1998).
45. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 215.
46. Daniel Boyarin, "Interrogate My Love," in *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 203.
47. hooks, *Black Looks*, 36.

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# 6

## St. Korczak of Warsaw

TERRI GINSBERG

*Korczak* (Poland, 1990) is the better known of two extant cinematic attempts to trace the life and legacy of renowned Polish-Jewish teacher, pediatrician, and children's rights advocate Janusz Korczak. Born Henryk Goldszmit, he perished in the gas chambers of Treblinka after a 1942 deportation there from the Warsaw Ghetto with two hundred orphans in his charge.<sup>1</sup> *Korczak*, directed by Andrzej Wajda, is a layered film with manifold significance. At the level of story, it is a film about pedagogy, especially as it may be practiced with regard to the Holocaust. It is likewise concerned with defining the Judeocide for its non-Jewish Polish spectators.

Further, as an international co-production marketed as both an art film and a popular melodrama and released in the current of the Soviet bloc dismantlement, *Korczak* is imbricated with, and to a certain extent symptomatizes, political and ideological conflicts cleaving Polish and Western European self-understandings at a watershed moment in global history.<sup>2</sup> Such conflicts include the end of the Cold War, the ascendance and suppression of Solidarity (*Solidarność*), and the re-envisioning of Auschwitz as a multinational Holocaust memorial. At the aesthetic theoretical register, *Korczak* has come to represent an international controversy staged primarily in the French popular press and argued vociferously by film maker Claude Lanzmann and journalist Danièle Heymann, the crux of which was the film's apparent kitschification of an event in Holocaust history

and, in addition, its explicit christological rendering of that event.<sup>3</sup> For these critics, *Korczak* was another in a long series of incidents and occasions symptomatizing the postwar persistence of Polish antisemitism. Its specific articulations entailed (1) a reclaiming of the Jew Janusz Korczak as a Christian martyr, whose death would be perceived as a redemptive allegory for the postwar founding of Israel, and (2) a right-revisionist representation of Polish wartime sympathy for and assistance to persecuted Jews.

For Lanzmann, *Korczak*'s docudramatic structure was primarily to blame. Whereas the film *Shoah* utilizes only contemporary footage and survivor testimonies so as, in Lanzmann's view, not to break Adorno's oft-misunderstood taboo against Holocaust mythicization, *Korczak* is a fictionalized reenactment of Janusz Korczak's imprisonment in the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>4</sup> Recalling other social realist docudramas of Wajda's, *Korczak* utilizes black and white stock and archival footage in an effort to lend credibility and authenticity to the reenactment, including material that refers intertextually to the Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (*Der Ewige Jude*, directed by Fritz Hippler, Germany, 1940).<sup>5</sup> In Lanzmann's peculiar existentialist historiography, efforts such as this are redundant and, by extension, unacceptably revisionist: authentic Holocaust knowledge is only ever fragmentary, its credibility dependant strictly upon proximity to memorial evocation by actual Holocaust survivors. Along these lines Lanzmann and Heymann were likewise able to criticize *Korczak*'s purely fictional scenes as Holocaust kitsch. Instead of depicting the fateful arrival of Korczak and his orphans at Treblinka, for instance, *Korczak* substitutes a pastoral scene, derived from a well-known Polish postwar fantasy, in which Korczak and his orphans survive their fateful trip to Treblinka when their train is diverted to safety by partisans (Lifton, 351). *Korczak* portrays the diverted children disembarking in slow motion from the train into a hazy fog and rallying behind the orphanage banner, which on one side depicts the orphanage logo, a four-leaf clover, and on the other, a Star of David.

In addition to its romantic transhistoricity and its concomitant conveyance of an ambiguous narrative closure, the scene's allegorical reference to Israel, marked by the flaglike banner bearing the Star of David,

led Heymann to criticize *Korczak* for propagating Christian (in apparent contrast to Jewish) Zionism. For Christian Zionism, a biblical imperative correlates a large concentration of Jews in Israel with apocalyptic global conflagration. Called Armageddon, this fiery catastrophe, or literally *holocaust*, is conceived as divine retribution against nonbelievers in the christic redemption signified by Jesus—namely Jews, but now also lapsed Christians—who are henceforth sacrificed so that believers, miraculously immune to the horrors of the Holocaust, may prevail in a peaceful, bucolic aftermath (Sharif, 17–19). By contrast, Jewish Zionism, which also calls for mass Jewish emigration to Israel, promises neither conflagration nor salvation but simply an antidote to antisemitism through modern restoration of a nostalgically envisaged, ancient Jewish homeland. Although recent and ongoing archival research reveals that many official Zionist documents and tracts do indeed acknowledge the violence entailed by their admittedly colonialist project, such violence is never mystified in apocalyptic terms, nor are its results foreseen as necessarily peaceful (Masalha, 5–48; Said, 56–114). In fact, Christian Zionism was formulated and adopted by non-Jewish European and North American ideologues for the purpose of promoting colonialist enterprise in the Middle East (Rodinson). While the Jewish Zionist reaction to antisemitism supplied such persons with an opportunity for political and economic expansion, proponents of Jewish Zionism variously negotiated that opportunity to their own ethno-nationalist advantage.

Although Heymann is not incorrect, then, in interpreting *Korczak*'s ending as an allusion to Armageddon, her failure even so to distinguish between what must be seen as mutually compatible because politically intereffective Zionisms is symptomatic of her and Lanzmann's dubious blind spots regarding the scene's broader significance, as I shall elucidate. That is, seeing merely the film's Christian Zionism, Heymann can offer only unilateral dismissals of it. It must be remarked that this proclivity obtains not only vis-à-vis the film's final scene, but also insofar as she and Lanzmann each criticize earlier scenes in which Polish Catholics, apparently imbued with Christian martyrial compunction, are portrayed yearning to suffer alongside their persecuted Jewish neighbors. The character

Maria Falska (Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska), for example, headmistress at Warsaw's Christian orphanage *Our Home* and instrumental in rescuing some of Korczak's children (residents of Warsaw's Jewish orphanage, the Children's Home), says auspiciously: "How awful not to be able to accompany them," as she witnesses Korczak and his children being herded into the Warsaw Ghetto during a sequence that visually foreshadows the film's concluding redemption fantasy.<sup>6</sup>

In effect, for Lanzmann, Heymann, and others, *Korczak* was an obscenity that proved *Shoah*'s polemical point. The film's defenders, however, did not consider *Korczak* antisemitic, much less unacceptably revisionist. Simone Weil, David Lindenber, Sylvie Kaufmann, and Alain Finkielkraut were among those in France for whom *Korczak* was undeserving of condemnation.<sup>7</sup> North American reviews of the film took up likewise ambiguous or, at most, conciliatory positions, implicitly bowing to prevailing political pressure to "open up" to Poland (McElveen; Sikorski; Wieseltier). And even those North American reviews critical of *Korczak* confined commentary to the film's formal techniques and left definitive interpretation to the religious right (Canby, "Saintly"; Denby; Hoberman; Kauffmann; Yung). Taken up primarily although not exclusively by North American Orthodox Jews, such definitive interpretation tended ironically toward moral posturing that praised *Korczak* for its presumed spiritual uplifting (Elkin; Fox; Kempley; Mantel).<sup>8</sup> That view was defended by, among others, literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov ("Parisian"), otherwise a liberal, who in debunking Lanzmann would also assert that the debate over *Korczak*'s alleged antisemitism proved Jewish control of the media!<sup>9</sup>

None of these rebuttals was inclined, however, to carry the *Korczak* debate past vying moral high grounds onto the register of critical aesthetic theory, which would have enabled interpretations of the film to transcend judgments based primarily upon varied codes of social propriety and taste by placing those interpretations in discursive context and analyzing the epistemology of their historical and conceptual differences. Instead the question remained simply: which religious orientation can lay proper claim to Holocaust historiography and interpretation? Beneath this horizon, the Lanzmann/Heymann problematic became sublimated rather

than effectively critiqued; key historical facts of Janusz Korczak's life and work were skewed, and the question of *Korczak's* alleged antisemitism was merely deferred.

In contrast to these moralizing positions, I propose that christology alone does not antisemitism make, and that fictionalized representation of the Holocaust does not necessarily imply kitschification, much less right-wing revisionism. As *Korczak's* defenders remind us, Polish Catholics did in fact offer aid to persecuted Jews; in addition, the dialectical interweaving of documentary with fictive modes is no longer subject to debate in film studies. In contrast to the film's defenders, however, I must concede a *phenomenological* aesthetic overdetermining the film's hermeneutic structure, a secular modality of abstract feeling linked inexorably here to Christian martyrology, which encourages an *allegorical* reception that may very well invoke antisemitism. That is to say, Lanzmann's and Heymann's arguments contain a kernel of truth worth pursuing. Despite themselves, these arguments highlight the fact that inaccuracies allegedly marking *Korczak's* portrayal of Janusz Korczak are actually less damaging either to his memory or to that of the Polish Jews he would represent than are the ways in which such inaccuracies facilitate historical interpretations that favor the very perspectives they might also offend—interpretations often formulated by Jews themselves. In effect, I am proposing that if *Korczak* is indeed interpretable as antisemitic, this is not because of its Christian martyrological portrayal of Janusz Korczak—even though, as I shall elucidate, that portrayal is verifiable—but because the film's formal-aesthetic structuring of that portrayal compels an interpretive transcendence, or “ludic” allegorization, of the political and economic foundations of modern antisemitism, foundations that happen to include Jewish as well as Christian Zionism and that therefore are not opposed by *Korczak's* particular outspoken critics.<sup>10</sup>

As against either pole of the *Korczak* debate, then, I am proposing that *Korczak's* phenomenological aesthetic, including what I describe as its visual metaphysic, is ideologically commensurate with *both* Lanzmann/Heymann *and* their ostensible detractors. *Korczak* neither strictly delineates nor subsumes the religious denominational aspects of its eponymous per-

sona, as is otherwise suggested within the parameters of the debate; nor is Lanzmann's theoretical distinction between *Korczak* and *Shoah*—a distinction accepted on both sides of the *Korczak* debate—sustainable on either account. As I shall explain, *Korczak*'s formal-aesthetic structure serves rather to cleave denominational differences between the film's Judaic and Christian aspects into a globalizing, Judeo-Christian orientation.<sup>11</sup> And this has been dissimulated by moralizing discourses on both sides of the debate, discourses that implicitly designate the film, for better or worse, as a passion play.<sup>12</sup>

In light of *Korczak*'s multinational production, I shall in turn indicate that this dissimulation belies not only the humanitarian benevolence of the Polish anti-Nazi resistance depicted from time to time throughout the film. *Korczak* must also be seen from within the context of the contemporary post-Cold War film industry of which it is an undeniable product. Increasingly through deployment of religious discourse, that industry, still dominated by Hollywood, has developed new hybrid modalities ("world cinema," "indie cinema") in which aspects of the art film converge with those of popular melodrama. The result is creation of a global "market" for cinematic signifiers of neoliberal diversification, especially as these may re-envision "underdeveloped" nations and regions as welcoming to Western/Hollywoodian culture and values (Miller).

In this context, one may argue that a Judeo-Christian *Korczak*, however "liberal" or magnanimous its portrayal of a Polish Jew may seem, belies complicity with the industry's verifiable right-hegemonic agenda—an agenda that, ironically, Wajda himself has tellingly opposed. Through my analysis of this and related ironies, I offer a means by which *Korczak*'s checkered public reception may be re-understood as one occasion among many in today's cine-cultural sphere (cf. the *Schindler's List*, *Life Is Beautiful*, and *Jacob the Liar* controversies) on which the Holocaust, and by christological association the "Jewish," are (re)positioned as ideological exemplars, often willing pawns, in European and especially American struggles for post-Cold War global dominance. I hold that the terms of this (re)positioning, reminiscent as they are of German right revisionism, obstruct critical recognition of how the Judeocide is (re)made to resonate



with neoliberal aims, not least as these would affect Jews, Catholics, and others engaged variously in socially transformative struggles.

Before proceeding, I should like to clarify precisely how I am using the concept of allegory in this analysis. Here allegory refers to a narrative-compositional nexus at which the subjective and objective, literal and figurative, denotative and connotative registers of *Korczak* appear to meet indeterminately and, as such, to trope the diegesis into a signifier of contemporary relevance.<sup>13</sup> My usage of allegory differs from that of Paul de Man, whose perspective has enjoyed an uneven academic prominence in Holocaust studies for its phenomenological designation of indeterminacy (e.g., Friedländer; Hartman). De Manian allegory understands rhetorical indeterminacy as an aesthetic index of transcendental time, such that for example, the subjectively mediated claims of Holocaust survivor testimonies are verifiable only in view of their displaced, post-traumatic performances, and moreover such that the ludic facticity of testimony forms an inviolable intellectual horizon (e.g., Lyotard, 86–106; Felman and Laub). By contrast, my usage of allegory derives from that of Walter Benjamin, whose writing on German tragedy illustrates the material-historical basis of rhetorical indeterminacy, thereby enabling its consideration as ideologically rather than merely aesthetically overdetermined. Whereas de Manian allegory pays lip service to historical temporality—that is, rendering it but a quasisacral means for aesthetic doubling—Benjaminian allegory resituates historical passage within a critical framework for which rhetorical shifts become interpretable as ideology-effects of political and economic struggles at the register of cultural practice.

In other words, as with the distinction I have outlined between factual inaccuracy and structural functioning in *Korczak*, Benjaminian allegory is less a signifier of experiential multiplicity than a crisis-riven symptom of its structuring absences—what Benjamin refers to elsewhere as a *dialectical image* (*Arcades*, 462). Allegory for Benjamin is therefore less a barometer of spiritual faith contested by vying moral perspectives—a reading that becomes possible on the de Manian view as it derives finally, with Kant, from Christian hermeneutic tradition (see Brabau; Mohanty; Schrader)—than a vehicle for the sort of layered critique that such christo-phenomenological

allegory necessitates. Indeed, in view of these distinctions, I shall consider as at once christological and phenomenological any hermeneutic layer of *Korczak* in which the narrative-compositional nexus appears determined to appropriate, reduce, and universalize the historical Korczak's enlightened, secular (*haskalik*) teaching philosophy into a project of sheer, even gnostic faith.

An obvious example of *Korczak*'s Christian allegorical structuring is its fashioning as such of Janusz Korczak after Francis of Assisi, a medieval Christian ascetic canonized for his saintly deeds on behalf of the poor (Moorman; Thurston and Attwater, 23–32). This resemblance was not lost on the film's critics, who nonetheless focused primarily on nuances of costuming and gesture. Wajda's *Korczak* (Wojciech Pszoniak) wears a frock-like coat, carries a sack over his shoulder, and sports a balding, monklike head, all of which foster a Franciscan likeness. In addition his numerous sartorial poses and practices evoke the Franciscan mystique. For instance he kneels in solitary prayer on the bare floor of his bedroom, as though residing in an austere, reclusive monastery. While watering plants on the orphanage windowsill, he is approached fearlessly by wild songbirds—a classic Franciscan motif. A known homosexual (Lifton 25), Wajda's *Korczak* never expresses sexual desire but instead performs duties traditionally perceived as humiliating, such as scrubbing floors, emptying the orphanage slop bucket, and begging for alms from the ghetto elite. Depiction of pleasure in general is largely confined to scenes of cenobitic bonding between *Korczak* and other orphanage residents and workers. In effect, Wajda's *Korczak* is lent neoplatonic qualities of second-century Christian gnosticism—charitable humility, spiritual inwardness, sexual abstinence, and pastoral communitarianism, with which the Franciscans have been associated more than any other mendicant Christian order save the Carmelites, a female order whose involvement in a recently resolved public controversy over the construction of a Catholic convent/mission at the site of the Auschwitz death camp henceforth resonates and reverberates across the *Korczak* persona (see Bartoszewski; Jenoff; Rittner and Roth).

Here some might object that my reading of *Korczak* is too narrowly focused on its Christian aspects and they would not be mistaken. Judaic

motifs are not absent from the film's characterization of Korczak; crucially, however, they are inscribed partially and reductively. One may possibly interpret Korczak's monklike qualities, for instance, in terms of Jewish gnosticism. Historically, Judaism has spawned numerous gnostic tendencies (Kabbalism, Essenism, Hasidism) as well as deriving partially from religious practices of ancient and medieval tribes ('Anavim, Chashaim, Zhenuim, Iswaites, Yudghanites, Karaites, Rechabites, and Nazarites), which are known to have encouraged solitary prayer and contemplation, respect for nature and work, charity, sexual continence, social cohesion, and ethical priority—qualities otherwise commonly associated with Christianity (Quispel and Scholem; cf. Hardy, "Monasticism").<sup>14</sup> The analogy ends there, however: Judaism has historically rejected prostrate worship, extended religious reclusion, sexual abstinence, and self-endangerment for its own sake (in excess of ethical interpolation), all practices nevertheless attributed to Wajda's Korczak.

A similar reduction of the Jewish to the Christian inscribes the film's construction of Korczak as teacher and the orphanage as teaching institution. While *Korczak* cannot deny the Jewish provenance of the Children's Home and remain credible, it can and does emphasize and draw out those aspects that are easily associable to Christianity. This occurs, for instance, when the orphans are portrayed reciting prayers common to both religions (e.g., the Psalm of David). Likewise the film entirely realigns aspects of the orphanage less recognizable to non-Jewish spectators into accordance with Christian practice. This includes misrepresenting Jewish prayer as strictly individual, subjective, and spontaneous, when in fact it is also collective, textually engaged, and time-bound; and refiguring Jewish intellection as confessionalism, whereas it refers in fact to the studied interrogation and practiced exercise of social and ethical imperatives, which lend priority to critical discipline over ritual tolerance (Friedlander).<sup>15</sup>

Thus detaching Jewish practices from their cultural foundations at the rudimentary representational level, *Korczak* prepares its Polish-Catholic spectator for the upcoming depiction of holocaustic horrors with a familiarized, comforting Korczak whose eventual demise may thus be perceived as more unsettling and meaningful than that of many other Jewish char-

acters in the film who are portrayed stereotypically (e.g., as “parasitical” *Judenrat* leaders and operatives of the Jewish ghetto “mafia”). In this regard, it is easy to concur with Lanzmann and Heymann, who otherwise, like the film’s North American critics, subordinate a structural analysis of Korczak’s characterology to the remarking of superficial detail. By the same token, one is compelled to interrogate their conceptual priorities in order that the explication of *Korczak*’s christological overdetermination resists devolving into a conservative multicultural rehearsal of Jewish identity politics, for which nonstereotyped image diversification is promoted at the expense of critiquing its potentially self-endangering material and ideological conditions. For this is precisely the point: as hinted earlier, those priorities entail affirmation of *Korczak*’s martyrology. More egregious than the film’s reductive representation of the Judaic, this critical affirmation entirely neglects the legacy of *Jewish martyrdom* as it also functions, however restrictively, in the film. Indeed at most, *Korczak*’s martyrological hermeneutic was deemed an unintended flaw attributable, ironically, to Wajda’s “good intentions” (Canby, “Saintly”; Engelberg), such that criticisms against it were vilified as “misguided and trivial” (Fox). Yet while a christological Korczak, like the Carmelite convent/mission project, is both historically tendentious and culturally offensive to Jews, the *spectral Judaism* to which that figure also necessarily refers offers critics—Jewish or not—a crucial insight into what we may call the film’s allegorical elegy to a Polish national history that is contemporaneous with Eastern European Jewish development up to and including the Judeocide, the Cold War, the Zionist turn, communist reaction, the ascendance of Solidarity, and beyond.<sup>16</sup> To his discredit, Lanzmann, a known Zionist whose *Shoah* many perceive as blatantly anti-Polish, was reluctant to acknowledge this crucial insight for reasons I shall surmise in due course.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate the historical and theoretical differences between Jewish and Christian martyrdom, much less to debate their relative merits, it is important for my argument that we at least understand one such difference. Christian martyrdom entails a project of emblematic self-sacrifice that is voluntary, transgressive, heroic, and eschatological (Hardy, “Asceticism”).<sup>18</sup> It is staked upon the

palpable image of a suffering individual whose preordained, (self-)sacrificial death is meant to signify a universal end to human suffering, lest his death have occurred in vain (cf. Brown; Kieckhefer; Meeks; Weiner and Weiner). Insofar as suffering persists, however, vigilant proof is required of the martyr's divine significance. Such proof takes the form of ritual reenactment of the sacrifice, which may be actual (pogroms, crusades) or representational (passion and morality plays), depending upon historical exigency.

This salvific, transcendental notion of martyrdom starkly contrasts with the Judaic notion, which obligates socially reparative deeds *on behalf of*, rather than merely *for the sake of*, the world (Heschel, 382). Jewish martyrdom is staked in the knowledge that mundane deeds are ineluctably social; it rejects as needlessly utopian, even diversionary, the worldly abdication necessary to the very conception of christo-martyrdom in favor of a project of *immanent* redemption. Jewish martyrology as such rejects voluntary self-endangerment and high mortal risk, which it considers blasphemous (*chillul hashem*).<sup>19</sup> Instead it promotes social participation for which sacrificial heroics are supposed only to be a product of self-defense (see Boyarin; Goldstein; Marcus; Weiner and Weiner).<sup>20</sup> In effect, Jewish martyrdom does not promise redemption christologically, for to do so would reintroduce the reactionary, medieval notion of Jewish mortal suffering as the quintessence of *Christian* sacrifice. While undeniably carrying a different series of problematic effects, historically the Jewish martyr has adopted the christological notion parodically (Jewish gnostics) and pragmatically (Israel) during times of perceived threat (Bilu; Blau; Cohen, "Sainthood"; Marcus; also Liebes; MacQuarrie, "Gnosticism"; Scholem; Sokel).

*Korczak's* veritable first act symptomatizes a grand phenomenological reduction of Jewish to Christian martyrdom, which prefigures the film's controversial final sequence and thus refers allegorically to the social relationship that has developed between Jews and non-Jews in and in connection with historical Poland, which I refer to here as the Polish-Jewish nexus. The critical evasion of this nexus by Lanzmann and Heymann betrays their unease regarding that relationship, suggesting perhaps a subliminal concern on their part that the film's spectral Judaism evokes

not merely Christian but also *Jewish* martyrdom, as it has likewise been reductively culled by Jews in the interests of neocolonialist policies in Israel/Palestine—policies that today are often perceived as verging on the genocidal (Shahak and Mezvinsky). The act's reduction articulates at the film's narrative-compositional registers, thus hermeneutically extending and deepening the film's problematic Judeo-Christian characterology.

At the narratological register, for instance, it is the subjective perspective of Korczak as it projects onto and extends across the diegesis, and not the objective action of a drama, that compels narrative movement. Recalling conventions of medieval chronicle and the New Testament after which these are modeled, Wajda's Korczak is a *hermeneutical* matrix whose evolving moral perspective serves as the film's motive force and interpretive cipher, its fulcrum for registering temporality and reference.<sup>21</sup> From an opening shot in which Korczak appears metaphysically inspired, through a series of quotidian events circumscribing the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto, the act traces a generalized, synoptic pattern by which characters move, points-of-view shift, and *mise-en-scène* is reconfigured. The narrative alternates from subjectivized interiors to objectivized exteriors and back again, with Korczak's often disembodied perspective as the vehicle of transition, as though it were a personalistic locus orienting a transcendental cause. The result is an epiphanic vision punctuating the passage of a christic parable in which Korczak's actions manifest pure will, a ubiquitous coalescence of moral feeling structuring the narrative into a cohesion and coherence uncannily emblemized by one of Korczak's memorable dialogic claims: "The world doesn't need oranges [Zionism] or labor [communism]. It needs a new faith!"<sup>22</sup>

The act begins with an interior shot of Korczak in the recording booth at the radio station. He is framed in medium close-up and positioned at a rear angle that obscures and alienates the shot's perspective. A resulting sense of subjective intimacy is underscored by low-key lighting and *chiaroscuro*. In an ensuing scene set in the station director's office, however, perspective is broadened. Korczak is fully lighted and framed in a medium shot at thirty degrees, and whereas he was initially shown speaking in monologue, he is now portrayed in dialogue with the station

director via the somewhat more objective shot/reverse-shot format. An ensuing sequence continues this externalizing orientation. Korczak and his orphans are on a weekend holiday at the orphanage summer camp at Włocławek, where they are portrayed outdoors at the lakeside. Prefiguring the film's final scene, the sequence is brightly lit and framed via frequent long shots and tableaux. It includes dialogues between characters exclusive of Korczak, and its point-of-view is largely omniscient.

At each point along the way, the apparently broadening narrative perspective is recontained, primarily by an intersection of moralizing discourse and triangulated conflict. Korczak's on-air monologue may be seen, for instance, as a homily sermonizing a travestied relationship between altruistic sacrifice and love. It subsequently evolves, however, into an angry tirade against the station manager, whom Korczak accuses of mocking human dignity by catering to Nazi orders that he be fired and his show canceled. The pattern complexifies during the Włocławek sequence, as Korczakian morality plays out across three incipient subplots, each of which exemplifies what will develop into a thematized moral dilemma. At each axis of conflict, Korczak's perspective, when not actually embodied, remains an intuitive presence, as though aligned with the omniscient point-of-view generally framing the sequence. In this way it serves to articulate the varying conflicts into an intelligible whole while itself not necessarily inhering in them.

While it facilitates this analogic hermeneutics, however, the narrative passage is also interpretable Judaically, at the Polish-Jewish nexus. During the Włocławek sequence, for instance, where Korczak calls for a new faith, central features of the proverbial "Jewish Question" play out across a love triangle between a Jewish boy, Yusek (Piotr Kozłowski), his Catholic girlfriend, Ewka (Agnieszka Kruk), and a Jewish girl, Natka, who is jealous of Ewka. These features figure explicitly as the Jewish-genealogical problem of intermarriage, the problem of internecine Jewish-political struggles (between Zionism, Bundism, and Haskalism), and the Jewish-cultural problem of sustaining communal structure and ritual practice in the Diaspora. At the same time, and because the character conflicts representing these features involve encounters with non-Jews, these problems transfigure

implicitly into allegories of Polish concern (national legitimation, political-economic instability, and the role of a national religion/ideology, respectively). The result of this twofold significance is a dialectical tracing of the Polish-Jewish nexus that illuminates the historical fact that the “Jewish Question” at once preexists and partially constitutes the Polish sovereignty from which Polish-Jewish culture will subsequently derive. Only when this twofold significance registers is Korczak’s fateful claim uttered; only then are we able to sense the depth of the scene’s abiding prewar despair.

This historiographic twist likewise marks the act’s penultimate scene, in which Korczak examines a live x-ray of a child’s beating heart while teaching a course on medical ethics, subsequent to being fired from an Aryanized radio station for which he hosts a weekly children’s show, and prior to the film’s depiction of the Nazi invasion of Poland. Here the x-ray image itself becomes a hermeneutical matrix of Korczak’s moral project. At its syntagmatic register, the image marks the brink of a major narrative ellipsis between the period immediately prior to the invasion and the Nazi takeover itself, whereupon the image accrues pre-apocalyptic significance as a minor catharsis. At its paradigmatic register, the image marks the function of a heliotrope, a rhetorical figure connoting a quasisacral, hermeneutic near-collapse (Derrida, “Violence,” 113, and “White Mythology,” 245–47).<sup>23</sup>

As seen heliotropically, the image accrues a uniqueness barely distinguishable from the x-ray machine used to represent it, thus appearing almost entirely self-referential. Exemplified by the visual disembodiment of the child’s heart within the diegetic x-ray frame and, near the end of the scene, through a medium close-up by which that frame is aligned with the nondiegetic one of the filmic shot, forming a visual mise-en-abyme, the heliotropized heart is at once decontextualized, as though displaced from its vital, organic function, and reduced to the apparatus which reveals it, as though a *prima facie* phenomenon, an animating force of the x-ray machine. Here the literal function of x-rays to enhance the capacity of human vision is not simply depicted but is mystified, directly contradicting the Judaic injunction against revering images (see Heschel, 80–99). Indeed as Korczak’s voice, now also disembodied, is projected over the image, the



heart's detached function and apparent hyperreality become interchangeable with the workings of the x-ray apparatus, which in turn expands into Korczak's perspectival ubiquity as it elevates the image-technological complex to the status of *sacre coeur* (*gnosis kardias*).

Yet again, the scene's transcendent tropology also signifies Judaically, at the Jewish-Polish nexus. At the figurative register, the x-ray machine, an apparatus of medical science, reminds us easily of concurrent Nazi medical experiments, including the "euthanasia" program decreed officially by Hitler at the conclusion of the Polish campaign (Yahil, 306–12).<sup>24</sup> The fact that the x-ray model is a girl invokes the Edenic innocence and occultism of German Romanticism as these were appropriated into the eugenic theory used to rationalize the Final Solution. As Imke Lode has demonstrated, German Romanticism is an ineluctably modern development, a reaction to scientific technology that, as such, always bears uncannily—and thereby perpetuates—the marks of its ostensible nemesis. Extending this view, Romanticism's mystical discourse on "blood and soil," invoked partially during the Włocławek sequence, may be considered to prefigure as well as to mystify the pseudoscientific character of Nazi eugenic practices (see Blaich; Roberts). The medical scientific milieu of the x-ray scene invokes the postwar Doctor's Plot, a counterrevolutionary witch hunt inversely mirroring McCarthyism and aimed almost exclusively at Jewish physicians falsely accused of anti-Soviet conspiracy.

At a literal register, furthermore, the fact that the x-ray is a *visual* technology suggests the critique of scientific looking, for which spectatorship is linked problematically to fetishism and, by extension, reification. In this respect, the scene prefigures the film's later incorporation of archival footage from the Warsaw and Łódź ghettos, a historiographic gesture that, by the footage's intertextual citation of *The Eternal Jew*, returns images exploited by Nazi propaganda to their rightful context as well as compelling critical interrogation of their function as visual (self-) evidence (Ginsberg). By this tack—a veritable secular rearticulation of the Judaic injunction against idolatry—*Korczak* evinces critical recognition of the relationship between cinema's aesthetic and ideological functions, a profoundly political move, which by its own allegorical gesturing in turn im-

plicates Polish cinema itself in a history of propaganda, whether produced under fascist, proletarian, or parliamentary regimes.

This analysis invokes my earlier suggestion that Lanzmann and Heymann evade *Korczak's* Jewish-Polish nexus because to engage it would mean having to confront their ideological implication, as propagators of Zionism, in the film's spectral referencing of Jewish martyrdom, which I have thus far illustrated figures dialectically, at manifold hermeneutic layers, as an allegorical elegy to a suppressed Polish history that is as tragically Jewish as it is triumphantly Christian. That theorists of *Shoah* such as Gertrud Koch, Elisabeth Huppert, and Shoshana Felman have confused its aesthetic with that of christo-phenomenology is in fact a telling indication of the tenor of this evasion. Lanzmann films generally inscribe an immanentism that historical elusiveness belies an otherwise respectable refusal to forget the horrors of the Holocaust as a dubious equivocation on the ideological ramifications of that event's global appropriation for those Jews today who are, at least for the moment, no longer the primary victims. Likewise Heymann's offense at *Korczak's* "Christian Zionist" conclusion should be taken not as a literal call for more "authentic" Jewish Zionist representations but as an obverse indicator of her support for a contemporary Western crusade mentality for which even the so-called involuntary, defensive heroics of Jewish martyrdom take on the mythical character of the preordained. My point, again, is not to deny *Korczak's* christological overdetermination but to insist that its undialectical interpretation dissimulates a similar overdetermination of that film's negative criticism, which, considering its provenance, poses perhaps more of a danger than the liberal term "hypocrisy" would imply.

One might concede on Lanzmann's and Heymann's behalf, of course, that during his chairing of the Polish Ministry of Culture under Solidarity, Wajda expressed publicly his enthusiasm for the sort of private Western co-sponsorship of popular Polish film production of which Lanzmann, a "high art" film director, was critical. Nevertheless, as Wajda's work on *Korczak* proceeded under that rubric, he found he could no longer sustain his initial openness: the international co-production *Korczak*, at once popular melodrama and art film, had in one respect become a deterritorialized

cultural product, a diversified commodity. Its global circulation necessarily implicated it, along with Poland itself, in the posthistorical moment of capitalist development, with its new “world cinematic” manifestation travestying the Brechtian structures often otherwise inscribed across Wajda’s political films (Engelberg, 17; Michalek and Turaj, 148–50; Sosnowski; Wajda).<sup>25</sup> In fact, *Korczak*’s Judeo-Christian “merger” recalls the modern Polish practice of deploying sacrificial imagery to national-opportunistic ends (see Fels). But Lanzmann, Heymann, and their critical supporters were oddly silent on the matter of *Korczak*’s commoditizing effects, their condemnations remaining detached from the *material* register at which aesthetic differences find ideological common cause. My analysis suggests that *Korczak*’s repeated deference to the Polish-Jewish nexus, despite and perhaps because of the reductiveness of its means, rehearses this “uneasy commonality” to the point of symptomatizing a radical social ambivalence regarding “what is to be done” that is as common to Polish as to Jewish experiences of oppression and exploitation in the modern epoch. Harkening to a pattern of compromise, collaboration, and misplacement of blame, this ambivalence uncannily parallels the ideology-effects of the proverbial *longue durée*, in the dialectical snare of which *Korczak* and many contemporary international films that grapple with the Polish-Jewish legacy, not least those of Lanzmann, leave us to imagine but a tragically redeemed utopia.

## Notes

The author wishes to thank the editors and Frances Guerin for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. The first film to be released about Janusz Korczak was Aleksander Ford’s 1975 Israeli–West German co-production *Sie Sind Frei, Doktor Korczak* (You Are Free, Dr. Korczak), also distributed as *Die Martyrer: Doktor Korczak und seine Kinder* (The Martyrs: Dr. Korczak and His Children), *The Martyr*, and *Korczak Ve’Hayeladim* (Korczak and His Children). I have been able to locate only one review of that film, Canby’s “Martyr,” which represents the film in an unfavorable light, as overly sentimental and emotive. We shall return to Canby’s evaluation. A theatrical predecessor and possible intertextual source of the Ford film, Er-

- win Sylvanus's *Korczak and His Children*, trans. Eva Boehm-Jospe (New York: Samuel French, 1970), premiered in Germany in 1958, where it won the coveted Leo Baeck Prize awarded by Berlin's Jewish community. See Skloot, *The Darkness We Carry*, 95–99.
2. France, Germany, and England all contributed financially to the film's production.
  3. Also participating in the debate was *L'Événement du Jeudi* critic A. Andreu.
  4. See his relevant criticisms of *Schindler's List* in Lanzmann, "Holocauste."
  5. Wajda's rationale for utilizing archival footage is discussed in Wajda, *Double Visions*; Michalek and Turaj, *Modern Cinema*; and Liehm and Liehm, *Most Important Art*. Ford's *Korczak und seine Kinder* also incorporates archival material but in the form of photographic stills rather than moving-image excerpts. Canby considered that the only memorable aspect of the film.
  6. The name Our Home not only implies Christocentrism (i.e., it designates an "our" [Polish-Catholic] vs. a "their" [Jewish] home); it also references the Polish resistance during World War II, as personified by its *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army); the political party formed by Solidarity; and the similarly proliberalization party to which Russian premier Boris Yeltsin belonged at the time of *Korczak's* release.
  7. For additional analysis of Simone Weil's perspective on the "Jewish Question," see Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France*, 39, 190; and Cohen, *Burden*.
  8. Tellingly, for Fox, *Korczak* testified "to the moral power of a single person."
  9. Todorov subsequently published a phenomenology of concentration camp life, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camp*.
  10. For an explication of "ludic" as I am employing it here, see Ebert, *Ludic Feminism*.
  11. For explications of this concept, see Cohen, *Myth*; and Silk, "Notes."
  12. For an extended explication of this Christian genre, in which tragic fall meets glorious redemption, see Speaight, *Christian Theatre*, 9–36.
  13. The term diegesis refers to the signified narrative content, or fictional world, of a narrative. Diegesis derives from an ancient Greek term referring to legal testimony. It was resuscitated in modern times by its introduction into film studies by French semiotician Christian Metz.
  14. Also Matt. 6:5–6: "When you are praying, do not behave like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in synagogues or on street corners in order to be noticed. I give you my word, they are already repaid. Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees what no man sees, will repay you."

15. For a classic critique of confessional tolerance, which finds its current rearticulation in George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism," see Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 93–138. The classic historiographic analysis of religious confession as social institution is, of course, Foucault's.
16. For example, Jews were given Polish right of abode during the fourteenth century by King Kazimierz the Great and became instrumental in the national development at several social and economic levels. Jewish right of abode was granted concomitantly with Western European pogroms instigated during the Crusades and with Polish national establishment, itself entailing religious acquiescence to the Holy Roman Empire. By the time of the Swedish invasion of 1655–60, known as the Deluge, Poland had a larger Jewish population than the rest of Europe combined.
17. Lanzmann's Zionism is confirmed in his subsequent film, *Tsahal* (France, 1994), a documentary that views Israeli militarism ambivalently and with noticeable tolerance.
18. As rationalized famously in Mark 8:34–35, quoting Jesus, "If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps. Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will preserve it."
19. See Talmudic tractate Shabbat 32a: "A person should never place himself in a dangerous situation with the expectation that Hashem will perform a miracle, for perhaps he will not make a miracle. And if there is a miracle, it will be deducted from one's merits."
20. Hence official Israeli insistence that reprisals against the Palestinian Intifada are merely a Jewish defense against "hostile Arabs"; and hence the name of the Israeli home army, the Israel Defense Force.
21. A supreme example of this modality in Polish literary tradition is the writing of Poland's foremost nineteenth-century Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, especially his four-part verse play, *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve), a patriotic, anti-Russian drama that famously hails Poland as the Christ of Nations. Mickiewicz is known, among others, for his sympathetic portrayal of Jews and for his later interest in mysticism and theosophy. Wajda has recently (1999) directed a cinematic adaptation of Mickiewicz's Romantic classic, *Pan Tadeusz*. For a relevant discussion of Christian subjectivism, see Waddams, who writes, "According to Christian teaching, belief, faith and commitment precede their results in the form of behavior" ("Ascetical Theology," 18).
22. This remark would be echoed six years later in North America by the rhetoric of Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed: "At heart, what America needs is not political revolution but spiritual renewal," *Newsweek*, May 13, 1996, 29.

23. In the Derridean thought representative of heliotrope theory, the quintessential heliotrope, following the term's etymology, is the sun, the apparent autochthony and generic self-containment of which would prompt Hitler to compare it favorably to the imperialist aspiration of the "Aryan race." Not irrelevant to my usage of "heliotrope" is the fact that postmodern philosophy subverts the concept into a (post)philosophical ideal for which a total collapse is effected of the literal onto the figurative layer of signification (Baudrillard, *Critique*; Bataille, *Visions*). The history of photography itself underscores this effect, as when the photographic inventor Niepce referred to the process whereby a photographed image appeared on the plate as "heliography," or "sun-writing," a phenomenon that for him would naturally require decoding (Sontag, *On Photography*, 160). In classical social psychology, however, the notion of the heliotrope is prefigured by that of bourgeois wealth, which may become its own conspicuous sign in an effort to efface its exploitative function. Harkening furthermore to Marx, this so-called conspicuous sign refers to nothing less than the supreme commodity, religion, "the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself" (Veblen, *Theory*). A Marxist critique of heliotropy is offered by Morton, "Politics."
24. An earlier Wajda film is perhaps not coincidentally entitled *Without Anesthesia* (*Bez znieczulenia*, 1978).
25. For the classic theory of deterritorialized commodification and what postmodern theorists have often called posthistorical capitalism, see Marx, *Grundrisse*, 408–9.

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# II

## Literary Encounters



# 7

## The Holocaust, Jedwabne, and the Measure of Time

GEOFFREY HARTMAN

An important attempt to understand the decisive impact of the Holocaust on both fiction and critical discourse is Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980). Though Blanchot does not equate the disaster referred to in the title exclusively with the Holocaust, he indicates that what happened is epochal, both for human consciousness generally and for the art of writing in particular. He plays on the etymology of "disaster" to suggest a radical disorientation linked to the fall or vanishing of a star. The impasse he faces is that after such disasters, writing (in whatever genre) must convey an altered state yet cannot change so radically that it would scuttle either its short-term communicative or long-term transmissive power. The disaster enters his text, therefore, as a prose that reflects "the shock of the unintelligible" (Adorno) yet maintains a normative decorum. Blanchot's *pensées* are antisystematic fragments that lack the steadfast "star" of a clear time-line or a synthesis affirming unity of consciousness or offering the hope of a progressive merging of subjective desire and objective reality. Though they refer unmistakably to his own intellectual milieu, and are datable that way, they remain, most of them, "impersonified," as Mallarmé would say. Sometimes this distinctly French mode of literary impersonality, this inertial, anticatastrophic formalism (more radical than T. S. Eliot's famous impersonality theory), results in word or image bearing an unusual emphasis that can be overlooked—or overlooks itself, as it were. This happens when Blanchot defines the

Holocaust. It is described as “the *absolute* event of history—which is a date in history—that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of meaning was swallowed up.” While the contagious metaphor going from “utter-burn” to “history took fire” is conventional enough, there is shock value if Blanchot is saying that history has come to a stop.<sup>1</sup> But that is not what he is saying, unless we differentiate between history as a particular mode of understanding time and time itself. Time does not stop.

What does it mean, then, to take the Shoah into consciousness? The temptation is to claim it periodizes the flow of time by marking off an exceptional phase, and so dividing before and after. Think of how many “posts” have recently sprung up: post-Holocaust, postwar, poststructuralism, postmodern, post-philosophy, post-traumatic stress syndrome. And now post-9/11. Blanchot does not doubt that such a trick of thought helps to focus the traumatic or unintelligible. But the next step, according to him, should be to guard (“veiller sur”) the space or absence created by that sudden incursion of the unintelligible. Guard it, that is, from explanations or consolations seeking to fill a void, from anything that pretends that the factors contributing to that moment are over, like a freak storm.

His subtlest point, however, is that responding with a vehement temporal demarcation is part of the disaster.<sup>2</sup> Instead of yielding to the “everything is different now,” to an epochal before/after distinction, this habit of the mind should be challenged. Blanchot’s own response is to turn from death as a final date toward dying: that is, to contemplate an intolerable un-power or passivity. This goes against our mental nerves, which are trained to be activist. They react to events by working them through or extracting a meaning. Though it may be that a *saeculum* or era is over, and that we now find ourselves in a different one, this era, like previous ones, was defined by the deceptive notion of an ending. *What has come to an end is the notion itself of an end-time.*

Blanchot’s insight does not remain at the level of methodology or epistemology. The consequences he draws are, instead, insistently moral. For suffering, without an end-time, is cut loose from any value system that comforts itself with the thought of a sublime reversal. Catastrophe-cre-

ation becomes an obsolete hope and suffering is no longer, as in the birth pangs of the Messianic era, a condition of redemption. It is the suffering, perhaps for ever, of suffering, whether we experience that directly or cannot avoid watching the suffering of others. "It is the horror of a suffering without end, a suffering that time can no longer redeem, that has escaped time and for which there is no longer recourse; it is irremediable."<sup>3</sup> The Holocaust, then, and with it the haunting imagery of both utopia and apocalypse—utopia because Germany as a nation was deluded into a euphoric vision of purity through expulsion and murder ("Genocide," Adorno wrote, "is absolute integration")—continues beyond 1945 as a possibility too fundamental to be foreclosed by a period term.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, from Blanchot's quarrel with Hegel throughout *The Writing of the Disaster*, we infer that the important word in "the movement of meaning was swallowed up" is "movement." History may catch fire, but it is not burnt up, as if Apocalypse were at hand; history's movement or "sens" (the French word carries the meaning of direction as well as sense) is what has been fatally injured. The divisions of time discerned by Hegel, the progressive movement of history powered by the famous dialectic, *that kind of historicized hope* can no longer be invoked. There is at most what Adorno labeled a negative dialectic: a contestatory rhythm or flux that recalls Nietzsche's "eternal return."

Blanchot's insight is far from being a limited polemical response targeting the Hegelian illusion. It cuts to the heart of the effort to find an explanation in history for the destructions recorded by history. All attempts to discern the shape of time, all micro-chronic or macro-chronic speculation, participate in that effort.<sup>5</sup> Does knowledge still provide a sort of comfort, as in Pascal's famous saying about man as a reed who is crushed, but a thinking reed that knows what is happening? "O you who know," is Charlotte Delbo's subversive reply in *None of Us Will Return*, "Did you know that suffering is limitless / That horror cannot be circumscribed / Did you know this / You who know."<sup>6</sup>

I was reminded of that limitless suffering while reading about the horrifying massacre of the Jews of Jedwabne, Poland, in Jan T. Gross's *New Yorker* article of March 12, 2001, a prelude to his book on that subject.<sup>7</sup>



The details are so crude and cruel, so utterly inhuman, that one wonders, despite the modern commitment to expose and publish, whether anything redemptive, or simply historically necessary, could come from knowing about this episode.<sup>8</sup>

The author marshals effectively the eyewitness and court depositions on what happened in barely eight hours on July 10, 1941; indeed he succeeds remarkably in setting the episode into the context of World War II and the successive occupation of this part of Poland, first by Russia then by Germany. It is clear, though, even from the *New Yorker's* condensed, journalistic version of Gross's book, which focuses on a survivor's account of April 1945 (the only one from that time), testimony from trials held in 1949 and 1953, and later interviews, that the author wishes to do more than sort out everything in terms of the precise sequence of events and the identity of the murderous posse. He rectifies in the manner of a historian an impression that the responsibility for the atrocity can be laid mainly at the door of the occupying German army, especially its commander. For the mayor and the town council, only too willing to kill all Jedwabne's Jews, seized on the commander's oral permission that they had eight hours—according to one deposition—to do what they wanted. They immediately set out to torture and slaughter by the primitive means at their disposal (stones, bricks, knives, axes, clubs) all their Jewish neighbors and, when that proved too large a task, drove the remainder into a barn and burnt them alive. Between one thousand and sixteen hundred people perished.<sup>9</sup>

To remove what is at best a half-truth, a self-protective distortion on the part of the perpetrators, or others wishing to ease the reputation of Poles nationally (the Jedwabne episode was not unique), hardly exhausts the reason for publishing this harrowing account. The headlines of the *New Yorker* article make that clear. They come as a triple layer that starts with "Annals of War," proceeds to "NEIGHBORS," and adds "*One day in 1941, half the population of a small town in Poland murdered the other half. Why?*"

The account itself begins with a date, "In January of 1949, security police detained fifteen men," and identifies the place, "in the town of Jedwabne in northeastern Poland." This composition of place is an utterly conventional narrative opening, yet makes sense if it elicits questions in the reader, es-

pecially after the rest of the story with its many specific dates has been absorbed. Why the hiatus between the end of the war and the trials of 1949? Why a further hiatus between those trials and today's fuller disclosure? What is the significance of the town being in northeastern Poland?

These questions are easily answered by the historian, but the up-front specificity of date and place remains overdetermined. It tells us: this did not happen "once upon a time" and in some country of the mind. Yet dates and actual place names also limit by that very concreteness the effect of what is told: it happened then and over there, and what happened is history. This containment of the event turns another containment into a bitter irony. The German commander, as reported, objected to the butchery taking more than eight daylight hours. Why he objected, we do not know: was it because of habitual Germanic or military precision, was it a taunt humiliating the Polish killers for their inefficiency, or did he wish to make the conquered Poles feel controlled (even murderous actions must be formally empowered)? Were those eight hours of murder insignificant in his mind compared to the Nazi vision of a thousand-year *Reich*?

A fictional telling not only could explore these motives but also would not need a double-edged rhetoric of specificity. Fiction's "once upon a time" suggests "once and always." Jedwabne's condensation of time, moreover, the fact that the slaughter was organized and evolved so swiftly, in the space of a day or less, adapts it intrinsically to unity of time and place, which are basic precepts of classical tragedy. The restriction of place to a few thousand square yards and of time to that single day, augmented by the fact that up to 50 percent of Jedwabne's adult population of male non-Jews as well as quite a few people gathered from the nearby countryside participated in the massacre, leaves one with the feeling of a natural disaster gathering suddenly and striking randomly like a deadly hurricane—except that this hurricane was a paroxysm targeting a specific group of neighbors. That the pogrom was a face-to-face, close-up killing, rather than being unleashed by a force indifferent to everything in its path, projects a devastating and unintelligible image of human nature.

Not that Jan Gross neglects to seek explanations. He refuses to rail, like Claude Lanzmann, against "the obscenity of understanding." He clears

away, for example, false or unproven allegations that the Jews brought the disaster on themselves by having collaborated with the Soviet regime or even by having betrayed the Polish resistance. He brings evidence, in fact, that inverts the “well-established cliché” of the closeness of Jews and communists. In a radical revision of popular historiography, or folklore, he suggests as a hypothesis that “*antisemites rather than Jews were instrumental in establishing the Communist regime after the war.*”<sup>10</sup>

Yosef Yerushalmi’s well-known book *Zakhor* has posited an absolute incompatibility between memory—in particular, the Jewish collective memory—and modern historiography.<sup>11</sup> Gross, it seems to me, disproves the dichotomy, or its absolute character, by producing a powerful *Yizkor* (Memorial) book based on strict historical methods. And he revives the truth of the proverb that truth is stranger than fiction. The one difference here between fiction and history centers on *probability*: while the historian has to prove that an incident, however incredible, happened, the fiction writer must convince us it happened without the self-limiting authority of established fact.

Probability is no small matter: incidents like Jedwabne, like many such events in the Holocaust era, are so hard to believe, so incredible, that while local knowledge of them survived, outsiders in contact with that knowledge could not suspend their disbelief. It took Gross, as he honestly says, four years to follow up what he heard. In an important chapter of his book he urges historians to take a new attitude toward oral sources, in effect to think of them initially as truthful rather than false.

The first superscript of the *New Yorker* essay, “Annals of War,” like the dates that follow and the placement of the town in eastern Poland, is a contextualizing move that emphasizes factuality and prepares us for a partial motivation of the pogrom. (Crimes must be motivated to have probability; that there are victims is not enough.) The massacre took place in wartime, shortly after the launching of Barbarossa, Germany’s invasion of the Soviet-occupied part of Poland. Some Jews, it seems, and also some non-Jewish Poles, had indeed welcomed the Russian troops and even collaborated. But whatever motives or passions were served by the false rumor of

extensive Jewish collaboration—greed for Jewish property certainly played its part in the massacre, to the point where the charred bodies in the barn were searched for booty—many inhabitants of Jedwabne mentioned that an already existing, if latent, antisemitic resentment was ignited.

Gross emphasizes, however, the exceptionally good relations of Jews and their neighbors in Jedwabne, even while acknowledging certain exceptions, such as threats of a pogrom every Easter. The second headline of the article indicates that something improbable happened, something hard to believe had we not seen the astonishingly swift disintegration of neighborly relations in the multiethnic towns of Bosnia. Yet moral astonishment is implied rather than explicit, perhaps because it might seem naïve (the most intimate relations, as in families, can also turn into the most hostile), or because the modern historian tries to present rather than moralize. To be a moralist would require the ironic and self-lacerating skills of another Pole, Czesław Miłosz, as in his poems “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” and “Child of Europe.”

The third headline does spell out a moral anguish, a “Why?” that cannot be suppressed. The Raul Hilberg doctrine of having a Holocaust historian or political scientist tell that what happened happened—that is, keeping to facts and uncovering the functional, administrative reasonings and mechanisms operative in organizing mass murder on that scale, rather than speculating on intention—never quite succeeds in suppressing that “Why?” as we descend to the bloody particulars. It is only in the form of a general, metaphysical question (“Why did God allow it to happen?” and “Why to the Jews?”), that the “Why?” leads to impotence of thought, or inane answers by those who claim to speak for God and blame the victims (usually for their infringement of orthodox Jewish law) as well as the perpetrators (who are made to figure, implicitly at least, as instruments of God’s retribution).

Every few years another shock wave from the past reaches us. The Polish case, in its complexity, shows how much was suppressed, to this very day. The “Why?” surfaces again, as much an irrepressible cry as a call for historical explanation. The historian can turn that cry into a rational narrative of Nazism’s mobilization of irrationality as it escalates from persecution

to genocide. Yet making the exterminating process intelligible by dividing it up into functional solutions at the local level (Gross decidedly does not engage in that), solutions motivated by ideology, or ethnic and religious hatred, or a perceived military necessity, explains neither the face-to-face murderousness of Jedwabne nor the rare acts of face-to-face goodness. And since the story of Jedwabne reveals once more that the historian's resurrection of the past continues to unsettle it and opens the wound of the Holocaust, it is no wonder art responds to the suppressed "Why?" in its own way, which is often not a historical narrative, sometimes not even a narrative. If the numberless victims burnt in barns or shoved into mass graves hurt too much to fit the measures of poetry, the accumulation of cruel facts scuttles almost every attempt at a bearable narrative, let alone one still trying to make sense of a people's collective biography.

This does not mean that the Matter of the Holocaust is impossible to depict. The problem is one of evoking an original response, of freeing rather than freezing our feelings and speech. Neither the subtlest nor the most graphic imaging of the disaster guarantees such a response.

Fiction at its best leads to a recognition scene. "Do you know me?" is the question haunting *King Lear*, a superbly royal but also ironic question, since the king clearly did not know himself. Shakespeare's play stays longer for the absent answer than any other writing about the human condition. The finest history writing does something equivalent. Gross asks the Polish people, through his remarkable exposition of the destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne, to know themselves, to focus on this agonizing quest for self-knowledge. One unusually explicit moral reflection links this quest to the future of Poland: "If at some point in this collective biography [of Poland] a big lie is situated, then everything that comes afterward will be devoid of authenticity and laced with fear of discovery. Like several other nations, in order to reclaim its own past, Poland will have to tell its past to itself anew."<sup>12</sup>

Miłosz is a precursor of that authenticity. He confronts his postwar consciousness of the Holocaust in lyrics that shuttle between Poland and America. He challenges the morality of the bystanders *including himself*, especially those tempted to deny the claims of memory in the very name

of communist dialectics:

He who invokes history is always secure.  
The dead will not rise to witness against him.

History is written by the victors, yet episodes the poet cannot not know, like the burning of the Warsaw Ghetto or massacres like Jedwabne, compel him to honor the dead and become a witness against false witness. If Miłosz keeps addressing himself as well as his fellow Poles and us, it is to remove indifference and expose a living wound in need of being healed:

You swore never to touch  
The deep wounds of your nation  
So you would not make them holy  
With the accursed holiness that pursues  
Descendants for many centuries.<sup>13</sup>

The truth may be holy, reconciliation may be holy, but the wound itself is never holy.

## Notes

An earlier and shorter version of this chapter appeared as “Wounded Time” in *Partisan Review* 64 (2002): 367–74. We thank the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University for permission to use a revised version here.

1. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 147. By contagious metaphor I mean the common stylistic practice, especially in journalism, of creating a metaphorical carryover from the subject of a sentence to its other parts. For instance, after Vice President Cheney’s formulation of an energy policy, concerning oil, gas, and coal, headlines tended to run: “Cheney’s Energy Policy *Fuels* Protest.” Here is Blanchot in the original French: “L’holocauste, l’événement absolu de l’histoire, historiquement daté, cette toute-brûlure où toute l’histoire s’est embrasée, où le mouvement du sens s’est abîmé” (*L’Écriture du désastre*, 180).
2. See his essay of 1963 on Jabès’s *Book of Questions* from which I take (p. 253)

“cette rupture du pouvoir violent qui veut faire époque et marquer une époque.” Blanchot’s “là parle la catastrophe encore et toujours proche, la violence infinie du malheur” shows how close he already comes to the concept of a disaster writing. Blanchot’s “disaster” is also adumbrated in earlier essays by citing Hölderlin’s understanding of a “withdrawal” of the gods, which Heidegger elaborates as “*Entzug*.” This cannot be literalized as an “event,” however, without introducing either a mythic speculation or a false mode of temporal reckoning that, seeking a return to essence, an event that is an advent, turns everything else into an inessential nonevent. Cf. Blanchot, “Hölderlin’s Itinerary,” in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 269–76. I discuss the issue of historical dating, or epochalism, in *The Fateful Question of Culture*, chap. 4, “Language and Culture after the Holocaust.”

3. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 172. Descriptions like this suggest something more intense than Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness,” that “conscience malheureuse” which became the center of Jean Wahl’s influential interpretation of the thinker. See his *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, first published in 1929. Wahl, who died in 1974, was active at the Sorbonne for some time after the war. We imagine rather the situation of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, or of a Hell without any torment except a time which does not pass, and which subjects us to others without any hope of redeeming them or oneself. The only writer before Blanchot who approaches his sense of “malheur” is Simone Weil. “Tous les problèmes se ramènent au temps. Douleur extrême: temps non orienté: voie de l’enfer ou du paradis. Perpetuité ou éternité.” See Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, 96.
4. Cf. Ignatieff, “Lemkin’s Word,” 25. “The danger of genocide lies in its promise to create a world without enemies. Think of genocide as a crime in the service of a utopia. A world without discord, enmity, suspicion, free of the enemy without or the enemy within. Once we understand that this utopia is the core of the genocidal intention, we have to realize that this utopia menaces us forever.”
5. For a useful account of “small time,” “middle time,” and “big time” measurements of history in Jewish tradition, see Idel, “The Jubilee in Jewish Mysticism.” For a more general and daring speculation based on the history of art, see Kubler, *The Shape of Time*.
6. Delbo, *None of Us*, 11.
7. Jan Gross, “Neighbors: Annals of War,” *New Yorker*, March 12, 2001, 64–77. See also his book-length account, *Neighbors*.
8. Saul Friedländer, in “The Wehrmacht, German Society and the Knowledge of the Mass Extermination of the Jews” (2001, unpublished), is the only historian

I know who has raised the question of whether writing about the extermination must include a detailed narration of the horror as such. He comes to the conclusion that “recording the horror is an outright historical imperative” even if the degree to which this is carried out should be left in each case to the historian’s sensitivity and judgment. Despite this qualification, Friedländer reiterates that “deleting the precise rendition of the horror may lead to a skewing of the overall picture and also to a distortion of the history of a society that was more tainted by the criminal dimension of National Socialism than had been assumed for a long time.” It remains to be seen in how far this conclusion about German society is valid for Poland under German occupation.

9. The *New York Times* of March 16, 2001, reported in “World Briefing” (A6) that the Holocaust monument at Jedwabne that had blamed the Nazis for the killings is to be replaced by a new one ahead of the sixtieth anniversary of the 1941 pogrom. But this report in its brevity again simplifies the issue. Adam Michnik’s description of the episode, and his self-examination as a Pole and a Jew in the *New York Times* of March 17 (“Poles and Jews: How Deep the Guilt,” A15, A17) then does justice to the issues involved.
10. Gross, *Neighbors*, 167.
11. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*.
12. Gross, *Neighbors*, 168–69.
13. Miłosz, *Collected Poems*, 88, 76.

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# 8

## The Ceremony (Excerpts from a Play)

EVA HOFFMAN

*The Ceremony* is based on two events, both of which took place in the small Polish town of Jedwabne, sixty years apart in time. The first event, the rediscovery of which several years ago shocked Poland and much of world opinion, was a massacre perpetrated in 1941 by the town's Polish inhabitants on their Jewish neighbors. The second, which took place in the summer of 2001, was a commemorative ceremony conducted under the auspices of the Polish government and intended to honor the dead and offer apologies for the Polish role in the crime.

For me the play emerged from the commemorative ceremonies that I attended, and which seemed to me in themselves to have some of the force and impact of ritual drama. Indeed, it struck me that such ceremonies of collective commemoration are our contemporary versions of communal ritual and that they bring up questions harkening back to ancient Greek drama: how to heal the *polis* in the wake of fratricidal conflict; how to deal with memories of ancestors who were wronged; how to attribute guilt and reckon with responsibility for the perpetration of atrocity. *The Ceremony* is therefore conceived as a drama of collective passions as much as of individual psychology—a kind of spoken oratorio for many voices, employing music, documentary voice-overs, and filmed images as part of the expressive palette.

Although *The Ceremony* is grounded in a particular history, it is also intended as a broader meditation on the causes of communal violence and

the possibilities of a reparative understanding in its aftermath. Finally, I hope that the play will itself act as a kind of ceremony, an enactment of communal conflict, mourning, and atonement and ultimately of a difficult, chastening exorcism.

*The play opens on a darkened stage. We hear muffled country sounds—crickets, rustling leaves, the barking of a dog—and a low clangor of metal being struck. As the sound grows louder, the light comes up on three men gathered around a basic smithy. The roughest of them is dressed in working overalls and is beating metal into a horseshoe. The two others, more genteel looking and dressed in ordinary clothes, are standing around, smoking cigarettes. It is dusk, and the light gets dimmer as the scene progresses.*

MAN No. 1 (dragging on his cigarette):

What're they coming for, anyway? What do they want?

MAN No. 2:

To spit in our faces, that's what.

BLACKSMITH (darkly):

If they think we can't spit back . . .

MAN No. 1:

Well, at least *they* won't be coming back here, worse luck . . . (He crosses himself furtively).

*Silence. The men drag on their cigarettes.*

MAN No. 2:

They say Leibe is still alive.

BLACKSMITH:

Who says?

MAN No. 2:

Somebody came from Warsaw the other day . . . some snoop. Journalist, they said.

BLACKSMITH:

There's going to be more of them tomorrow. Snooping around. Gawking. Just don't let them try to come to my house . . .

MAN No. 1 (inhaling on his cigarette deeply, as if to add some importance to himself):

Dignitaries . . . from all over the world. Coming to our Jedwabne.

BLACKSMITH (darkly):

Just let them try . . .

MAN No. 1 (suddenly):

Buenos Aires, that's what it's called.

BLACKSMITH:

What're you talking about?

MAN No. 1:

That's the place where Leibe lives. That's what they said.

MAN No. 2 (reflectively):

How did he get away, anyway?

BLACKSMITH:

He ran into the woods . . . You know, while we were busy.

MAN No. 1:

Then Frania took him in . . . that saint.

MAN No. 2:

I thought I heard the moans . . .

BLACKSMITH (banging on the metal):

What are you talking about? What moans?

MAN No. 2 (with some anxiety in his voice):

From the barn . . . You know, where it was. At night.

MAN No. 1:

It's the wind, man, that's what you hear.

MAN No. 2:

Old Mandelbaum, I hear him . . .

MAN No. 1 (reminiscently):

Old Mandelbaum . . . Not a bad sort, he was. Never came after my dad for his debts . . .

BLACKSMITH (harshly, as he bangs the horseshoe):

He came to have horseshoes made all the time . . . That's one that won't be coming back for sure.

MAN No. 2:

They'll gawk, like we're in a zoo . . .

MAN No. 1:

Remember, how they moaned in that synagogue . . . Like they were possessed. It got worse after 39 . . . Maybe they knew what was coming.

BLACKSMITH:

They were getting scared, that's what . . . They knew their time was coming.

MAN No. 2:

They thought they could lord it over us, when the Russkis got here . . .

But they got it too. That's what you get, for trusting the Russkis.

BLACKSMITH (bringing down the hammer ferociously):

He snitched on my dad . . . Leibe. I know it . . . Five bloody years in Siberia . . . for nothing.

MAN No. 2:

Jankowski too . . . Worse luck.

MAN No. 1:

He was never the same afterwards . . .

BLACKSMITH:

Remember our boys in that meadow . . .

MAN No. 2:

Leibe's throat . . .

BLACKSMITH:

I knew that weapon well, I made it myself.

MAN No. 1:

Yeah, our boys gave it to him, didn't they. Zbych was drunk as a lord that day . . .

MAN No. 2:

And Malka, do you remember Malka and her little girl?

MAN No. 1 (urgently):

I don't want to remember Malka . . . Not Malka . . .

MAN No. 2:

It's a shame to say it, but sometimes I miss them . . . You know, how they talked, in that funny way . . .

MAN No. 1:

Yeah, and how they carried on in them synagogues of theirs . . . The

ones in the black clothes . . . The way they bowed all over themselves, to that what'd you call it, Torah . . . Not like any normal person you ever saw.

*Silence.*

BLACKSMITH (banging on a piece of metal fiercely):

If they try to take anything from us . . . They can gawk, but just don't let them try. It's ours now.

MAN No. 1:

They had money under the mattress, every one of them . . .

MAN No. 2:

I didn't find any, worse luck . . .

*Sound of wind whistling through the trees.*

MAN No. 1:

Remember how they dressed . . . the girls. Dresses like nobody ever saw here . . . Eh, some of them were pretty, with their black eyes.

MAN No. 2:

If you fall between their fingers, that's the end. Like with them sirens . . .

MAN No. 1 (crossing himself):

D'you hear . . .

BLACKSMITH:

Yeah, I hear. The wind is what I hear.

*Pause.*

MAN No. 2:

It's a shame to admit it, but sometimes I wish . . .

BLACKSMITH:

Yeah, I know what you wish . . . well, that ain't going to happen. They ain't coming back.

MAN No. 1:

Leibe's father, remember him? Tate Leibe, he was called. Eh, I still remember the way he moaned when our boys . . . Damn their souls . . .

MAN No. 2 (reflectively):

Yeah, damn their souls . . . all of them. (Pause.) The President is coming too, they say . . . What for, I'd like to know? He's never come to Jedwabne before.

BLACKSMITH (angrily):

To apologize to the Jews, that's what for. He'll be bowing all over himself, like he's a Jew himself . . .

MAN No. 1:

There's some say he is . . .

MAN No. 2:

Worse luck . . .

*Silence, while the two men drag on their cigarettes thoughtfully. The light, which has been subsiding throughout the scene, is now very dim. For a moment, only the light of the cigarettes is visible; then it is extinguished as the stage goes dark. Lights up on empty stage, bathed in bright light. On the SCREEN, a fragment of a bucolic country road, framed by poplars. The Guests, dressed mostly in dark clothes, start coming on, in pairs or one by one.*

MAN (looking around in a kind of perplexity):

So it was here?

WOMAN:

Hard to imagine . . .

MAN:

A pretty town . . .

WOMAN:

Poor . . .

MAN:

Right here. So hard to imagine . . .

WOMAN:

Why did we come . . .

MAN:

Maybe we shouldn't . . .

WOMAN:

You mean, revive them?

MAN:

What does it mean . . .

WOMAN:

You mean to us . . .

MAN:

It was so long ago . . .

WOMAN:

But they're still with us . . .

*On the SCREEN, a fragment of text:*

"Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was coming up from the Peiraeus, close to the outer side of the north wall, when he saw some dead bodies lying near the executioner, and he felt a desire to look at them, and at the same time felt disgust at the thought and tried to turn aside. For some time he fought with himself and put his hand over his eyes, but in the end the desire got the better of him and, opening his eyes wide with his fingers, he ran forward to the bodies, saying, "There you are, curse you, have your fill of the lovely spectacle."

*Other GUESTS enter the stage, looking around as if they were in a kind of trance. As they walk on, they speak musingly, as if to themselves, in a continuous ribbon of sounds.*

GUESTS:

Why did we come . . .

*Co my tu robimy . . .*

*Il est si beau ici . . .*

No wonder they loved it.

They hated it . . .

Right here . . .



Why come . . .

*Musielišmy . . .*

*Zakhor . . .*

I'm afraid . . .

I feel . . . nothing.

Haunted ground . . .

A pretty place . . .

Why are we here . . .

To remember . . .

To avenge.

To atone.

To mourn.

*Le-hitabel . . .*

To hate.

To grieve.

To understand . . .

*As the GUESTS gather in the square, they look up at the podium, where the PRESIDENT is standing, as if overseeing the proceedings. The PRESIDENT stands very still for a moment, contemplating the scene before him.*

PRESIDENT:

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sixty years ago, on July 10th, 1941, a crime was committed

Against the Jews on this land,

At that time conquered and occupied by Nazi Germany.

This was a dreadful day.

A day of hatred and cruelty.

We know much about this crime,

Though not everything.

Maybe we will never learn the whole truth.

But this has not prevented us from being here today,

And speaking in an open voice.

We know enough to stand here in truth—facing pain, cries  
 And suffering of those who were murdered here;  
 Face to face with the victims' families who are here today;  
 Before the judgment of our own conscience.

*The HOST comes in from the direction of the podium. He is dressed in a traditional Polish costume and extends his arms in a gesture of expansive welcome. As he does so, the GUESTS snap to and look alert, as if coming out of a trance.*

HOST (making an expansive gesture of greeting):

Welcome, welcome to our little town . . . We are here on a somber occasion; this cannot be denied. But I hope you've had a chance to observe some of the charms of our countryside on your way here . . . Those poplar trees, they are beautiful, you must admit, especially at this time of the year . . .

*The HOST proceeds to greet the guests one by one, shaking hands, and indicating the place where they should stand. The first guest he greets is RACHEL, a young American woman dressed in a chic black suit and high heels.*

HOST:

Young lady, you're welcome here. You are?

RACHEL (without any nicety):

Rachel Tannenbaum.

HOST:

I wonder if you could tell us where you've come from today.

RACHEL:

America. Baltimore, if anyone cares.

HOST:

Baltimore . . . And you've come all this way to Jedwabne . . .

RACHEL (cutting in, in a resentful tone):

My parents. They think it's some kind of duty. Otherwise, I'd have much preferred to stay at home, believe me.

HOST (startled):

Yes, of course, a duty . . . Did you have any . . . family . . .

RACHEL (angrily):

My grandparents, if you must know.

HOST:

Yes, I see . . . (Trying to recover his joviality.) Then I hope you feel this is your country too . . . in a way.

RACHEL (brusquely):

Why should I? I am a lawyer in Baltimore. With a specialty in divorce. I came because . . . I had to. They thought it was some kind of . . . sacred duty. I have nothing to do with this place.

HOST (taken aback, but continuing):

Did you know them . . .

RACHEL:

How could I, they were killed. (Pause.) By your people.

HOST (pulls back as if stung, and turns to PIOTR, a middle-aged Polish man dressed in a dignified way).

HOST:

Yes, this is a somber occasion . . . You're from Warsaw, have I guessed . . .

PIOTR (cutting in, and speaking with a sense of injured urgency):

Yes, not from very far.

HOST:

You look somehow . . . familiar.

PIOTR:

My father . . .

HOST (expansively):

Ah, the schoolteacher!

PIOTR:

Yes, the schoolteacher.

HOST:

So you came . . . to remember him.

PIOTR:

And the others too. His friends.

HOST (more thoughtfully):

Yes, I remember . . . Old Mandelbaum, they talked together all the time . . . Discussions they had, into the night . . . Theology, don't you know . . . I remember the light in Mandelbaum's house . . . Eh, I was just a tyke then.

RACHEL:

Mandelbaum! That's my grandfather you're talking about! I never heard of any friends of his . . . among your people.

PIOTR (speaking with a sense of injured urgency):

It sounds to me like this lady knows very little about how . . . life was here, and I'm very sorry to hear her accusatory tone. It's not . . . helpful on a day like this. It's just not . . . helpful.

HOST (trying to interrupt him unsuccessfully):

Yes, just what I think, but we mustn't . . .

PIOTR:

Yes, but I feel that this young lady should know something . . . of what went on here. She should know that we also have . . . our memories. My father told me about all those discussions he had . . . They were his friends . . . I came here to express my . . . human sympathy and solidarity. With everybody who died . . . who suffered. My father . . . died in Siberia. A terrible death, all alone in the snow . . . Someone must have informed on him . . . but . . . it doesn't matter. (Pauses, with evident self-restraint.) Or at least it doesn't matter any more . . . I have come here to express my deep . . . sympathy. To mourn, because this is a day of mourning.

*This declaration is interrupted by SAMUEL, a Jewish man of intellectual demeanor, who speaks in a quick, articulate stream. The HOST, trying to keep some control of the proceedings, indicates with a gesture where PIOTR should stand.*

SAMUEL:

Of course I understand the young lady's feelings completely—what is your name? Yes, Rachel . . . Of course, it's a very emotional experi-

ence to set foot for the first time on the very ground where our ancestors died in such a terrible way . . . But you know, Rachel, I can't help but agree with this gentleman—Piotr? Yes, hello, Piotr . . . (He shakes Piotr's hand without interrupting his speech)—that we must try to understand the other side, if I may say so, *we* must try to understand too . . . And of course, we must remember that before death there was life, lots of life, in this very village, in this very town, look around, can't you just imagine? . . . the Polish peasants, the Jews all here, living side by side, nothing unusual about it . . . I have studied these things, you see, we must remember how it was . . . for all those hundreds of years . . .

*The HOST, who has been looking more and more pleased throughout SAMUEL'S speech, now nevertheless decides to interrupt him, and gestures him toward his place.*

HOST (speaking to the gathered company, as if introducing SAMUEL):

Professor Smolensky, one of the distinguished visitors whose presence here is so important for us today.

*The HOST then extends his hand to HANNA, a Jewish woman of uncertain nationality, who has stood a little apart from the others, with a look of wonderment, or perplexity, on her face. In all the group scenes, we should remain aware of her as a kind of central consciousness.*

HOST:

You haven't told us why you've come . . . What your expectations are today.

HANNA:

Expectations . . . You see, I understand so little about what happened here and why . . . Even thought I was born . . . not far from here. So I thought maybe standing on this ground again . . . I would like to understand . . .

*She has been observed by ROBERT, an impeccably dressed, somewhat rakish-looking Jewish man, carrying a sleek briefcase.*

ROBERT (with an ironically formal bow):

Robert Eisler, from Argentina.

HOST:

A long way to come . . . (Less decisively than before; he's clearly been a bit shaken by the previous exchanges.) I wonder if you can tell us what brought you here.

ROBERT (speaking with a kind of dismissive nonchalance):

Oh, personal reasons. Isn't that what it's called? (Ironically) Too personal perhaps to *share* with this distinguished company. (Pause, after which he shifts to Polish.) *Jestem stąd* . . . Yes, I'm from this country.

HOST:

Your family . . .

ROBERT (tersely):

My mother survived. My father didn't.

*He makes another ironic bow, as if he were on stage. He then turns toward ZVI, a young Israeli filmmaker with a small camera slung over his shoulder.*

ROBERT:

You're planning to record this lovely occasion for posterity?

ZVI (extending his hand):

Zvi Talmin. From Israel. (He shrugs.) No thoughts of posterity . . .

This is for my own benefit.

*The HOST indicates where ROBERT and ZVI should take their places. Simultaneously, an aged, frail couple—the TOMASZEWSKIS—enter the stage. She is in a wheelchair, bent over as if half asleep. He is pushing the wheelchair solicitously, occasionally adjusting the blanket around her legs. They are noticed by ZVI, who approaches them, looking at them with fascination.*

*EUGENIA emits a long sigh.*

ZVI:

So you're the Orpheus and Euridice of Jedwabne . . . Except you came out, you emerged from the flames . . .

EUGENIA:

From the flames, from the underworld . . . Three years I spent in the underworld, with him bringing me food, giving me the marriage ring . . . There were others too, hiding under the ground, like animals . . . Helped by good people, who behaved like angels . . . Not like the others, the devils who killed. Everything they took from me . . . My credenza . . . (She hangs her head low, as if falling asleep.) But I've told my story many times, and I'm tired . . . It's an old story. Let others talk now, it's up to them . . .

*ZVI joins the GUESTS, who are now ranged in an orderly group, in front of an improvised podium. There is a moment of silence, as the HOST looks behind him, in a clear expectation of somebody's entrance.*

HOST (in a ceremonial tone):

Ladies and gentlemen, the Mayor of Jedwabne.

MAYOR:

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to welcome you in this ancient square on this historic occasion. In the last year, the name of Jedwabne has become well-known throughout the world. It has been a difficult year for this small town. But before the war, for many hundreds of years, this very place in which you are standing served as a marketplace where Poles and Jews met every Thursday—yes, every Thursday for several hundred years!—met and traded. Poles and Jews and others lived here amicably, ladies and gentlemen, until a terrible time came for all of us. A time when our defenseless country was caught in a vice of two totalitarianisms and two occupations. A time when two armies marched into this region, first from the East and then from the West . . .

*A very low underground rumble begins to be heard, as if of knocking from below the stage. The SHADES are beginning to make their pres-*

*ence known. In the next sequence of scenes, the encounters between present-day characters and their Shades take place in a spot-lit space, while the rest of the stage is submerged in near darkness.*

*The spotlight falls on RACHEL, who suddenly whips around as if pulled by some magnetic force. She is faced by the figure of her SHADE—an old Jewish man in Orthodox garb—who contemplates her sternly.*

RACHEL (in an angry whisper):

For god's sake, don't grab me from behind like that! Not again . . .

GRANDFATHER:

You think you can get rid of us just like that! You know how your grandmother suffered?

RACHEL:

Go away! You have nothing to do with me!

GRANDFATHER:

We have everything to do with you. You are ours . . .

RACHEL (with an undertone of fear):

I shouldn't have come . . . I live in another world . . . You couldn't possibly understand, in this godforsaken place . . .

GRANDFATHER:

This is where you come from! Here!

RACHEL:

No . . . Stop coming after me . . . I don't even understand your language . . .

GRANDFATHER (angrily):

You've betrayed everything you are . . . You don't even follow the laws, as they were written in the Torah!

RACHEL (more defiantly):

What good did they do you, your laws? You didn't even see what was coming!

GRANDFATHER (still sternly, but more thoughtfully):

I was doing my duty as a good Jew should. I was saving the world for God . . . And who knows, maybe I did save it a little.



RACHEL:

Why didn't you try to save yourself when they came and dragged you out of your house!

GRANDFATHER:

Don't speak like that! If you disrespect your ancestors, you're lost!  
Cursed!

RACHEL:

You only knew how to curse your own! My mother . . . you broke her spirit. She told me . . . she was always afraid.

GRANDFATHER:

You have to learn to pray . . . If you think you can predict the future better than we did, you're lost . . . It's all in the hands of God.

RACHEL (in a suddenly helpless tone):

I wish I could just . . . forget you ever existed. I never even knew you . . .

GRANDFATHER:

If you forget where you come from, you are nothing.

RACHEL:

You only gave me fear . . . that's all I know of you. Why should I give you a thought . . .

GRANDFATHER:

If you forget us, we are nothing . . .

*The figure of the GRANDFATHER becomes dimmer and recedes into the group of SHADES. For a moment RACHEL looks very vulnerable, then she composes herself and regains her tough look. As she turns around resolutely toward the square, HANNA walks toward her from the other direction. HANNA is walking toward the SHADE of her MOTHER—a dignified figure who is holding a spool of white wool and knitting needles.*

RACHEL:

This godforsaken place . . .

HANNA (from some distance away, speaking with a kind of wonderment):

Mother . . . I've missed you so much.

MOTHER (looking up from her knitting needles):

Why have you come here?

HANNA:

I understand so little . . . I wish I had asked you so many questions . . .

MOTHER:

What is it you want to ask?

HANNA:

About the people here . . . What they were like. You knew them so well . . .

MOTHER:

They were not bad people, not worse than anyone else . . . Just ignorant. Unenlightened . . . Ours too, not only the Others . . . Full of superstitions, all of them . . . You see, this village was all they ever knew. Come, I'll show you a little . . . How it began to happen. I can only show you, I can't explain.

*On the SCREEN, an image of ordinary shtetl life in prewar Poland—if possible, from Jedwabne. This could be a scene of people standing in front of a Jewish shop or of girls in a sewing class. Throughout the following scene, images of Jewish life succeed each other quietly. MOTHER leads HANNA toward a spot-lit scene in which a PEASANT COUPLE is buying something from a Jewish SHOPKEEPER. The man is poorly dressed and barefoot. The shopkeeper is dressed in a more urban way but wearing a wig and with an amulet around her neck.*

*Hanna's MOTHER takes out her knitting needles and begins to knit calmly as she and HANNA observe the next scene from the sidelines.*

PEASANT WOMAN (looking at the merchandise in the shop):

That there is pretty fabric . . . Is that what they're wearing in the city?

PEASANT MAN (humorously):

Eh, woman, don't you get any ideas now . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

You want to see it, Anya?

MAN:

Now, Mrs. Sztein, don't you give her any ideas, because I'll have to pay dearly . . .

SHOPKEEPER (writing something in a large ledger book):

No harm in looking, eh, Mr. Ceglarski?

MAN:

What're you writing in that big book of yours?

SHOPKEEPER (handing him a small package):

Just what you purchased today, Mr. Ceglarski, don't worry . . .

MAN:

You know I pay every time, fair and square . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

I know, Mr. Ceglarski, you're a good customer.

WOMAN:

That little girl of yours . . . Rivka . . . Is she going to study in the city?

SHOPKEEPER:

Sewing school she's going to . . . Then she can make you all the pretty dresses you want.

MAN:

Eh, and what does your rabbi say about the war? People say it's coming, like the last time . . . It's coming, our Lady War . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

Don't say such things, Mr. Ceglarski, worse luck . . . (She touches an amulet around her neck, and spits over her shoulder.) God forbid, you're going to bring down the evil eye on us if you talk like that . . .

MAN:

People say the Russians are stirring things up like a hornet's nest . . .

WOMAN:

Rivka, she came to do homework with my Basia the other day. Eh, they giggled into the night . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

Better the Russians than the Germans . . .

MAN (with slight menace in his voice):

Eh, don't say that, Mrs. Sztein . . . The Russians are the worst, they hate us the worst . . .

SHOPKEEPER (taken aback):

They're all worse than the other, worse luck. (She touches her amulet again.)

WOMAN:

Don't pay attention to him, Mrs. Sztein, he's got a head as thick as that big gate of ours.

MAN:

Just don't say that about the Russians, it's not friendly . . . We don't want none of you Communists . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

Communists, who says anything about Communists?

WOMAN:

C'mon Janek, what're you bothering Mrs. Sztein for? . . . She ain't one of them.

*On the SCREEN, a somewhat blurred but flowing image of a train, traveling through a snowy Russian landscape from an eastward direction.*

MAN (in an undertone):

Eh, what do you know woman? . . . Our priest has warned us, they're not like us . . . They don't believe the same things . . .

WOMAN crosses herself at the mention of the priest.

SHOPKEEPER (grasping her amulet more convulsively):

With God's help, none of them will come . . .

MAN (crossing himself sullenly):

With God's help we won't let anyone exploit us . . .

SHOPKEEPER:

Now, that's not friendly, Mr. Ceglarski . . .

WOMAN (cuffing the MAN about the ears):

Such stupid things he says . . . Why do you say that to Mrs. Sztein? Her Rivka plays so nicely with our Basia . . .

MAN (louder this time, as if he doesn't care who hears):

You don't understand woman . . . They're not like us, who knows what she writes in that big book of hers?

SHOPKEEPER (suddenly frightened, as if she's just understood something):

*Gottehniu* . . . (she touches her amulet). What'll happen to us?

*As the PEASANT COUPLE leave, the SHOPKEEPER spits over her left shoulder.*

SHOPKEEPER:

The goyim . . . They'll turn on us yet.

*A Soviet OFFICER steps out, as if from the screen. He is large and jolly, with a revolver swinging ostentatiously in his holster and a bottle of vodka in his hand. He takes the revolver out of his holster and, with a kind of brutal merriment, fires into the air. Then, as if he likes the sound, he fires again—and again. He takes another swig of vodka.*

*MOTHER quietly turns HANNA toward the scene. A PEASANT and a JEWISH SHADE are dragging a handcuffed man between them toward the OFFICER.*

OFFICER:

*Chto on zdelal?* (What did he do?)

JEWISH COMMUNIST (saluting and snapping his heels awkwardly):

Reporting Tomek Jankowski, caught for stealing common property.

PRISONER (furiously):

It was my property! I was using my own wheat! To feed my family in these terrible times!

OFFICER (blithely):

All property is now common property, didn't you hear? Eh?

POLISH COMMUNIST:

He refused to hand it over! We asked him politely! (He turns to

Jankowski, with a kind of friendliness.) We asked you, Zbysiu, didn't we?

*The PRISONER tries to break out, in a gesture of impotent fury. The OFFICER pushes the revolver against his chest, with menacing playfulness.*

OFFICER:

Got a bit greedy, eh? (Pushing the revolver deeper in.) How much did you steal, then?

PRISONER:

I didn't steal.

OFFICER:

How's that? Are you saying the comrades are lying?

JEWISH COMMUNIST (officially):

Don't believe him, Comrade Krasimov! He kept it back when everyone's going hungry! He stole from all of us.

POLISH COMMUNIST (half-heartedly):

Yeah . . .

PRISONER:

It was mine, you . . . Bolshevik! How can you, we met in church every Sunday . . .

POLISH COMMUNIST:

The times are different now.

JEWISH COMMUNIST:

Shut up, things are different now . . .

*A brief struggle between the PRISONER and the two men ensues.*

PRISONER:

Bolshevik . . . Jew! You robbed us blind . . .

JEWISH COMMUNIST (giving him a rough shove):

Comrade Zimmerman to you, from now on! You'll speak with respect!

*The OFFICER fires another shot into the air and points his revolver eloquently eastward.*

OFFICER (merrily):

At least there's nothing to steal in Siberia . . .

*The two men drag the PRISONER away. On the SCREEN, documentary footage showing a sorry caravan of carts and people clothed in rags, moving through Siberian landscape.*

*The square with gathered GUESTS now becomes visible. The HOST claps his hands as if to bring everyone to attention. He has lost a bit of his expansiveness and looks somewhat chastened, though undefeated.*

HOST:

Ladies and gentlemen, we have heard many things in this little square today . . . And I'm the first to say that we must admit the truth . . .

Look it in the face, like the President said. But this is not a bad little town, believe me, though poor . . . Yes, it was poor then and it's poor now . . . Yes, our farming still needs to be reformed . . . We need to move forward, that's what I always say . . .

*The AMERICAN ENVOY, a tall, informally dressed man, now interrupts the HOST.*

AMERICAN ENVOY:

Well, those are words that I like to hear. Those are the very words I have said, in places like this, where terrible things have happened . . .

HOST (shaking the ENVOY's hand with great zest):

Ah, this is a great pleasure! (To the others) The American Envoy, who has just come from an important peace mission . . .

ENVOY (speaking in an informal style, and at the same time as if he were accustomed to addressing large audiences):

You see, I have been in many other places where terrible things have taken place. I have studied other villages, where . . . situations like

the one here have occurred. Srebrenica—yes, I was in Srebrenica—Rwanda, My Lai. Yes, My Lai. Kashmir. Terrible things have taken place in Kashmir . . . I have studied these situations, and I know that reconciliation is possible . . . that it is inevitable.

*On the SCREEN, indistinct images of the aftermath of atrocity and of mourning (mass graves with people standing over them) from other places: Srebrenica, Rwanda, Kashmir.*

ENVOY:

What happened here was a true expression of human evil—yes, evil. I'm not ashamed to use that word. And yet, as I look around me, I cannot help but feel that this is also a day of hope. Hope, because we have gathered here together, Pole and Jew, Israeli and American, and a few folks from other places too, in the spirit of mutual understanding, to affirm that we can forgive and forget, and put the past behind us . . .

RACHEL (looking at the ENVOY with angry incredulity):

How can he talk such . . .

ENVOY (looking past her, and continuing as if he hadn't heard):

ENVOY:

I am an American and, if I may say so, a universal man. I know that remembering matters. But I also know that forgetting matters. Letting go of your old grievances and differences and getting on with the present. This country is about to join the European Union—a daring dream come true. So even in this place—especially in this place—let us vow to build a better, more tolerant world. Let us vow we will not let evil have the upper hand . . .

HOST (cutting in):

Well, that is a noble and, if I may say so, a beautiful sentiment . . .

ROBERT (ironically):

Very noble . . .

RACHEL (now turning furiously on the HOST):

Noble?! Does he know what he's talking about? I mean, I'm proud to be an American, but sometimes I'm ashamed to be an American



... (Turning toward the ENVOY) Do you know what *happened* here? What those . . . people did? With their bare hands? (Her voice rises to a hysterical pitch.) My mother told me stories all my life!

ROBERT (shaking his head with patronizing irony):

Stories, stories . . . That's all you know, stories. (More angrily) You don't have a clue about what this country is like! You haven't touched on anything that matters in your life.

RACHEL:

I know what I need to know about this place . . .

*A hubbub of voices rises in added anger, or protest.*

POLISH WOMAN:

Now please, let us speak with a little more understanding . . . a little more respect!

POLISH GUEST:

Why do they come here if they hate us so much . . .

ZVI (to RACHEL, quietly):

We've done things too . . . all of us . . .

RACHEL (turning on ZVI fiercely):

Don't give me this . . . liberal guilt . . . I mean, I am a liberal, but sometimes it's just . . . inappropriate.

SAMUEL:

You know, sometimes anger is easier from a distance, abstract anger, it's understandable, of course, but quite dangerous, you need to be informed, this country has such a complicated history . . .

HANNA:

I wonder what right we have, I mean to judge . . . When it didn't happen to us.

ROBERT:

And who exactly would you have as judge?

HANNA:

I don't see what we can do except understand . . .

SAMUEL (speaking quickly):

Yes, that's it exactly, and maybe we haven't understood enough . . . All

this talk of Poles and Jews, Us and Them . . . it's a little late for that, I mean I thought those categories . . .

ENVOY:

Exactly what I tried to . . .

POLISH WOMAN:

All these accusations, where do they get us? . . . We got along once, my mother told me about it . . . Honestly, we were so . . . interconnected.

That's what I'm learning, though I grew up later, what could I know about Jewish people . . . about this fascinating world that was here . . .

But I'm learning, I've started to learn . . .

POLISH GUEST (speaking confidentially to the HOST):

Don't let them pull the wool over your eyes . . . They've come to be-smirch our good name . . . accuse us over and over again . . . To show their contempt for us, because they always looked on us with contempt . . .

ROBERT (looking at the woman with icy hauteur):

I come from here too, *proszę Pani* (if you please, Madam) . . . (He makes a small ironic bow.) You might say this is my country too . . .

POLISH WOMAN:

Then why do you hate it so much . . .

RACHEL:

If you don't know why . . .

PIOTR:

I came here to express sympathy . . . Human sympathy. I'm ashamed of the things some of my countrymen have said today . . .

Ashamed . . .

ZVI:

Perhaps we should all be ashamed . . . for what happened here . . .

HANNA:

For how it was allowed to happen . . .

RACHEL (with suppressed anger):

Don't you know we're standing on cursed ground?! On the graves of the dead? The *unburied* dead?

POLISH GUEST (crossing herself superstitiously):

We shouldn't summon ghosts, it's not good for us . . .

*The POLISH GUEST crosses herself again. A kind of sigh, or groan, is heard from EUGENIA. ZVI approaches the TOMASZEWSKIS, with camera trained on them.*

ZVI (speaking to Tomaszewski):

Orpheus of Jedwabne . . . Except you brought out your Euridice.

TOMASZEWSKI (as if coming out of a trance):

Eh? I'm Tomaszewski, and this is my wife, Eugenia.

ZVI (extending his hand to them):

I wish I could have done that . . . for someone. Rescue someone, bring them back . . . But I couldn't . . . I have never saved somebody's life . . .

TOMASZEWSKI:

Eh, you're young yet, you'll have your wars . . .

ZVI:

I suppose I will, in my Israel . . . though who would wish for it. But why did you do it?

TOMASZEWSKI:

How do you mean?

ZVI:

Why did you go back for her? To the ghetto.

TOMASZEWSKI:

What was I going to do, let her walk right into that hell? I wanted to get her family out too, but that I couldn't do . . .

EUGENIA (as if just coming out of her doze):

My parents died there . . .

ZVI (to Tomaszewski):

Weren't you afraid? Didn't you know what the penalty was?

TOMASZEWSKI:

I was young, I wasn't thinking of death . . . And besides, she was young and pretty, and so elegant too. Clothes from Warsaw she had. You know, from a better family. And she let me flirt with her too . . . Yes, I sometimes took her on my bike, and even stole a kiss . . . (He squeezes her hand and she looks at him affectionately.)

ZVI (to Eugenia):

Weren't you afraid to come out . . . with him? Into another world?

EUGENIA:

I was all alone . . . and he asked me to marry him.

TOMASZEWSKI:

Her parents gave her permission to convert . . . . But don't you worry, I had to pay the priest dearly . . . He knew we needed that wedding band . . .

EUGENIA (nodding toward her husband):

He would have been better off not to marry me . . .

TOMASZEWSKI:

My own brother-in-law tried to blackmail me . . . He came with his gang to her parents' house, and started nosing around for gold. They thought all Jews had piles of gold . . . So I got them very drunk, threw them off the scent . . . They tried again, but I scared them good. I had my own people too.

EUGENIA (falling into a stupor again):

Why do they want to know after all these years . . .

*A brief silence, as the camera keeps whirring.*

EUGENIA (coming in and out of her doze):

I have some of the things . . . A nice porcelain pitcher, a tray . . . But my mother's credenza . . . I could never get it back . . . It was her favorite . . .

TOMASZEWSKI:

She wanted to buy it back from the people who kept it for her . . . For good money too. But there was a note pinned to our door instead.

EUGENIA (nodding):

Yes, a death sentence . . . For the credenza.

SHADES:

*Tsss . . . Sh'ma . . .*

EUGENIA:

But there were others . . . my friends . . . . They came to our house . . . to eat on our china . . .

ZVI:

I've heard your story often . . . in a way . . . and it never ceases to amaze me . . .

EUGENIA:

Why do they want to know . . . after all this time . . . I'm so tired.

EUGENIA falls back into a deeper stupor, as if she cannot talk any more.

HOST (ushering the guests into his inn, as a long wooden table is placed on the stage):

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome, welcome to my modest establishment! Modest but hospitable, I hope you'll find! And I hope you'll tell your friends when you go back to your beautiful countries . . . Please, please . . . Ah, the President made a beautiful speech today, you must admit.

PIOTR:

Yes, a beautiful speech. I hope all our countrymen listen to his words carefully, and take them to heart. To their souls. Because I would say that the President . . . yes, I would say he's redeeming our Polish soul.

SAMUEL (standing nearby and butting in):

That, if I may say so, is a terribly old-fashioned concept . . . Polish soul . . . Jewish soul . . . Though the speech was very . . . well, poetic.

RACHEL:

Poetic, really . . . How can you fall for such . . . rhetoric! Such high-minded insincerity . . .

SAMUEL (in a quick patter):

Ah, no no, if you'll allow me, that's a stylistic misapprehension, you must understand the rhetorical conventions within which the President spoke, just because the speech had a certain formality doesn't mean . . . Sincerity doesn't have to be inarticulate, you know, not that I have anything against that, I love American spontaneity, but you must appreciate the elegance of the President's . . .

RACHEL:

I wish I hadn't come . . .

HOST (insulted):

So it wasn't enough for you that the President made an apology . . .

RACHEL:

Enough! What a concept! You think an apology is . . . enough?! After everything that has happened here?

PIOTR (speaking with insulted hauteur):

Then what would have been enough? What would the young lady have the President do? Cut his heart out?

RACHEL (brusquely):

It's too little too late. It's all too easy.

ZVI (quietly):

Maybe it wasn't all that easy . . . to admit . . . such shameful things . . .

Maybe we should give the President credit for what he did . . .

ROBERT (turning on ZVI and speaking fiercely):

You're willing to fob off the memory of your ancestors for a few words! Even if they were eloquent words . . . You think a few well-composed sentiments can redress . . . what happened here.

ZVI:

I don't know what could redress it . . . But at least he tried . . . I just can't feel as righteous as you . . . when I think of my poor country . . . Of others . . .

RACHEL (with cold logic):

Don't mix everything up! They killed—we were killed!

POLISH WOMAN:

This hurts me so much . . . We were so . . . interconnected! I think of you as a part of us, the lost part . . . I grew up after . . . it all happened, I never knew your world, but I regret its loss, I wish you were still here . . . I keep missing . . . something . . . Something I never knew. But I'm learning, I'm finding out . . .

SAMUEL:

Absolutely, I think we must not forget some things, it is here, you know, that Jews lived for centuries, side by side, you see, and they thought of this country as home . . . They were part of this country, just as the . . . other young lady said . . .

HOST:

That's the truth for sure, even I probably have some Jewish ancestors in my family. Who doesn't in this country, with so many pretty girls . . .

RACHEL:

I shouldn't have come . . .

ROBERT (turning on RACHEL unexpectedly):

What do you understand, anyway, growing up over there . . . In your Baltimore suburb. You just bring all your grievances here . . . it's so convenient.

RACHEL (looking at him with disdain):

You mean, you are the only one who's *allowed* to hate.

POLISH GUEST (self-righteously):

He shouldn't have apologized, what do we have to apologize for! And to whom, I wonder, people who point their fingers at us . . .

HOST (speaking to the woman in an undertone):

Don't say such things, the President wouldn't like it one bit!

POLISH GUEST:

Eh, these newfangled fashions! A person can't even tell the truth any more! I agree with her (she points to RACHEL)—all these nice words won't fix anything!

PIOTR (looking at the woman with distaste):

I just want to say very clearly that I want to distance myself from what has just been said. I think the President saved our reputation today by speaking as he did. By looking the truth straight in the face. I am a little bit more proud to be a Pole today.

SAMUEL (speaking quickly):

Please, please . . . All these extremely antiquated ideas. I thought we'd moved way beyond them, all this talk of Poles and Jews, us and them . . . All this essentialism, it's enough to make one a little ill . . .

Yes, exactly, it's time to learn about each other . . .

PIOTR:

Exactly. And it was such a beautiful ceremony . . .

RACHEL:

You . . . did those things, and now you want to feel good because you put on some . . . ceremony!

PIOTR:

You, you, who do you think you're speaking to? Do you think I did . . . those things?

*The GUESTS have reached an open field, where the burning barn once stood, and where there is now a single memorial gravestone covered in cloth. A RABBI, frail and old, ascends the podium, his hand shaking on his cane, and looks over the field, to where it gives out onto a low line of forest.*

RABBI:

It is here, on this site, that sixty years ago my friends, my family, my community disappeared. The community was wiped out in one blow by thugs, by hooligans who behaved more like beasts than humans. Their souls were unrefined by law or love. But it is not of them I want to speak; it is not of them I want to think. I want to think instead of my beloved rabbi, who walked into the burning barn with his people even though there were people who wanted to pull him out of the flames. That was because his goodness inspired love and it inspired awe. He was thought to be a saint, not only by Jews but by people of non-Mosaic faith . . . He was also revered for his learning, for he was one of the great scholars of Jedwabne, scholars renowned in the world for their commentaries on the Torah. Yes, this little town where I grew up produced great scholars in the course of the centuries . . . It was my beloved rabbi who taught me the story of Rabbi Hanino Ben Tra-bian, who taught the Torah two thousand years ago, when the Roman emperors declared that such teaching would be punished by death . . . You see, he too was burned to death, by thugs whose souls were cruel and unrefined by compassion or true learning . . .

*SOUNDS of a CANTOR'S lament, continuing in the background as the RABBI speaks.*



RABBI:

Before dying, the Rabbi was wrapped in the Torah scrolls which he had taught . . . but the area around his heart was laid over in wool, so that he would suffer longer . . . Therefore, his pupils had a chance to ask him: “Rabbi, how can you bear this martyrdom and maintain your faith? How can you not lose your faith in the order of the universe?” And the rabbi had a chance to answer: “Do not despair, my pupils. For even though this body burns, and even though papyrus may burn, the letters of the Torah—*otiyot*—rise up to heaven . . . For it is they that hold the eternal presence within them, and which shall remain to guide and inspire generations upon generations which shall come after us . . .”

*The RABBI pauses as if too moved to go on. The CANTOR’S lament moves into the foreground.*

RABBI:

And this, my friends, is my consolation that in our beloved Poland, *otiyot*, the letters that the Jewish people had studied for the last nine hundred years, rise up over these fields and meadows . . .

CANTOR’S voice.

RABBI:

One might ask how the little town of Jedwabne has deserved such a historic event as has taken place here today . . . In my opinion, it is not only because—as we might think—a whole community was burnt to death here. I think this was also brought about by the tears shed by Jews and people of other faiths . . . which made a great impression in heaven. Our dear President, by the will of Hashem, opened a historic event which will be one of the most beautiful pages in the history of Poland . . . because of the tears which had made an impression in heaven.

*The RABBI’S hand begins to tremble more markedly.*

*A MILITARY FANFARE is heard.*

VOICE-OVER (a gentle voice, not heard before):

Let us therefore say Kaddish for those who died here on that awful day sixty years ago. Let us pray that the letters of consolation are reunited with their souls. Let us pray that letters of consolation and compassion enter our souls and flower there into full and beautiful texts. More than that, as mortals on this beautiful, injured earth, we cannot do.

(MUSIC, continuing until the end: Krenecki's *Kaddish for Cello and Voice* and "Prayer" from Knittel's *Cantata*.)

*The RABBI begins to say Kaddish. As he does so, the GUESTS approach the gravestone one by one. Each drops a stone near the gravestone, before leaving the stage. The Kaddish blends into a sung lament of mourning, piercing and beautiful. There is a rustling, as if of a wind in the trees. The pieces of paper fall on the empty stage as the guests leave one by one.*

# 9

## It Began with Pleasantries

ANNE KARP F

We were lying by the village pool in southwest France—trust me, there will be a Jewish theme before we reach the digestif. As usual I was deep in the new Philip Roth. (On holiday I am invariably deep in the new Philip Roth. I am not sure if this proves how rarely I take holidays or how prolific Philip Roth is.) My five-year-old, with her unerring talent for discovering gorgeous ten-year-old boys, brought back her latest find. Pleasantries were exchanged, and a critical fact was established. He was Polish.

I asked him his name. He answered. In the microsecond between question and answer passed centuries and a hope against hope that his surname would end in “stein” rather than “ski.” But those blonde curls were eloquent, and it did not.

He was charming, and the children’s friendship grew. We met the parents, English mother, English-born father but with Polish parents. Whole family now living just outside Warsaw. “I couldn’t believe it,” said the mother, “when the children came back and said they’d met another Anglo-Polish family.”

Do I correct her? Not Anglo-Polish; Anglo-Jewish perhaps, or Polish-Jewish, or Anglo-Jewish-Polish. It would take too many hyphens and make too much of an issue to try to calibrate accurately the degrees of Englishness, Polishness, and Jewishness that go to make up our identity, so I let it pass.

We were invited for drinks and a barbecue and accepted. It went more than smoothly: it was interesting, enjoyable, with both parents actively involved in the new Poland and talking intelligently about it. Even before the first glass of Gaillac was drunk, I had to decide how much to say and when in the event, under questioning, my parents' stories emerged naturally. The mother had visited Auschwitz and spoke of her reaction. They also had a wartime family story (which Pole does not?) involving Siberia.

There were just two moments of unease. One, when their seventy-something cousin was talking about some art he had made for two London households and paused for a fraction before describing the second rich . . . family. Was it paranoia, or did I imagine the censoring out of "Jewish"? (I had just read Elinor Lipman's hilarious novel *The Inn at Lake Devine*, in which the heroine is convinced that the antisemitic hotel owner refers to MassaJewsetts.)

The second moment occurred when, responding to a comment by the cousin about Jews in Kraków, I said Jewish-Polish relations were complex. He thought I had said that the Poles had a complex about the Jews, and said yes, but the Jews also had a complex about the Poles. For just a moment there, we turned into *Fawlty Towers*' "Don't Mention the War."

But harmony was soon restored, more Gaillac was downed, the children played happily, and soon it was time to for us to go (to a neighboring village fete to raise money for the church organ. We are catholic, you see, if not Catholic). Email addresses were exchanged.

Later that night as I was putting the children to bed, my twelve-year-old told me that while she had been playing with airguns with the sixteen-year-old, she had mentioned that she was learning Hebrew and was Jewish. In return he told her that the Jews killed Jesus, the Poles suffered more in Siberia than the Jews during the war, that many Poles were killed for protecting Jews, and other unspeakable things about American Jews. "Is that antisemitism?" she asked me, never having encountered it in North-West London.

Which left me with the question of what to do. My daughter was all for doing nothing, but then for a preteen, causing embarrassment is almost

as big a sin as antisemitism. I could easily imagine what my mother's reaction would be, a wearily cynical "My dear, what do you expect?" (And so it was, when I told her.)

But I concluded that following the do-nothing route would be an expression of fatalistic resignation quite foreign to my instincts. What was more, I had a sense that this antisemitism had not been learned at home (in which case challenging it would be a hopeless task) but at school. The parents had told us that the boy, to their surprise and ambivalence, had chosen to go to a Catholic boys' school.

So yes, I had to do something, even though I felt an utter lassitude at revisiting this particular roundabout and had the mandatory sleepless night. By the morning I had resolved to tell the mother what had occurred, and to do it in such a way as to avoid any possibility of competition for victim status or of sounding like the *Monty Python* sketch where each party claims that their home was more deprived. As I did not see them again before we left, this interchange will have to be electronic.

Of course I know that one single intervention will not overturn centuries of prejudice. As my family friend and Polish-Jewish expert Felek Scharf puts it, "The Poles didn't invent antisemitism—it's an old phenomenon—but they did invent antisemitism without Jews. It's deep in the Polish psyche and learning. Here is a young man who's probably never met a Jew." Felek has agreed to help me compose the letter to the mother—as delicately worded a document as any potential Northern Ireland Catholic-Protestant deal.

And so I composed the letter—composed being the *mot juste*, because I had to listen out for false notes and harsh cadences just as carefully as any composer. I wanted to ensure that my letter was free from aggression and unnuanced by guilt trips. Here is part of what I wrote.

Dear X,

I want to share with you a conversation that your oldest son Y had with our oldest daughter Z, because it pained me, and I thought you would want to know about it.

When Y learned that Z was studying Hebrew, he told her that the

Jews killed Jesus, the Poles suffered more in Siberia than the Jews during the war, that many Poles were killed for protecting Jews, and other things in a similar vein about American Jews.

I presume that Y learned this at school. . . . We know that both the Poles and the Jews suffered in the war, but are disturbed that children are still being taught to believe in this hierarchy of suffering.

(Here I talked about an article in Polish that I enclosed and referred them to a Polish book.) I think that bridge building and mutual understanding have become more important than ever, so I would value your response.

With best wishes, etc.

Life is a poltergeist, upsetting our every expectation, so I should not have been surprised that none of the responses I had anticipated came to pass. What transpired instead was that three days after I had dispatched the letter, I was roused from a rare lie-in by a phone call from Poland. It was the mother, calling the nanosecond she had received my letter. And the first shock was that its contents had not shocked her at all *because she knew about the conversation between Y and Z*. Who knows, maybe at the very moment that Z was telling her parents about the conversation, Y was telling his. The mother had phoned to reassure me that he had not learned it either at home or at school: it was purely playground nonsense (only she used the vernacular). “We gave him a rocket, and asked him how he could have done such a thing, it was so stupid.”

I was relieved by her reaction, even if I could not shake off a lingering disquiet. Was it because she seemed to see it in such individual, ahistorical terms, purely as an episode of adolescent thoughtlessness? On further reflection, the notion that antisemitism is merely a normal developmental stage, like fear of the dark, also unsettled me, though we parted on friendly terms.

But the poltergeist was not done with me yet. A couple of weeks later came a fat email from the husband, and this had an altogether different tenor. Rereading it, I felt that I had erred in sending him the article and the book reference: however subtle I thought I was, my letter must inevitably

have given off a whiff of schoolmarmishness. There was an intemperate exhibitionism to his reply, intended, I felt, to demonstrate that he was perfectly well versed in the debates about Polish-Jewish relations and knew plenty more about them than I do. (He is probably right.)

Again there were references to his son's "infantile" behavior, but the most disturbing aspect of his communication was its virulence, especially toward Jan Gross's book on Jedwabne. Gross's important study was here reduced to an "equally infantile piece of anti-Polish spite," which should have been "ignored with contempt" and which had "incensed" his son. So while criticizing his son's behavior, he simultaneously depicted it as legitimate (and we are back to our old friend, antisemitism caused by Jews).

Even more discomfiting were his references to Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry*. I have defended Finkelstein's book before, and found aspects of it useful, but to treat this rabid text as rational is simply to reveal one's own rabidness. And to speak of "the Holocaust Industrialists"—with the connotations of industrialization that belong properly with the perpetrators now transferred to the victims and survivors, this I found distasteful indeed.

What was to be done? Another phone call to my mentor, Felek Scharf, who wisely counseled, "Put an end to the correspondence, but signal that you do not agree with him." Which is what I have done.

Felek and I ruefully agreed that I had wanted them to be shocked by their son's behavior, but the father's response had (inadvertently?) helped explain it. It gives me no satisfaction at all to report that the events of these three months only confirm the unease I instantly felt (and tried to dispose of) when I learned of that sweet little boy's nationality.

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# 10

## Imagined Topographies

*Visions of Poland in Writings  
by Descendants of Survivors*

MARITA GRIMWOOD

A 1992 opinion poll showed that 25 percent of Poles put the number of Jews then in Poland at between 750,000 and three and a half million, while another 10 percent thought there were between four and seven million. In reality there were around six thousand.<sup>1</sup> In what has become a commonplace in talking about Polish-Jewish relations since the Shoah, the Jews persist as imaginary Others even in their absence. This absence, of course, is not total. Quite apart from the estimated six thousand, there are those beyond Poland who are still intimately connected with it: those who survived, those who fled, and, increasingly, their children and grandchildren. What kind of imaginary Other is Poland to these descendants? What happens when the Poland that is filtered through distant memory is brought up against reality? In this article I reflect on these questions with reference to a novel and two autobiographies by descendants of survivors. Joseph Skibell's novel *A Blessing on the Moon* uses the techniques of fantastic fiction to explore a shadowy post-Holocaust Poland occupied by Jewish figures who are simultaneously murdered and sentient. Lisa Appignanesi and Anne Karpf have both written memoirs of their own and their parents' Canadian and British lives, as well as returning, both in narrative and reality, to visit Poland. By juxtaposing such profoundly different texts, I aim to uncover some of the common preoccupations of these writers, whose shared terrain is one they have never occupied as their own.



### Constructions of Poland in Second-Generation Memoirs

The memoirs I have selected—Lisa Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead* and Anne Karpf's *The War After*—share two key features: the author has little or no personal memory of Poland, and she makes a "return" journey there. In both cases, Poland was the site of the family's prewar home and war-time experiences. Despite these similarities, the memoirs are structured significantly differently. Karpf's memoir is split into three parts. In the first of these, she narrates her childhood in London, which she intersperses with the transcriptions of interviews with both of her parents. These interviews build up a chronological picture of their wartime experiences. In the second part, she provides some historical and psychological context for her family's experiences. This includes a description of the emerging perception that a "second generation" had been affected by their families' experiences in the camps. Part three returns to her own life, particularly her own parenthood and the death of her father. It is not until the very end that she describes her visit to Poland. Present-day Poland is thus portrayed as part of her adulthood, whereas the impact of her parents' experiences in Poland was something initially felt in childhood, justifying the placing of their narratives in part one.

Appignanesi's text begins with her father's death and her own meditations on memory. It too is then split into three parts. The first, titled "Scenes of Memory," describes emigrating to and growing up in Canada. The second, titled "Excavations," begins by delving further into the family's psychological reactions to the past, including her father's animosity toward Poland and her own visit there for professional reasons in 1988, when she found Poles to be uncomfortable with her identity as a Polish Jew.<sup>2</sup> The rest of the section then alternates between describing her later visit to Poland to research her family history and describing her parents' wartime experiences. The short final section returns to the present, both to review the effects that writing the book has had on the author and to describe her and her family's current situations. Thus in both texts, and despite its different role in the narratives, Poland is at once the site of parental life and trauma and a site of the author's own investigations.

Contemporary discussions of writing about the Holocaust are dominated by questions concerning the nature of memory. And as Nicola King demonstrates in the opening chapter of *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, “it is impossible to imagine or formulate memory and its operations without the use of metaphor.”<sup>3</sup> King addresses the models of archaeological excavation and *Nachträglichkeit* (or retro-action) that have informed psycho-analytic accounts of the memory process.<sup>4</sup> The archaeological model is, in King’s reading, “suggested by Freud’s frequent use of the analogy between the recovery of the buried past and the excavation of an archaeological site.”<sup>5</sup> This has particular resonances with the experience of survivors’ descendants, especially in terms of those who return, either personally or imaginatively, to the landscapes of their parents’ earlier lives. On the other hand, *Nachträglichkeit*, whereby later experiences and impressions lead to a reorganization of earlier ones, is a model that King suggests “is close to the structure and effect of narrative itself.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, some of the issues raised by the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* reflect certain aspects of the relationship between narrative and memory. King writes: “The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* unsettles the belief that we can recover the past as it was and unproblematically reunite our past and present selves, although the assumption that memory can give us direct access to the preserved or buried past retains a powerful hold on our culture.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the archaeological model, *Nachträglichkeit* recognizes memory as a process occurring in the present, rather than implying that it is already formed in the past, awaiting retrieval. This assumption, inherent in the archaeological model, is similar to that which underpins anxiety about representing the Holocaust in any form other than the historical chronicle or eyewitness testimony. The cultural and emotional power of this idea lies in its presupposition of a “pure” form of memory, which, once located, removes any problematic obstacles to our relationship with the past. In the following reading of the representation of Poland in Ap-pignanesi and Karpf’s texts, I demonstrate that both memoirs are concerned with the failure of the “archaeological” project of memory, and the recognition that a more complex model resembling *Nachträglichkeit* is its necessary successor. The interplay of these two models provides a

framework for understanding the reactions of Appignanesi and Karpf in their adult visits to Poland.

The Polish “landscape” of these writers’ minds is one that is remembered, reimagined, and narrativized by parents and reinterpreted by children. As Anne Karpf writes, “How does a child cope with information about the past brutalisation of its parents? . . . Perhaps it becomes another story. You mythicise it, structure it round the rhetorical devices and narrative features of the other fables you know.”<sup>8</sup> This is highlighted by the fact that children and grandchildren of survivors often write from the perspective of having grown up with their families’ history functioning as their childhood stories. Again, Karpf recalls that “the Holocaust was our fairy-tale. Other children were presumably told stories about goblins, monsters, and wicked witches; we learned about the Nazis. And while their heroes and heroines (I realise now) must have fled from castles and dungeons, the few I remember had escaped from ghettos, concentration camps, and forced labour camps.”<sup>9</sup>

Alternatively, in Lisa Appignanesi’s family “no one bothered with Grimm. But at the age when [she] had grown out of fairytales, [her parents’ stories] persisted.”<sup>10</sup> The survivor’s tale shares certain features with the fairy tale, as it is a tale of miraculous escape from danger. Some women survive because of the lure of their beauty to a handsome Nazi prince.<sup>11</sup> Others survive due to a special gift, such as Anne Karpf’s mother, a concert pianist. The enemy, an unequivocally evil force, is variously misheard and inadvertently fictionalized by children: “the Not-sees.”<sup>12</sup> Or “the Nasties.”<sup>13</sup> Stories of the Holocaust enter these children’s frames of reference as they are struggling to differentiate lived and fictional experience, and the impressions they leave bear the hallmarks of both.

The transposition of the Poland of parental memory onto a landscape of fairy tales and fiction already reveals that, in these texts, it belongs to the indeterminate past of “once upon a time,” where good and evil are clearly distinguished. Fairy tales depict a world in which the moral framework and symbolism can be easily understood, without the need for concrete historical detail. Yet the memoirists’ desire to visit Poland suggests a dissatisfaction with the imagined: it is precisely the concrete details that they

seek. Lisa Appignanesi calls one of the sections of her book "Excavations," with the episodes in Poland entitled "On Site," evoking an archaeological metaphor. For Appignanesi, her quest is a response to witnessing the gradual loss of her elderly mother's faltering memory: "I would like to give my mother's past back to her, intact, clear, with all its births and deaths and missing persons in place. The task, I know is impossible. The dead are lost. But maybe, none the less, it makes a difference if by remembering them, we lose them properly."<sup>14</sup>

Karpf, too, is determined to find tangible detail on her visit to Poland: "every booklet, each receipt and postcard seemed imbued with a value far in excess of what they might actually sustain, as if they were archaeological relics encoded with meaning and potential clues."<sup>15</sup> Both writers seem anxious to locate their parents' pasts in the materiality of dates, places, and objects, as if the knowledge, experience, and memories they already have require further verification.

Linked to these archaeological images, which connote burial, is the search for family graves. Karpf's idea of "retrieving those graves back from untended anonymity, and somehow restoring them to [her] mother" recalls Appignanesi's aim of "losing the dead properly," but she fails in her quest: "My failure gave me some inkling of how those whose families died without any graves must feel, with no precise place to attach their sense of loss. So instead I settled upon a random unmarked grave, put some pebbles on it (Jews aren't meant to place flowers on gravestones, using pebbles instead as a sign of having visited) and said the few words of Kaddish I knew. Then, only a little self-consciously, I spoke to Mania in English, told her what had happened to my mother during and after the war, and introduced myself as her daughter. And so, sobbing, I left the cemetery, and couldn't wait to leave Kraków."<sup>16</sup>

Karpf attempts to salvage a spiritual moment from her physical proximity to the elusive graves she seeks. Her distress mirrors that of Appignanesi, who becomes so upset about the lack of information regarding her parents' families' lives in Grodzisk that she forgoes a visit to the town's Jewish cemetery. In both these cases, the landscape fails to yield up the graves that the writers perceive as proof of their families' existence. Appignanesi's

father's view of Poland is emphatic: "Poland is a cemetery!' my father would say, his eyes narrowing into fierce hatred. 'A desecrated cemetery. Mud and shit and bones and ash and scavenged graves. You don't play tourist in shit. You don't grow sentimental over shit.'" <sup>17</sup> In one sense, he is proved right: this is not a cemetery where one can visit neatly tended graves; the cemetery metaphor cannot be easily literalized.

In contradiction of this image, however, both writers go through experiences that lend a new clarity to their perspectives on Poland and the past. For Karpf, her feelings of Jewishness seem initially to be connected to what is old or past: despite native English Jews' tendency to "revolve around the young," she as a refugee finds her "most powerful, though mixed, feelings were about old Jews," including "an almost irresistible pull towards the elderly, thickly accented, sometimes stooping Jews in [London's] Finchley Road." <sup>18</sup> Similarly, her desire to visit Poland also focuses on the past: until an opportunity unexpectedly arises, she declares "the only Poland I'd ever had any streak of interest in was old and past and seemed almost mythological—contemporary Poland bore no relationship to it at all." However, this changes: "After the death of my father my interest in both Polish Jewry and the Holocaust had intensified, and I felt the urge somehow to integrate these two Polands—the past and the present—in my mind. The war seemed so close now, as if I could almost touch it, no longer the stuff of myth or old people's ramblings. I harboured the hope that after visiting Poland it might recede, and I might be able to let it go. With mounting excitement I pored over a map of Poland for the first time: Kraków, Tarnów, Jasło—these places actually existed beyond my family narratives, and their physical relationship to each other seemed, for the first time, full of meaning." <sup>19</sup>

At some level Karpf has denied that contemporary Poland is the place her parents came from. On arrival she is surprised not only that it actually exists but also at the modern appearance of her mother's former home. For Appignanesi too, her imagined Poland is not of the present, as she realizes on arrival: "I hide my disappointment. Had I in nostalgic unreason really expected a Chagall-scape, an exotic site of crooked streets and higgledy-piggledy houses, their sloping thatched roofs providing a ready

perch for a dream fiddler? If it had ever been, Grodzisk was no longer the *shtetl* of imaginary homelands. . . . Of course, I knew that. I know that. Yet the twinge of loss is there all the same.”<sup>20</sup>

As already noted, Karpf’s desire to “integrate” her two Polands occurs after her father’s death, when she can suddenly face dealing with Polish-Jewish issues; and Appignanesi’s sense of loss hints, too, at an emotional *need* for this imaginary Poland, as if its containment in the past is due to more than pure nostalgia. It is at Auschwitz that Karpf comes to terms with the contemporary:

I’ve confused time and place, history and geography, as if coming in person to the site of terrible events which occurred fifty years ago could somehow yield them up for us to transform them—they might actually extrude through the stones and earth and be mitigated by modern sorrow. But it’s time which has enfolded and buried those events, not place, and it was their contemporaries on different continents who had the possibility of intervening, not those of us standing here now. In fact, in Auschwitz I, I get a sense not so much of having come to a place where over a million of the doomed were brought fifty years ago, as one where millions of tourists have visited subsequently, and it’s only in the relatively neglected and decayed Birkenau that the effects of time more aptly give off ravage and abandonment.<sup>21</sup>

Past and present are not only separate, but there is a barrier between them. Like Appignanesi watching a woman who turns out to be her own reflection in a Warsaw building, the view from present to past is through a distorting one-way mirror that prevents the viewer from seeing it properly, let alone influencing or mitigating it. In this sense, it is helpful that the past and present Polands seem separate for these authors: they need to accept their existence in the present and recognize not just the separateness of the past but the value of their present experiences, such as Appignanesi’s sudden realization that in looking for the buried, she has overlooked the presence of her family’s former railway yard right next

to the station platform.<sup>22</sup> The realization that an “archaeological” search for the past is doomed to failure establishes the need for a more complex model of memory.

My discussion thus far has focused on the writers’ presentation of their responses to a real and imagined Poland in the past and present. Their perceptions of Poles are equally important. Appignanesi is ambivalent about her own Polishness, owing to her parents’ persistent lying about their origins, in which she was enlisted as a child: “Lying implies there is something to hide either out there or in here. In my case, the secret was tainted origins. Poland was a bad place, a shadowy region, not good enough to foster my birth—otherwise why give it a French mask?”<sup>23</sup> Karpf’s mother refers to a number of antisemitic or treacherous Poles throughout her account of her war experiences.<sup>24</sup> However, Appignanesi qualifies her remarks about Poles by noting that her family “also lied about being Jews, so . . . Jewishness too carried a shameful taint, one which had on too many occasions proved mortal.”<sup>25</sup> This uneasy similarity between her family’s responses to their Polish and Jewish identities emerges despite their mocking attitude to the *shtetl* and leads to the “murky ambivalences” in her perceptions of both.<sup>26</sup> Karpf’s father, in contrast to her mother, remembers no antisemitism in his childhood.<sup>27</sup>

A further ambivalence lies in the position of American tourists visiting late twentieth-century Poland, a position that reverses aspects of the wartime hierarchy. Karpf is uncomfortable with the moral ambiguity of a situation that allows her as a comparatively wealthy Westerner to benefit from Eastern prices. She also grows aware that she is indulging in “negative sightseeing,” implicitly expecting to find the worst.<sup>28</sup> As she grows acquainted with Polish Jews, she realizes the insensitivity of having asked her Polish friend Zygmunt why he still lived in the country: “A couple of young Jewish women I met in a bar told me how enraged they got when foreigners invariably asked them endlessly about the war, as though Poland were purely a cemetery, whereas they were engaged in trying to build some contemporary Jewish presence. . . . And . . . after a service in the tiny Remuh synagogue where the different nationalities (chiefly American and Israeli) far overwhelmed the native congregants . . . I learned that the

regular local attenders stay away when there are Jewish visitors in town: they don't like to be gawped at like some anthropological specimen, 'the last Jews of Kraków.'"<sup>29</sup>

Appignanesi too feels uncomfortable about her own comparative wealth and is sensitive to "the textured ironies of a Jew feeling guilty in Poland."<sup>30</sup> Both writers are aware of the ambiguous position of either themselves in present day Poland or the philo- and antisemitism of Poles present and past, which defies convenient stereotyping.<sup>31</sup> Their own quasi-superstitious attitudes to Poland also surface, including Appignanesi's early childhood memory of a man with no toes.<sup>32</sup>

Both writers search for a tangible, "archaeological" past, on the assumption that their own relationship to the past is not quite tangible or credible and is in need of concretizing. However, as I have shown, both texts indicate that their authors have realized the impossibility of this aim. They accept a more complex model of the mediation of the past through mechanisms at work in the present, closer to *Nachträglichkeit*. Despite her use of the title "Excavations" for part of her text, the structure of Appignanesi's memoir, with its repeated alternations between Poland and Canada of the past, and Poland and London of the present, builds into her whole text the process of memory's constant reorganization and reworking. Karpf's visit to Poland initially leads to an increased obsession with death and the inability to think of her mother as anything other than a Holocaust survivor. The extremity of this, particularly in the light of her pregnancy, eventually proves untenable, and she, like the Jews she met in Poland, has to recognize herself as part of the present. Poland, then, moves from being the "archaeological" Poland of her parents' autobiographical narratives in part one to being a Poland of continuing Jewish culture, existing simultaneously with her own present day existence, in part three. In both texts, a historical Poland functions as a backdrop to the personal stories that the authors' parents narrate. It could be argued that parents, as living, escaped relics of the past, with true stories to tell of it, facilitate the persistence of an archaeological model of memory in their children. The Poland of these texts blurs fact and fiction, being factual enough to visit, yet constructed fictively in the writers' minds. These terms of reference provide a means



of comparison with the final text under discussion in this essay: Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon*.

### Imaginary Landscapes: *A Blessing on the Moon*

Joseph Skibell's powerful novel *A Blessing on the Moon* portrays a fantastic Poland that concretizes some of the metaphors at work in the autobiographical works already discussed. The grandchild of a Jew who fled Poland, Skibell has said that his family never talked about the Holocaust, and "the book is an attempt on [his] part to recover from the silence a family history that, except for a clutch of photos and whatever is encoded genetically, had all but disappeared."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the protagonist of the novel is named for his great-grandfather, Chaim Skibelski, and the author's dedication of the novel to all his great-grandparents attests to its commemorative function.

The novel begins in Poland during the war. Chaim Skibelski escapes a mass grave, only to find that he is dead, though still able to suffer from his wounds. His Rabbi is also alive but has been transformed into a crow. Chaim's home has been appropriated by a Polish family, of whom only the young daughter Ola shows any guilt over the "disappearance" of the Jews. While Chaim is nursing her through an illness, the moon falls from the sky. When Ola eventually dies, Chaim helps his dead friends and neighbors out of the grave. In their wanderings, they are threatened by wolves, and Chaim "befriends" the disembodied head of a German soldier who believes himself to be Chaim's murderer. They are eventually welcomed at the mysterious and luxurious Hotel Amfortas, where after a reunion with their families, all except Chaim are apparently put into the hotel ovens. He wanders in despair, and then comes upon a town which he realizes is his own, though much time has passed. A trail of strange glowing rocks leads him to two Hasidic Jews in a hut in the woods, who have been waiting for him to help them restore the moon to its rightful place. After they achieve this, with the now elderly Rabbi's help, Chaim is finally released from his sufferings.

Like the memoirists, Skibell is aware of the influence of fairy tales on his portrayal of the Holocaust. He writes that it "seemed foreshadowed in

the tales of the Brothers Grimm: the oven in Hansel and Gretel becomes the ovens of Auschwitz; the Pied Piper leading away the rats and then the children of Hamelin is, to me, the story of World War II. Hitler as the mesmerizing entrancer seducing the “rats”—which is how the Nazis characterized European Jewry—to their doom.”<sup>34</sup> At particular moments in *A Blessing on the Moon* fairy tales seem especially influential, such as when Chaim’s first wife’s face appears to him in the feathers, blood, and snow at his feet.<sup>35</sup> A second instance is when the dead Jews cross a river with healing powers.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the bakers at the Hotel Amfortas joke with each other: “Hansel, stick your finger out so I can see if you are fat enough!”<sup>37</sup> These points where the influence of Grimm is most clear tend also to be entwined with a traumatic reality. Thus the hotel kitchen staff, for all their joking about Hansel, tell Chaim that his family “have been in our ovens.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the head baker sings, “There will again be sweetness in the world,” proud of his role in murdering the Jews.<sup>39</sup> At such moments the text seems closer to allegory than fairy tale.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, identifies three conditions that define a text as “fantasy.” First, a hesitation on the part of the reader as to whether the events portrayed are natural or supernatural; second, a replication of this hesitation in the experience of a character; and third, the reader’s refusal to interpret the text allegorically or poetically.<sup>40</sup> If the hesitation in the text is resolved by a natural explanation, then the story belongs to the *étrange*; while if the events cannot be explained without calling into question our knowledge of natural laws, it is *merveilleux*. A text is only *fantastique* for as long as it sustains a hesitation between these two genres.<sup>41</sup>

*A Blessing on the Moon* resists categorization as *fantastique* because allegory accounts for those parts of the text that draw uncomfortably close to historical events. First, the Jews, though dead, are capable of prolonged, possibly infinite suffering. This makes the reader confront the possibility of physical mutilation in a context that, although apparently belonging to the genre of the *merveilleux*, nonetheless feels strangely real because of the Holocaust theme:

I recognize a face or two. It isn't easy. The soldiers' lime has eaten into their skins, gnawing deep rouged gashes into their chins, into their cheeks . . .

But certainly there's Reb Yudel the candlemaker. We nod to each other, a silent greeting, and I see that he's missing an arm.

With a dirty hand, Basha Rosenthal wipes a tear from a lost eye. Her child plays at her broken feet, without its jaw.<sup>42</sup>

On an obvious level, this is indeed *merveilleux*: these people have climbed out of their grave, and some of their injuries are enough to have killed them. Yet it may also be read as an allegory of suffering in the camps, in which the body underwent extreme and grotesque transformation. In *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi wrote: "I turn rotten in the rain, I shiver in the wind; already my own body is no longer mine: my belly is swollen, my limbs emaciated, my face is thick in the morning, hollow in the evening; some of us have yellow skin, others grey. When we do not meet for a few days we hardly recognize each other."<sup>43</sup> While Levi survives, his description of his own body evokes a dead rather than a living one. Earlier Levi states "this is hell" and "we are not dead" in close succession, suggesting that the coexistence of these two facts begins to explain his position.<sup>44</sup> In Skibell's novel, when a character points out that they are already dead, Chaim counters "You think they can't kill us as often as they wish!"<sup>45</sup>

In her essay "Aliens among Us," Elana Gomel links fascism with the literary genre of fantasy, arguing that "while H. G. Wells was writing his evolutionary fantasies, . . . the discourse of evolution was producing its own monsters, eugenics and Social Darwinism."<sup>46</sup> Eugenics, a corruption of Darwin's theory of "natural selection," advocates "selective breeding" to "improve" the human race.<sup>47</sup> Such ideas underpinned the Nazis' mass murder of the mentally disabled as well as Jews. Gomel notes that "the rise of Nazism in Germany had been foreshadowed in a number of fantastic works that espoused a radical right-wing ideology and enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the Weimar Republic, outselling almost any other genre."<sup>48</sup> She suggests that it is precisely in the figure of the "monster" that this link pertains, as the "forgotten bestsellers" used a particular symbol-

ism that “reduced all social, political or even psychological conflicts to corporeal affects. Ideological hatred was translated into the language of nausea caused by the body of the ‘alien,’ while revolution became bodily purification.”<sup>49</sup>

Such symbolism is characteristic of Nazi depictions of the Jewish body as deformed, intrinsically “inferior” and verminous. Furthermore, Gomel points out that “*Mein Kampf* depicts the Jew as a monster, not figuratively but *literally*.”<sup>50</sup> This represents what narrative theorist Peter Brooks has termed a “collapsed metaphor, a metaphor unaware that its tenor and vehicle have become identical.”<sup>51</sup> In his representation of the Jewish body as literally monstrous, Hitler completely elided the complex relationships between language, representation, and reality—which Skibell’s novel explores—in the service of eugenic objectives. As Daniel Schwarz writes, “words have instrumentality when the word *Jew* becomes a fact or thing, a star to be worn, a reason to be defiled. Words also have materiality when they fictively render that process into a text that lives its effects on others.”<sup>52</sup> The effect of Hitler’s use of words in *Mein Kampf* with its emphasis on bodily monstrosity is “that real human bodies are overlaid with literary clichés to the point of becoming invisible. Ironically, the ideology grounded in corporeal discrimination erases the corporeality of its victims.”<sup>53</sup>

In the light of centuries of antisemitic superstition in Poland, the Holocaust was superstition, folk belief (specifically superstitious antisemitism) and fairy tale given materiality. *A Blessing on the Moon* repeatedly calls into question the nature of “supernatural” events. For example, Chaim returns to his home and realizes he cannot be seen or heard by the Poles in his village: “So I touched them. I grabbed onto their shoulders, I pleaded with them. At that, they crossed themselves and shuddered. They muttered their oaths. They were peasants. Superstitious.”<sup>54</sup> He derides them for their superstitious belief systems despite knowing that such “superstition” is “real.” Chaim’s perspective also inverts antisemitic superstition when he remembers seeing priests: “How we feared them as children, in their black ghouls’ cloaks. . . . We used to run by, as children, on our way to cheder, our hearts pounding against our ribs, out of fear for these black demons,

certain they were neither man nor woman with their pointy beards and their wide billowing skirts.”<sup>55</sup> This forms a counterpart to Polish superstitions attached to Jews. When Ola dies, Chaim’s perspective places Christianity on the plane of superstition as well, despite apparent proof of its truthfulness: “A small bearded man with a rounded tummy and long curling peyes [sidelocks] sits beside his doting mother. ‘Oh, look!’ Ola shouts, tears in her eyes. ‘It’s Jesus and Mary!’ . . . ‘Surely not! I exclaim. That fat mama’s boy with the scraggly beard and the blotchy red face? This neb-bish is their god?’”<sup>56</sup>

As they fly up into the sky, the woman calls out, “‘Shalom aleichem, Reb Chaim!’”<sup>57</sup> Both the concrete reality and the *Jewishness* of Christianity are emphasized, yet Chaim is angry to see “those idolatrous abominations, while our God, the One True God, has left me neglected here below, answering my pleas with His stony, implacable silence!”<sup>58</sup> Chaim’s own beliefs are called into question, yet in his role as Job, his faith remains unshaken, however it is tested. The novel thus maintains the possibility of both Jewish and Christian belief, while its network of images elides religion and superstition.

Skibell’s portrayal of the disinterment of dead-but-sentient Jews fits the archaeological model of memory that the memoirists initially find so appealing. However, despite their disinterment, the dead Jews have no effect on the world around them. Although their suffering threatens to be eternal, thereby functioning as a metaphor for the unimaginable degree of suffering experienced by European Jews in the Holocaust (and possibly also its continuing effect on future generations), their lives are over. This discovery of the severing of past and present is analogous to the memoirists’ realizations that the Poland they visit both is and is not the same one that their parents knew.

Alain Finkielkraut considers what the Holocaust did to antisemitic words: “The insult ‘dirty kike’ . . . is only taboo now because forty years ago it was carried out to the letter by the regime of the Reich. The very goal of Hitlerism was, in effect, destruction of the barrier traditionally raised between hate speech and the murderous act. The classic slogans of antisemitism have been so effectively transformed into reality that they

have lost, in a single stroke, all ritualistic or symbolic force. Today one can no longer say "Death to the Jews," because this death has taken place."<sup>59</sup> That which was figurative and storylike has become real, and in its reality it has effaced the possibility of the figurative discourse that provided its own precondition. The novel's flexible use of genre is not simply, then, to do with representing events that are hard to comprehend within any single genre. It also reflects, in its slippage between two relationships of words to reality, the shifts that took place, and are still taking place, in history.

### Conclusion

Despite the significant formal differences between the novel and the memoirs I have discussed, common structures of "memory" emerge, notably the importance of the fairy tale to children's understanding the Holocaust in the context of their families' pasts. Skibell exploits the very collapsed metaphor on which Nazi ideology relies, the Jew as monster, in literalizing the grounds for antisemitic superstition with the dead Jews' "haunting" of the Polish landscape; while the memoirists' initial inclination to search for their families' pasts in the Poland of the present represents not so much a "collapsed metaphor" as a "collapsed metonym." Their imagined, imaginary Poland represents the Holocaust because of its association with it, so that the memoirists implicitly believe that visiting a particular space on a map can provide direct and unmediated access to an entire unknown, unexperienced past. Thus for all of these writers, the Polands of past and present, reality and superstition, are collapsed and overlaid, before, eventually, the passage of time has to be acknowledged. In all cases this acknowledgment occurs when the impossibility of an "archaeological" approach to the past, and of simply "disinterring" people, places, or objects and finding them as they were, is revealed. Poland is thus initially a site of fantasy, a landscape onto which imaginary visions of the past are projected. It eventually becomes a site for the working through of the writers' relationships to the past and present: what has been imagined is separated from past and present topographies, permitting movement into a real and positive future.

## Notes

1. Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora*, 262.
2. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 75–77.
3. King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 25.
4. King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 11.
5. King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 11.
6. King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 17. For a reading of Freud's Wolf-Man case history that thematizes the relationship between memory, *Nachträglichkeit*, and the structure of narrative, see Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, chapter 7.
7. King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 12.
8. Karpf, *The War After*, 94.
9. Karpf, *The War After*, 94.
10. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 22.
11. Examples are Helen Fremont's aunt Zosia in *After Long Silence*; and Lisa Appignanesi's mother in *Losing the Dead*.
12. Rose, *Hiding Places*, 21.
13. Weissbort, "Memories of War," 337.
14. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 8.
15. Karpf, *The War After*, 296.
16. Karpf, *The War After*, 309.
17. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 72.
18. Karpf, *The War After*, 52.
19. Karpf, *The War After*, 291.
20. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 102.
21. Karpf, *The War After*, 300.
22. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 109–10.
23. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 35.
24. Karpf, *The War After*, 68, 76, 115.
25. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 35.
26. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 71.
27. Karpf, *The War After*, 19.
28. Karpf, *The War After*, 301–2, 307–8.
29. Karpf, *The War After*, 307.
30. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 91.
31. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 142–46; Karpf, *The War After*, 302–6.
32. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 210.
33. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 273.

34. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 272–3.
35. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 120–21.
36. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 34–37.
37. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 189–90.
38. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 190.
39. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 190.
40. Todorov, *Introduction*, 37–38.
41. Todorov, *Introduction*, 46.
42. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 81.
43. Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 43.
44. Levi, *If This is a Man*, 28.
45. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 132.
46. Gomel, “Aliens among Us,” 138.
47. Bullock and Trombley, *New Fontana Dictionary*, 288.
48. Gomel, “Aliens among Us,” 131.
49. Gomel, “Aliens among Us,” 132.
50. Gomel, “Aliens among Us,” 134.
51. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 223.
52. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust*, 22.
53. Gomel, “Aliens among Us,” 137.
54. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 5.
55. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 44.
56. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 59.
57. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 60.
58. Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon*, 62.
59. Finkelkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, 13.

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# 11

## Figures of Memory

### *Polish Holocaust Literature of the “Second Generation”*

ALINA MOLISAK

Memory will not resurrect anyone,  
Not even on paper JOSEF BRODSKY

More radically than any other modern event, the Holocaust marks a new stage in human history, even if it is possible, following Tadeusz Borowski or Zygmunt Bauman, to seek its roots within European civilization.<sup>1</sup> Repeatedly we observe not only the consequences of a profound crisis of civilization but also a stubborn persistence of the Holocaust experience in everyday life. The internal shock to the individual, which occurred on the most profound spiritual plane, has led to a disdain for the value of the life of the Other.<sup>2</sup> Alan Rosenberg and others have pointed out that the Holocaust was an event that has *actually* transformed culture and that the communal memory of the Shoah is socially constructed.<sup>3</sup>

In this context questions about responsibility for the memory of the Holocaust and the ways in which this memory—and forgetting—are shaped arise with increased urgency. James E. Young, in his seminal study on representations of the Shoah in literature, emphasizes that we are now dealing with multiple historical, ideological, religious, and linguistic contexts, which tend to dominate their subject matter.<sup>4</sup> Young underlines the multiple meanings of the Holocaust, pointing out that the consequences of the Shoah can only be described *post factum*, yet even at the time of

writing about the events, they were already filtered through the schemata according to which they were grasped and expressed. This introduces the need to read the texts about the Holocaust—both the early ones and the most recent productions—in the context of a mythological and metaphoric recording of facts, which raises the question of the deep structures of Holocaust literature. It must also be remembered, and perhaps it has not been emphasized strongly enough, that much of the discourse produced after the Holocaust has been produced by the survivors.<sup>5</sup>

The question of the Shoah has been broached in Polish literature often enough. Documentary writing is especially well represented, as a number of diaries and memoirs were published, and the many more contained in archives and libraries are occasionally accessed by sociologists and historians. Specialists in the field agree that writing in Polish constitutes a substantial part of the world's Holocaust literature. The majority of analyses of literary texts to date have emphasized two common characteristics of this writing: a departure from literary fiction ("nonliterary literature"), and an unprecedented emphasis on autobiographical elements.<sup>6</sup>

One can distinguish at least four stages of Polish Holocaust literature. The first literary reactions to the Holocaust in the Polish language were produced before the war was over; most of these were in the form of poetry rather than prose. They were written in occupied Poland (Czesław Miłosz, Mieczysław Jastrun, the anthology *Z otchłani* [From the abyss], Władysław Szlengel) as well as abroad (Władysław Broniewski, Kazimierz Wierzyński, Józef Wittlin, Julian Tuwim).

The second stage was the first five years following the war, when the important works of the so-called older generation were published (Zofia Nałkowska, Maria Dąbrowska, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, and Adolf Rudnicki, who were already known before the war), along with the outstanding debuts of Tadeusz Borowski and Tadeusz Różewicz. These first five years after the war are special because of the sheer number of works created, never to be equaled again. Like the writers of the war period, most of these authors were convinced that literature had a duty to testify and to deliver a diagnosis of an unprecedented existential situation after the war. Many of these writers were searching for new forms of expression, a new

literary language. Nevertheless, next to the radically innovative writings of Nałkowska and Borowski, traditional narrative modes were also used (Dąbrowska, Iwaszkiewicz, Rudnicki). Some authors were unable to let go of stereotypes and clichés (e.g., Andrzejewski in *Wielki Tydzień* [Holy Week]).<sup>7</sup> Despite the recent nature of the events, it was characteristic for most of the works published at that time to adopt a common perspective on Jewish and non-Jewish experience of the war in Poland. The radical difference in the Jewish experience was not yet perceived, and the Holocaust was represented against the background of the presumed commonality of experience of living in an occupied country. Also, the writings about the ghetto uprising glorified heroic acts, thereby inscribing it within the martyrological formula of traditional “Polish” patriotism.

Another characteristic feature of this literature, as noted by Jan Błoński many years later, was that “one could, especially in the postwar decades, count on the fingers of one hand the number of literary works that described the Polish society’s attitudes toward the Jewish Holocaust. It is not simply that literature is helpless in the face of the genocide. The subject was a hot potato, and writers were afraid of finding themselves in conflict with the sentiments and the expectations of their readers.”<sup>8</sup>

In the third stage the paths of different writers began to diverge. Starting from the mid-1950s there was a growing tendency to produce images of the war focused on the non-Jewish experience (Roman Bratny, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and others). On the other hand, the subject of the Holocaust has never been abandoned by writers born into Jewish families or those who identified as Jews (for example, Stanisław Wygodzki, Adolf Rudnicki, Artur Sandauer, Krystyna Żywulska, and Ida Fink); for many, the Holocaust has remained the central subject. For non-Jewish Polish writers, however, especially in the 1960s, the Jewish experience became increasingly marginal. It should also be noted that in the wake of the wave of antisemitism that swept Eastern Europe in 1968, a number of texts with strong antisemitic undertones (such as Bratny’s *Dawid, syn Henryka* (David, Henry’s son), or Stanisław Ryszard Dobrowolski’s *Głupia sprawa* (A silly matter) were published in large editions.

A distinctly different kind of writing was produced by authors such

as Hanna Krall, Henryk Grynberg, Jadwiga Maurer, Bogdan Wojdowski, and Michał Głowiński. These are writers of a younger generation, who lived through the war as children and whose writing may be described as Polish-Jewish. These authors have been writing almost exclusively on the topic of the Holocaust, and they have never shirked from the most disturbing questions, regardless of the reading public's possible discontent.

The fourth stage of Polish Holocaust literature began at the end of the 1970s, with the publication of Jerzy Ficowski's *Odczytanie popiołów* (Reading from the ashes, 1979), and later with Jerzy Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz* (1988) and Andrzej Szczypiorski's *Początek* (The beginning, 1986). Here the Holocaust is discussed from an entirely new perspective, as it is in Piotr Matywiecki's reflections on the Shoah in *Kamień graniczny* (Border stone, 1994). The often schematic representations of history begin to change and become more complex, the protagonists' life stories are more complicated, and some of the questions that have been missing from the inquiries are finally being posed.

Finally there emerges a generation of writers born after the war who take up the subject of the Holocaust (Piotr Szewc and Marek Bieńczyk). Such works as Szewc's *Zagłada* (The Holocaust) and *Zmierzchy i poranki* (Dusk and morning) and Bieńczyk's *Tworci* mark the beginning of second-generation writing, by the generation that engages in vicarious memory or, to use James E. Young's expression, the memory of memory.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, James E. Young inspired the critical discussion about "an alternative hermeneutics of literary testimonials of the Holocaust."<sup>10</sup> He pointed out the need to apply hermeneutic tools to *all* Holocaust testimonies and to examine the *texture* of these writings. This call resulted in an increased number of literary analyses of Holocaust texts as well as in a certain blurring of generic boundaries: if writings by Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Zofia Nałkowska, and Jean Améry are all included in the Holocaust canon, then the label should also be extended into the present to include writers who are child survivors (for literature written in Polish, they include Henryk Grynberg, Bogdan Wojdowski, Hanna Krall, and Michał Głowiński) as well as those who were

born after the war.<sup>11</sup> One should note, however, as does Jakov Lind, that the danger of such expansion of the canon is that from now on all literature on any Jewish subject may legitimately be referred to as Holocaust literature.<sup>12</sup>

Hungarian writer Imre Kertész has also pointed out a certain change, or perhaps a deformation of perspective, in Holocaust literature, which in his view dates back to the 1980s: “A certain conformity about the Holocaust has set in: there is Holocaust sentimentality and a Holocaust canon, a taboo system about the Holocaust, and a ceremonious language that is part of this phenomenon; the Shoah products are sought out for the Shoah consumers.”<sup>13</sup> The Nobel Prize laureate does not quote the most obvious examples, such as action novels or sentimental romances about the Holocaust (e.g., Leon Uris’s *Mila 18* and other similar literary “products,” or the famous case of the Swiss author Bruno Doesekker, who assumed the false identity of the Holocaust child survivor Benjamin Wilkomirski), but rather refers to highly influential ways of shaping memory, such as Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*.<sup>14</sup>

Levinas’s ethical reflections in *Totality and Infinity* and Derrida’s in *The Gift of Death* make it clear that an act of memory need not (should not?) be “symmetrical”; it should not require the other to become responsible for our memory. We are left to ourselves with the problem of memory, which is not to say that we are alone; memory requires us to approach the face of the other. Derrida holds that today, we are faced with an urgency of memory.<sup>15</sup> This has nothing to do with ritual memory (which has often been instrumentally used), or with the impossibility of compensation, but with the kind of thinking about memory that represents a challenge to every new generation.

Keeping in mind the various ways in which memory had been manipulated in Poland at different moments of the communist era, I would like to comment on the prose works by authors whom I have identified as the second generation.<sup>16</sup> I focus on Piotr Szewc and Marek Bieńczyk because they appear to move away from the schematic and artificial ways of writing about Holocaust memory (ways that still persist in publications appearing after the mid-1980s). Even in their case, however, one should examine

the figures of memory and the literary devices they employ, since some of them are drawn from a well-rehearsed textual repertoire, ensconced in popular imagination.

Szewc's prose is distinguished by its way of looking at the world of the past and by its characteristic ways of shaping memory. Szewc does not create plots directly connected to wartime, and his oneiric prose maintains the distance of time (both *Zagłada* and *Zmierzchy i poranki* are set in the 1930s). The narrative is focused on the events of a single day, as they unfold from dawn till night, and it is characterized by a certain absence of narrative action.

Szewc's first book *Zagłada* (1987) clearly lacks a plot; there is also no dialogue or psychologism (as Julian Strykowski points out in his introduction). The narrative *pluralis* ("we") is focused on registering elements of the represented world and only occasionally engages in probabilistic divagations or in guessing the intentions of the characters' actions or subsequent behavior. ("He may be returning home. Or walking to the office"; "One must guess he was carrying grain"; "This may have been. This could have happened.")<sup>17</sup>

Focusing attention on details in a photographic image of the town suggests that the narrator is conscious of the not-remembered: "These few facts, minor ones . . . will be lost . . . will not survive." Remembering and exploring "the unexamined past perfect" in narrative reflection brings to mind questions of language and the choice of textual medium, as pointed out by the narrative voice.<sup>18</sup> A captured object or a moment in time disappears in a generalized name: this is the first stage of forgetting, which produces only that which cannot be remembered. The narrative "we," which is trying to capture the existence of a small town, its status as "center of the world" to its inhabitants, is conscious (and makes the readers conscious) of its limitations. The narrator's knowledge of the past and of the characters' dreams (the lawyer's childhood and youth, or Baum's terrifying dreams), the most diligent descriptions of gestures, smells, shadows and light, the consciousness of future events (a discreet hint of a photograph taken at the time of the events but being looked at half a century later)

make it possible to create a world that is “imaginable, but only up to a point.”<sup>19</sup>

The narrator has only momentary associations at his disposal (which may be lost in abstraction or simply forgotten); he has “selective points of view.”<sup>20</sup> Hence the narrator repeatedly underlines the purpose and the meaning of the story: “To salvage. How to salvage. For whom. Before it is lost forever, before it slides into non-being, eternal not-remembering. . . . What can be salvaged. Before it is fulfilled.”<sup>21</sup> The narrator has chosen his own location in time and space: “Let us stand and watch the sky. In this record, which wants to be a detailed register of the phenomena we observed, the chronicle of the Book of the Day fulfilling itself.”<sup>22</sup> He repeats: “To be vigilant. To register with all diligence, so that the Book would not miss anything. To bring into the real whatever is difficult to observe directly, through the law of the probable.”<sup>23</sup>

It is worth asking how this record of duration is constructed in Szewc’s prose, what imagistic sequences the writer has used, and which conventional structures he has called upon. Here the text draws on a familiar motif of the Book. The narrator is said to be reading from the Book of the Day. Dreams, which are visions of the future tragedy, visit Baum, the textile merchant whose dark shop is full of secrets hidden by colorful fabrics. Baum is also the only inhabitant of the town whom we see at the evening study of the Talmud. Besides these overt allusions to Bruno Schulz’s prose, let me point to a few other sources.<sup>24</sup> Rosenzweig’s pub in the market square is filled with the rancid smell of fermenting wine and vodka, and the overwhelming odor of warm bodies, sheepskin coats, and leftovers—a description that evokes a conventional image of “the Jewish inn.”<sup>25</sup> Keeping in mind the oneiric character of Szewc’s prose, it is hard not to note the exceptionally idyllic presentation of the shtetl (non-Jewish inhabitants are practically absent, although the mention of a church indicates that people of other religions also live in the town). The decision to limit the action to one day shortens the time of the narrator’s vigilant “photographing,” but it also makes images of the past schematic (despite the declared intent: “To record diligently. . . . Not to miss anything”).<sup>26</sup> The appearance in the town of Chassidic Jews (who dance on the steps of the



city hall and take a rest in the park) takes place at the border of the represented world and the imagination of the storyteller, who comments on this intertwining of disparate visions: "The Chassidic Jews were melting into the tangled plants from which one could not emerge or, more likely, they disappeared underground. . . . Perhaps the Chassidic Jews were never here? Yes, it is possible they were never here. It is not clear that it was they who were dancing and singing."<sup>27</sup>

Szewc's fiction, with its peculiar balance between dream and reality, transforms space and time. On the one hand, his prose is filled with profound appreciation for the smallest details of existence, whether visible or surreal; on the other hand, he is fascinated by secrets and by traces left by the "Chassidic saints," which he takes to be "the incomprehensible which must be comprehended."<sup>28</sup> Immersing oneself into the "past perfect" is tainted with uncertainty: "Whereas all facts we have witnessed are certain and evident, the presence—the existence—of the Chassidic Jews was not evident."<sup>29</sup> But as Levinas insists, it is important to remember the task of exploring "the secret of traces," which, despite uncertainty, accompany the consciousness of being that, though it is there, is not there fully, but remains suspended and may resume at any moment.<sup>30</sup>

The poetic prose woven into the text makes it possible to infer an allusion to a painting by Marc Chagall (a painting on the wall of the pub represents a fantastic vision of the town and its inhabitants who are floating in the air).<sup>31</sup> The contemporary reader inevitably associates this vision with the tragedy of the Holocaust: "And the people who are afloat and the colorful objects are enveloped in tongues of fire."<sup>32</sup> In Szewc's work this image plays a special role, as it undergoes subsequent transformations. The fiery sphere falls out of the picture, sprinkles sparks on the inn, and rolls across the market square, while "some of the people we saw afloat above the town, their arms spread, are already above the clouds."<sup>33</sup>

In the fictional world, the fiery sphere is not only the sun, which changes the look of the buildings, the space, and the people; it is also the shining cupola of the city hall, thanks to which the market square becomes the "'Center-All' in which . . . there is the beginning and the end of the world, just because it can be here."<sup>34</sup> The Chagallian motif of a world that is

floating is recalled here as well: "Everything is as it was. . . . The hot air is circulating over rooftops. The Town is floating about the Townhall. Everyone is afloat."<sup>35</sup>

The second vision of the Holocaust appears in dreams (Baum's, Walek's, and the lawyer's): it is a vision of dead trees, of the dogs' diabolical red tongues. The recollection of a hunt from long ago ("the mystery of the hunt") brings forth symbolic, crucially signifying images: "Dog-devils chase people running in the streets. The streets are white with smoke. . . . The crying floats to the sky with the smoke";<sup>36</sup> "Dog-devils, noise . . . and words no one has ever heard before."<sup>37</sup>

Another symbolic and rather obvious allusion to the Holocaust (it has been used by many authors) is the description of a train passing through the town, the sparks above the locomotive forming "a braid that will rise up more than once, though in another place, at another hour, thrown up by another train."<sup>38</sup>

Dreamlike visions of the Holocaust accompany the narrator, who is trying to write—to hold onto—existence. They weigh down over the space he contemplates, connecting to the awareness of the impossibility of "photographing" this reality and to a possibility of imagining, which, if we consider that this is about the "not-remembered"—is rather weak. What is left? "The pain is the same: that we have managed to salvage just a tiny part."<sup>39</sup>

In a similar though more complex way, the author returns to the reality of the town (with the same Łabuńka river, etc.) in the collection *Zmierzchy i poranki* (Dusk and morning). Maintaining the probabilistic style of description, inviting the reader to partake in the work of the imagination, he once again observes the town's structure and its inhabitants. The narrator's stories about particular characters are more differentiated than they were in the debut work, as we accompany them in their journeys, watch their daily chores and minor events of their lives, and participate in a sort of multicultural idyll of the small town. The method of narration permits an image of the town to be constructed with sounds, smells, and rhythms. Light aids in the creation of this world—from morning till dusk, the different times of the day bring out Being, whose ontological status is

rather unusual: “real, true, universal. They must have been so convincing because they were not there at all.”<sup>40</sup> Memory does not enable duration; it is unreliable. The play of light is perhaps more helpful since it brings space “to life,” as does also a specific kind of time that allows for the repeatability of gesture and the ritual of being.

Encountering the space delineated by the pomp in the market square, the merchants’ stalls, the watchmaker’s shop, the little stores full of secrets (again reminiscent of the climate of Schulz’s prose), a world of deformed and degraded objects (voices from the attic!), we encounter a world that is, on the one hand, ungraspable, a mere glitter, while at the same time with a repeatedly emphasized motif of time, duration, framelike pause. We learn the most about duration from the chimneys of houses, which have long been witnessing events and will yet see things taking place in the houses. The coming catastrophe is clearly indicated: minor signals, some “splinter, interstice” of being, a shadow that never managed to crawl all the way to its destination, Salome, who years later “was better able to hear the train rolling by than to feel and remember that which the train had carried away forever, taking her away too, or if not her, then a part of her world.”<sup>41</sup> The mixing of the real and apparition is effected with the narrative device of anthropomorphism, which makes it possible to weave, from a number of perspectives, the tale of the miracle of being and the changing modes of time.

Szewc’s suggestive prose may, I think, be described in terms of shaping memory. This would be most of all the memory of the labor of imagination: the memory read off damp walls and from reports of chimneys listening to noises from the spare room, the memory made possible by the transformation and the “freeing of time” in Chaim Brandwein’s watchmaker’s shop. This kind of memory would become possible thanks to the traces of the shadow, mentioned repeatedly in the narrative: “It is necessary to approach, to stoop, so that in the sand or dry mud one might see the outline of a shadow, next to the clear mark left by the soles of boots. Perhaps the fingers of the one who, without a doubt, just walked by, would grope for the thick air like for a balustrade, perhaps some hope of surviving would smolder still.”<sup>42</sup> Such is the work of memory that Szewc offers,

faced with the ghosts that have always been with us in the space of the post-Holocaust Polish reality.

Marek Bieńczyk was also born after the war, and his novel *Tworci* (1999) similarly takes up the subject of the Holocaust. In comparing Szewc's and Bieńczyk's work, some remarkable differences in the way they perceive the world of the past can be noted. While Szewc gives us as a somewhat idyllic image of an East European shtetl, constructed from well-known imaginary formulas and marked with the omens of the impending Shoah, Bieńczyk writes about a group of friends and in this way, while focusing on the Holocaust, seems to be treating it as a historical event and therefore one that is graspable and that can potentially serve as material for efficient literary treatment.

Bieńczyk—who is the author of many books as well as several outstanding essays on melancholia—is aware that writers born after the war are not describing experience (or writing about “experienced history”) but are dealing instead with description of experience (“history testified”).<sup>43</sup> The ideal reader would see the novel *Tworci* as a text appended to another text: the reader should operate not within the realm of the story told but in the novel's larger textual space. In this sense Bieńczyk's fiction is also evidence of the transformation in the Polish paradigm of Holocaust memory.

The history we encounter in Bieńczyk's narrative is the kind of history that is taking place in words, playing itself out in dialogues, in the allusions to major figures of Western culture (the mental patients in the *Tworci* psychiatric hospital are named after famous European philosophers), in allusions and suggestions. The narrator is very much aware of the linguistic codes in his game of quotations, and he emphasizes the “metafictional” nature of the world presented.

The setting—the hospital, the park, the surrounding meadows—evokes the garden of Eden. If it were not for the barely suggested context of the war, we would not wonder why some of the characters were forced out of this paradise. A selective “absence of history” is strange—for example, the Easter of 1943, which the characters spend in Warsaw, is in no way special, even though they enter and leave the city next to the walls of the ghetto,

behind which the uprising is in progress. It is only the subsequent Warsaw uprising that becomes a historically significant experience (in 1944, one of the characters dies in Freta Street; “the earth is quaking” and there is “black smoke over Warsaw”).<sup>44</sup>

The novel’s diction is also notable: the author is carefully avoiding the word “Jew,” which appears only in the sense of an ink-stain in the copy-book of an “Aryan” classmate.<sup>45</sup> The euphemistic phrase “to come from Berdyczów” is used instead of the word that would describe the characters’ identity (for readers not acquainted with the Polish-Jewish cultural heritage, this allusion may easily escape notice).

Bieńczyk’s choice of language points to aspects crucially different from the recognized difficulties of “speaking the unspeakable” (Różewicz, Borowski, Grynberg). The prose is in no way helpless: it is not broken to reflect that wound in being which so many other authors found hard to render. This use of language, its reiteration of fairly schematic conventions and its saturation with allusions to European culture, invites mistrust. Bieńczyk’s fiction yields an impression that the account of the Holocaust has been absorbed by too strong a literary presence. A diagnosis of the world in which the disaster reaching to the very roots of being is taking place is softened by a metaphoric grasp of this universe, by a reduction of the world to a madhouse.

The author has made the disclaimer that *Tworci* is not a historical novel to be read on the level of events and has referred the reader instead to the mediation of the text itself (this suggestion is repeatedly made in the novel). One may nevertheless question whether such referral does not render Bieńczyk’s message about the consciousness of “his world” somewhat oblique. In the writer’s time, the sense of loss has somehow been covered up with the heightened sense of artistic creativity. The repeated attempts to write about the Holocaust can thus be seen as questionable, the point once made by Elie Wiesel: “There is no such thing as literature of the Holocaust; and there cannot be; it is obviously a self-contradiction; Auschwitz negates all literary form, it denies all prescriptions and systems.”<sup>46</sup> In the context of the narrative construction offered by Bieńczyk, one has to agree with the radical stance adopted by the author of *Night*.

Bieńczyk's fiction does not clearly illustrate the author's thesis, formulated elsewhere, about loss and melancholia (might the elaborate rhetoric and saturation of the prose with literary devices be the reason?): "The melancholic aesthetic . . . is doomed to language, it is trapped inside language and shot through with the loss of a directly tangible entity, presence, reality, while it is infinitely spinning a yarn of that loss and the memory of that loss."<sup>47</sup> The shaping of memory in the novel meets the challenge of the melancholic story trapped in language only sometimes (this effect is best achieved in the dialogues between Yurek, one of the main characters, and psychiatric patient Anti-Plato). The characters' knowledge and self-awareness can sometimes be heard in dialogues, whenever these are sparse and carry multiple meanings; an example of a successful shortcut effect is the exchange between Yurek and Yanka (a protagonist who comes "from Berdyczów"): "—What's going to happen next? . . . —Nothing. Not a thing more. We've survived the war and nothing else is ever going to happen."<sup>48</sup> An evocation of historical events leads neither to a melancholic catharsis nor to identificatory consolation. The narrative about the past becomes instead an element of a present defined by mourning.

An important aspect of Bieńczyk's prose is the impossibility of assigning guilt and innocence in the ethical context. Each of the characters could be perceived as a victim and as guilty before the Other (even though not everyone is guilty of despicable deeds). This stance, whether conscious or not on the part of the author, is close to Levinas's category of being for-onese, as defined by the consciousness of being guilty before the Other.

The common dimension for the two second-generation authors discussed is their search for language and their attempts to shape memory by choosing a particular paradigm of speaking about the Holocaust, motivated by the awareness of the challenge posed by a very much alive yet indescribable problem that concerns us all. The fictional works discussed here make evident that the Holocaust, as a fundamentally transformational event, has been reflected in Polish literature of the past decades. This has happened in the context of a more general change in the representations of the

Holocaust in world literature (the breaking of taboos, the use of “improper” genres, etc.).

It seems to me that the writing by Polish authors of the second generation differs from Holocaust literature produced in countries such as Germany, Israel, or the United States. Most notably, the Polish authors do not resort to irony, or they use it very sparingly; they make no use of the grotesque or comic modes (unlike David Grossman, Maxim Biller, or Barbara Honigmann).<sup>49</sup> It seems that Polish literature (still?) respects a certain taboo that has already been broken in other national literatures, such as the use of humor or of “improper” genres (Art Spiegelman’s comic book *Maus* is the most notable example).<sup>50</sup> It may be that in the Polish context, the use of irony would emphasize the distance and make it impossible to complete the work of mourning.

It must be kept in mind that the profound absence and loss of Jewish life and culture in Poland began to register in public consciousness only in the mid-1980s (Rymkiewicz’s *Umschlagplatz* was one of the crucial texts in this respect). The awareness that culture and history have been fragmented by the Holocaust, the opening up of a wider debate, and the questioning of schematic ways of thinking have been enabled not only by literature but also by nonfictional texts (including several underground publications).

One can ask: Why so late? In the first half of the twentieth century, the Jews were acquainted with non-Jewish Polish literature, but the reverse was not true: authors writing in Yiddish and Hebrew did not see their work translated into Polish, while translations the other way were common.<sup>51</sup> Mutual relations were burdened with stereotypical images and antisemitic attitudes. Wartime experience, instead of bringing people together, divided the non-Jewish “witnesses” and their Jewish “neighbors,” challenging them with difficult, discomfiting dilemmas. That these attitudes and patterns of thinking were persistent was evidenced by the debate that followed the publication of Jan Błoński’s essay and the subsequent more public debate about *Jedwabne*.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, examining our conscience without self-pity, without masochism, and without engaging beautiful, lyrical rhetoric has turned out to be particularly difficult.

In general, after the war Polish attitudes have been shaped by two ex-

treme positions: on the one hand, by prejudice against the Jews, stemming from ignorance and perpetuated by stereotypes passed from one generation to the next, and on the other, by a folkloristic reduction of Judaism and Jewishness to a few clichéd, schematic images. In my view the transformation of the Holocaust discourse in Poland, which I have dated back to the eighties, has barely begun. A lot of work must still be done for this change to bring about more lasting effects for the definition of Polish identity, the reconstruction of memory, and changes in attitudes.

### Notes

1. I am thinking primarily of Zygmunt Bauman's argument in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Other scholars have made similar points.
2. The ruthlessness in the approach to the Other has been pointed out both by Levinas and by Lyotard, who wrote about hatred of otherness and the creation of "pseudo-community" that excluded the Other, turning him into a nonperson, killing him, and removing him from memory.
3. See Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście: Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*, trans. Leszek Krowicki and Jakub Szacki (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe "Scholar," 2003).
4. See James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Interpreting Holocaust Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
5. This crucial aspect of memory and narration about the Holocaust was pointed out, among others, by Primo Levi. See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
6. I am thinking first of all of writings by Irena Maciejewska and Madelaine Levine, as well as Maria Janion and Michał Głowiński.
7. In his story "Holy Week," Andrzejewski describes two women: a Jewish woman, who is rich, very intelligent, cynical, and well groomed, and a Polish woman—good, innocent, compassionate, a Catholic mother, and patriot.
8. Jan Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto," in *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, 28. The article first appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, January 11, 1987.
9. The term "second-generation survivors" is usually used to describe persons born after the war to families who were Holocaust survivors. My own definition of second-generation survivors is much broader: it refers to authors who were born after the war and who take up the subject of the Holocaust in their work. Young



- discusses the “memory of the witness’ memory” in “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the Afterimages of History.”
10. In Young, “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past,” 29.
  11. A separate, much-debated issue is the ethical valuation of treating Holocaust testimonies from a literary, predominantly aesthetic perspective.
  12. Jakov Lind’s statement and discussion of Young’s theses is from Strümpel, “Im Sog der Erinnerungskultur.”
  13. Kertész, *Die exilierte Sprache*, 149–50. Translation mine.
  14. In the same piece Kertész defends Benigni’s film *Life Is Beautiful*.
  15. Quoted in Dorota Glowacka, “Forgiving, Witnessing, and the ‘Polish Shame,’” in this volume. Glowacka points out that Derrida’s phrase “the urgency of memory” can be read in a double sense—as a strong desire to remember the past, but also as a strong desire to forget, or to “free memory from the burden of the past.”
  16. Michael Steinlauf gives a synthetic account of the history of Polish memory of the Holocaust and its stages (up to the mid-1990s). See Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
  17. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 17, 10, 28.
  18. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 12.
  19. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 24.
  20. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 121.
  21. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 147.
  22. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 26.
  23. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 97.
  24. Editors’ note: Bruno Schulz (1982–42) was a Polish Jewish writer and graphic artist. In his stories—collected in the volumes *Sklepy cynamonowe* (Cinnamon shops) and *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the sign of the hourglass)—he frequently draws on the motif of the Book. The father of Schulz’s protagonist in the short stories, like Szewc’s Baum, is a visionary textile merchant. Bruno Schulz was shot by the SS in 1942, during an *Aktion* in his hometown of Drohobycz, in today’s Ukraine.
  25. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 28.
  26. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 105.
  27. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 110.
  28. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 125.
  29. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 110.
  30. Levinas, 236–40.

31. This is another surprising element of the world presented. If the narrator's eye is "photographing" the space of the town, the shtetl, one must recall that in the 1930s, just like earlier and later in the tradition of Judaism, and particularly in its Orthodox and Chassidic versions, the proscription against making images was very strong: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4).
32. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 28.
33. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 134.
34. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 67.
35. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 63.
36. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 81–82.
37. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 78.
38. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 158.
39. Szewc, *Zagłada*, 157.
40. Szewc, *Zmierzchy i poranki*, 12.
41. Szewc, *Zmierzchy i poranki*, 33.
42. Szewc, *Zmierzchy i poranki*, 90.
43. I am referring here to Jerzy Jedlicki's distinction between "experienced history" and "history testified," in Jerzy Jedlicki, *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1978). This perspective is clear in Marek Bieńczyk's statements made in an interview; see Bieńczyk, "Imię Soni."
44. Bieńczyk, *Tworci*, 187–88.
45. In the nineteenth century the Polish word for Jew also meant "an ink-stain," which was indicative of the pejorative meanings associated with Jewishness. That usage disappeared in the first half of the twentieth century.
46. Quoted in Strümpel, "Im Sog der Erinnerungskultur."
47. See Bieńczyk, "Imię Soni."
48. Bieńczyk, *Tworci*, 199.
49. See Barbara Honigmann's *Damals, dann und danach* (1999), *Soharas Reise* (1996), and *Eine Liebe aus nichts* (1991); Maxim Biller's *Land der Väter und Verräter* (1994) and *Wenn ich einmal reich und tot bin* (1993); David Grossman, *Under Love* (2002).
50. The situation in Polish visual art about the Holocaust is completely different, as evidenced by Zbigniew Libera's controversial installation *Concentration Camp Lego*.
51. See, for example, Segalowicz's memoir *Łtomackie* 13.
52. Editors' note: See introduction to this volume.

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# III

Religion, Ethics, Politics



# 12

## A Breakthrough in the Teachings of the Church on Jews and Judaism

ROMUALD JAKUB WEKSLER-WASZKINEL

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock. *NOSTRA AETATE*, no. 4.

The message contained in paragraph 4 of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* proclaimed at the Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4; see epigraph)—refers to memory. The memory of the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock, and to be more precise, the discovery of the bond that links the Church of Jesus Christ with Judaism, is a significant breakthrough for the new teachings of the Church following the Second Vatican Council.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely what the fourth paragraph of the said Declaration proclaimed by Pope Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council *remembers*, or rather *recalls*, that constitutes a clear dividing line in the history of the Church.

Commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the proclamation of the said Declaration, John Paul II—making a reference to the contents of paragraph 4—said: “*It has been contended repeatedly that the content of this paragraph, even though it is not overtly long or complicated, was the starting point of a new epoch that has changed the relations between the Church and the Jewish people, opening an entirely new era in these relations.*”<sup>2</sup>

The phrases “new epoch” in the history of the Church, “a starting point,” and even “a new era” in Christian (Catholic)-Jewish relations do not

appear frequently in official papal addresses. They did appear this time, since they adequately described what happened. Paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate* is the first doctrinal and highly solemn expression since Apostolic times—that is, since the Council of Jerusalem—that underlines the inseparable spiritual bond between the Church (those who believe in Jesus Christ) and the Jewish religion (the followers of Judaism). It is said that the Second Vatican Council marks the beginning of *new evangelization*. What can this possibly mean? After all there is no new Gospel to speak of.

Shortly after the Jerusalem Council, a momentous event that took place in the first century CE and was reported in Acts, chapter 15: instead of “perpetuating” the spiritual bond between the followers of Christ and the followers of Judaism, the chasm separating the two began to emerge.<sup>3</sup>

Let us consider the following statement made by John Paul II: “The New Covenant has its roots in the Old. The time when the people of the Old Covenant will be able to see themselves as part of the New is, naturally, a question to be left to the Holy Spirit. We, as human beings, try only not to put obstacles in the way.”<sup>4</sup> At first glance, the Pope’s statement resembles an adage of St. Augustine: “Novum Testamentum in Vetere patet, et Vetus in Novo latet” (The New Testament is contained in the Old and the Old Testament opens up because of the New). However, there is no need to explain in detail that this apparent similarity reveals striking differences. Instead of elaborating on the differences between the statements made by St. Augustine in the fourth century AD) and John Paul II in the twentieth century AD), it is best to return to paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*. A cursory look at the text of the Declaration is sufficient to see that it does not contain a single reference to the teachings of the previous councils, popes, fathers, or doctors of the Church. Clearly, this can only indicate that during the past nineteen centuries of the teachings of the Church—including all the twenty councils that took place, from the Council of Nicee in 325 through the First Vatican Council in 1869—no signs of the remembrance as referred to in the paragraph cited could be found.<sup>5</sup> The document is issued by the Holy See concerning the implementation of the said Declaration, where references are made to Judaism and Jews (i.e., *Guideline Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* of 1

December 1974), seems to confirm this situation right at the beginning: "Although Christianity sprang from Judaism, taking from it certain essential elements of its faith and divine worship, the gap dividing them was deepened more and more, to such an extent that Christians and Jews hardly knew each other."

This single-sentence summary of the twenty centuries of Church history explains a great deal about the subject matter of this chapter. Shocking as it sounds, there are grounds to call the literature of the nineteen centuries of Christianity—roughly from Bishop Meliton of Sardes or Tertulian (second century) through all the Church fathers and doctors of the Church, including contemporary Polish examples, such as Professor F. Koneczny or Reverend S. Trzeciak—"the literature of the growing gap" or, more directly, as literature tainted with anti-Judaism: anti-semitic literature!<sup>6</sup>

Whatever name we choose to give to this literature, the rich literary heritage of the nineteen centuries of Christianity collected in libraries proves useless if one attempts to build a "bridge" or even a "footbridge" in order to discern the spiritual link between Christianity and Judaism. This is, on the contrary, literature that deepens the gap and makes it unbridgeable. It presents the Jewish world as an exterior and utterly alien reality, or even as hostile to Christianity.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, it is "this literature of the growing gap" that is also responsible for the fact that Christians and Jews hardly know each other. And not only because of the mutual lack of knowledge. Stemming in the majority of cases from erroneous interpretations of the Bible, especially the New Testament, this literature is also responsible for the fact that Christian Europe in the twentieth century failed to combat the anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda. Exceptions to that rule, such as the writings of J. Maritain, Reverend Ch. Journet, E. Stein, and a handful of others, were few and far between.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Decree of the Holy Office issued on March 25, 1928, condemned "in the strongest possible terms the hatred . . . that is commonly referred to as 'antisemitism,'" Hitler's rise to power in 1933 made the said decree practically useless.<sup>9</sup> This is clearly evidenced in a letter written by Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI immediately after the rise of Hitler, in which she pointed out that the German government "which calls itself 'Christian,'" actually propounded hatred toward Jews.<sup>10</sup> Soon after the end of



World War II, J. Maritain pointed out that the Church needed to condemn antisemitism. As French ambassador to the Holy See, he wrote a letter to Pius XII via Archbishop J. B. Monitini (later Pope Paul VI), dated July 12, 1946, in which he pleaded—ineffectively—for the explicit condemnation of antisemitism.<sup>11</sup>

The situation in Poland was no different. The letter of Cardinal A. Hlond, Primate of Poland, written in autumn 1936 to condemn extreme antisemitism, did not have any effect on the Polish Catholic press of the day, as many historians now assert.<sup>12</sup>

The fact remains that Christian Europe not only failed to undertake an all-out war against the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazis but also remained susceptible to it. The author of a study on the Jewish themes as presented by the Catholic press in the thirties, A. Landau-Czajka, makes the following comments about the Polish environment: “Jews were perceived as *strangers and enemies*, not only for not being Christian but also as followers of Judaism—unknown and mysterious, and therefore dangerous. While this type of traditional antisemitism did not generate its own solutions to the Jewish problem, it did constitute fruitful ground on which such solutions took root.”<sup>13</sup> This opinion is evidenced in a report for June and mid-July 1944, compiled by the community closely linked with the Church for the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. An excerpt reads:

As far as the Jewish problem is concerned, it is a peculiar sign of God’s Providence that Germans, despite the atrocities committed in our country in the past as well as at present, have made a good start by showing the way to free Polish society from the Jewish plague. We should follow it, of course, in a less brutal and cruel but nevertheless consistent manner. Clearly, this is the work of Providence to make the occupying army contribute to solving this pressing problem. The Polish nation, too soft and lacking in consistency, would never be able to take the decisive steps that the solution of this problem requires. It is obvious that this is a burning issue, for undoubtedly, Jews are doing irreparable harm to our religious and national life.<sup>14</sup>

This is a shocking account, which can only prompt a response of shameful silence and an appeal to God for forgiveness.

Indeed the Nazis, who occupied Poland and other countries, did contribute to “solving” the Jewish problem once and for all. Worse still, they were not alone in their desire to “purify” Europe (to make it *Judenrein*). The wave of hatred toward Jews that swept through all of Christian Europe claimed a heavy toll in lives: about six million people, including one and a half million children.

However, it must also be pointed out that this unprecedented wave of hatred opened the eyes and moved the hearts of those who did not bury their conscience. One cannot fail to notice that among those who “opened their eyes and hearts” during the years of the Nazi occupation, Poles are the most numerous. The largest number of those who received the distinction of Righteous among the Nations, conferred by the Yad Vashem Institute for saving Jews from imminent death during the war, are Poles (among them my parents—Piotr and Emilia Waszkinel). These people risked their own lives to save others, as Poland was the only country under the Nazi occupation with such severe sanctions against those who helped Jews. One should also bear in mind that the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile was the only government of all the countries that fought against the Nazis to have established a clandestine underground Council for Aid to the Jews.<sup>15</sup>

Generally speaking, during World War II people behaved as humans do: in many different ways. In view of the war crimes committed by the Nazis, their sneers addressed at the God of the Hebrew Bible were also sneers addressed at God, the Father of Jesus Christ (compare Ro. 1:1, 1:3; Eph. 1, 3).<sup>16</sup> Hatred or contempt for the Jewish world was actually hatred or contempt for Jesus of Nazareth, his Mother, his disciples, and ultimately for the first Church of Jesus Christ, a church that consisted entirely of Jews!<sup>17</sup>

In the light of the facts and events presented, it should now be clear that any attempt to seek an answer to the question “How should one talk about the Church after Auschwitz?” in “the literature of the growing gap” is bound to fail. The Second Vatican Council was well aware of that. While raising the question of the Church’s relation to Jews and Judaism, it made a reference to the Bible—mainly to the New Testament.<sup>18</sup>

Mainly, but not exclusively. The contents of the fourth paragraph of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* should be supplemented with one more significant explanation. Even without an in-depth analysis of the document, one can easily detect its connection to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) promulgated a year earlier (November 21, 1964). One of the footnotes of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* makes a reference to Chapter 2 of this earlier declaration, titled “On the People of God.”<sup>19</sup> An important clue referring to the Constitution adopted by Second Vatican Council is placed in the first sentence of paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*. The sentence informs us of what the present Vatican Council remembers (and what the other councils neglected to remember), and it indicates the very source of this memory: “As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church (mysterium Ecclesiae perscrutans), it remembers . . .” Let me repeat these words: The Second Vatican Council remembers . . . while searching into the mystery of the Church. Before analyzing the semantic content of these words, their very syntax and the terminology used serve as a signpost directing our attention to the title of the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church; that is, “The Mystery of the Church” (*De Mystério Ecclesiae*).

Clearly, there are easily recognizable syntactic road signs allowing one to assume that the first sentence of paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, which seems to be the starting point of a new teaching of the Church about Jews and Judaism, is in fact a link that binds the paragraph of *Nostra Aetate* under discussion with the fundamental doctrinal document of this council.<sup>20</sup> There is every reason to believe that the whole message on Jews and Judaism, as expressed by the Second Vatican Council and placed in paragraph 4 of *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, is in fact deeply influenced by the ecclesiology of the council. It is an expression of the Church’s new way of thinking about itself and about Jews and Judaism.

Certainly the expression of the Church’s new way of thinking and teaching about itself—and consequently a new way of thinking and teaching about Jews and Judaism—is found in all the documents of the Second Vatican Council as well as in the teachings of St. Peter’s follower, the bishop

of Rome, the first teacher and witness of faith; the documents of the Holy See commenting on the teaching of the council; and finally, in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which has been recommended by Pope John Paul II as “a definite norm” for the teaching of faith as revitalized at its very source.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the twenty centuries of the history of Christianity the Jewish world has been a reality, not an abstraction. Local synods—for example, Toledo in 653 or Wrocław in 1267, and even councils, such as the Fourth Lateran Council, 1205, or Florence, 1442—defined the place of Jews in the Christian community, most notably their legal status. They offered the Christian community guidelines on how to “protect oneself against the detrimental influence of Jews.” These entities also gave advice to Jews on what they should do in order to become members of the Christian world; for instance, to be baptised.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of these documents belong, regrettably, to the murky side of the history of all Christian churches. As a result the majority of Christians know nothing or very little about these documents.<sup>23</sup> The fact remains, however, that throughout nearly nineteen centuries all Christian churches (and not just the Roman Catholic Church) perceived the Jewish world as external, strange, and hostile with respect to Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

Following the changes inside the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council and the Church’s new way of thinking about itself, and by extension about Jews and Judaism, it was possible not only to arrange the Pope’s visit to a Roman synagogue—the *first such visit since St. Peter’s*—but also to hear the words that made many Christians feel dizzy. Notorious for his disobedience, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre concluded after the visit that “the Pope is no longer Catholic.”<sup>25</sup> And what was it that so scandalized the archbishop, who seemed more pious than the Pope himself? This is what Pope John Paul II said to the Jews who gathered in the synagogue on that memorable day, April 13, 1986: “The Jewish religion is not an external reality to our religion. It is its internal part. Our attitude toward the Jewish religion is different from our attitude toward other religions. You are our dear brothers or, we might say, our elder brothers.”<sup>26</sup>

These words from the speech delivered by the first witness and teacher

of faith, the bishop of Rome, John Paul II, are probably the best illustration of the breakthrough in the teachings of the Church about Jews and Judaism. It is a genuine milestone made possible by the Second Vatican Council.

As I have acknowledged, the latest council did not compile a new Gospel. So what is this new evangelization? It is the remembrance of this inseparable spiritual bond that ties the people of the New Covenant, or Christians, to the followers of Judaism. It follows that the postcouncil breakthrough in the teaching of the Church about Jews and Judaism by no means stands for a significant change of doctrine. If not that, what is this breakthrough? It is an explicit rejection of the old mistakes that persisted for centuries. One can safely say that the council diagnosed and defined this old, chronic, and still very dangerous disease as anti-Judaism, with its concomitant anti-Jewish phobias of various sorts. At the moment, the task of the Church is to see that the treatment undertaken is successful. We are now undergoing such treatment.

#### Notes

1. In his address delivered in the Roman synagogue Tempio Maggiore in Rome, on April 13, 1986, John Paul II—paraphrasing the first sentence of the Council Declaration—said: “Analyzing in depth its own mystery, the Church of Jesus Christ is discovering the bond that ties it to Judaism” (in *Nostra Aetate*, October 28, 1965).
2. Quoted in Ignatowski, *Kościół wobec przejawów antysemityzmu*, 57–58; italics in the original text. During his visit to the Roman synagogue John Paul II said the following about the document: “this short and concise paragraph has become a *turning point* in the relations between the Catholic Church and Judaism as well as individual Jews” (para. 4; emphasis mine).
3. See “Żydzi-chrześcijanie: Tak blisko i tak daleko,” in Roman Jakub Weksler-Waszkineł, *Zgłębiając tajemnicę Kościoła* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2003), 90–109.
4. John Paul II, *Przekroczyć próg nadziei*, 87.
5. In a conciliar compendium compiled by K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, the following statement is made concerning Jews and Judaism: “The declaration, as it is dynamically worded today, is an absolute exception in the history of the Church,

- its councils and theology" in *Żydzi i chrześcijaństwo jedną mają przyszłość*, trans. Danuta Motak (Kraków: Znak, 2001), 42. See also F. Bécheau, *Historia soborów*, trans. P. Rak (Kraków: 1998).
6. See, for example, Feliks Konieczny, *Cywilizacja żydowska* (Komorów: Antyk. M. Dybowski, 1997).
  7. M. Starowieyski writes: "The first three centuries of Christianity were marked by polemics with Judaism which, besides paganism, was considered the most serious threat to Christianity"; see "Caelestis urbs Hierusalem," in *Jerozolima w kulturze europejskiej*, ed. Piotr Paszkiewicz and Tadeusz Zadrozny (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1997), 49–57.
  8. On Maritain see for instance M. Dubois, "Jacques Maritain et le mystère d'Israël," in Marcel Dubois, *Rencontres avec le judaïsme en Israël* (Jerusalem: Editions de l'Olivier Maison Saint Isaie, 1983), 127–46. On Journet see Łukasz Kamykowski, *Izrael i Kościół według Charlesa Journeta* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe P&T, 1993). On Stein see J. M. Oesterricher, *Sept philosophes juifs devant le Christ* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955); M. Dubois, "L'itinéraire philosophique et spirituel d'Edith Stein," in *Rencontres*, 147–83; R. J. Weksler-Waszkinel, "Edyta Stein—patronka Europy," in *Zgłębiając tajemnicę Kościoła*, 199–216.
  9. Quoted in Ignatowski, *Kościół wobec przejawów antysemityzmu*, 81.
  10. See "Nieznany list Edyty Stein do Piusa XI" in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 9 (2799), March 2, 2003.
  11. See B. Charmet, "Jacques Maritain et Pie XII. Quelques précisions d'ordre documentaire," *Sens* 2 (2000): 101–6.
  12. See Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu*; D. Libionka, "Kwestia żydowska" w prasie katolickiej w Polsce w latach trzydziestych XX wieku, Ph.D. diss., Institute of History, Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, Warsaw, 1998.
  13. Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu*, 25.
  14. From the Archives of Ministry of the Interior, file 46. L.p. 8/Kość., k. 1–10. See Szarota, *U progu Zagłady*. For the evaluation of the Church's attitude toward Jews during the World War II see Alain Besançon, *Przekleństwo wieku: O komunizmie, narodowym socjalizmie i jedyności Zagłady*, trans. Jerzy Guze (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2000), 94 ff.
  15. Among 21,310 persons representing forty-two countries who were named the Righteous among the Nations, 5,941 are Poles; information from <http://www.yad-vashem.org.il>, accessed June 2006. See *Those who Helped: Polish Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (Warsaw: Institute of National Memory, Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation 1997). For more information on the clandestine underground organization—Council for Aid to

- Jews in Occupied Poland—see Irene Tomaszewski and Tacia Werbowski, *Żegota: The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland, 1942–45* (Westmount: Price-Patterson, 1994). For more information on aid provided in France, see Henri De Lubac, *Résistance chrétienne à l'antisémitisme: Souvenirs 1940–1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).
16. In his article “The Valley of Shadows: Holocaust in the Context of Judaism,” J. Sacks writes: “Josef Mengele, a doctor from Auschwitz, joked openly that he had replaced God as the one who delivers the final judgement as to ‘who will live and who will die.’” Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, forced Jews to spit on the Scrolls and spat into their mouths so that they did not run out of saliva. Jewish holidays and Sabbaths were marked by particular atrocities”; translated by Paweł Peak, *Znak* 507 (August 1997): 11–12. For a commentary on sneers against God, the Father of Jesus Christ, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Bóg Jezusa Chrystusa*, trans. J. Zycho-wicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1995).
  17. Cardinal J. Ratzinger writes: “Auschwitz was the horrible expression of the outlook aimed to destroy Jews but also expressed hatred of the Jewish heritage in Christianity and attempted to erase it completely”; see J. Ratzinger, *Granice dialogu*, trans. M. Mijalska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 1999), 11.
  18. Out of the ten references, seven are to the Letters of St. Paul (out of which five refer to the “Letter to the Romans”).
  19. See *Nostra Aetate* 4, footnote 11, 520.
  20. The council adopted three more documents of a similar theological value. They include Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). See Bécheau, *Historia soborów*, 228–29.
  21. See John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* (October 11, 1992), where John Paul II states: “I declare it [i.e., the Catechism] to be a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion and a sure norm for teaching the faith.”
  22. See, for instance, Rev. Grzegorz Ignatowski, *Kościół i Synagoga* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Więzi, 2000). See also my article “Henri Bergon: spotkanie judaizmu i katolicyzmu, in *Zgłębiając tajemnicę Kościoła*, 158–76.
  23. I highly recommend the address of Rabbi M. Melchior, delivered during the Pope’s official visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on March 26, 2000; available on the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive>.
  24. See, for instance, E. H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); F. Lovsky, *L'antisémitisme chrétien* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970); F. Lovsky,

- La déchirure de l'absence* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1983); Brother Johanan, *Chrześcijananie i antysemityzm*, trans. M. Tarnowska (Kraków: Znak, 2000); Michel Remaud, *Chrétiens et Juifs entre le passé et l'avenir* (Brussels: Éditions Lessius, 2000).
25. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre was excommunicated in 1988. See *Żydzi i chrześcijanie jedną mają przyszłość*, 36, 116.
26. John Paul II, *Przekroczyć próg nadziei*, 87.

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# 13

## The Vision and Language of the Other

### *Jedwabne versus the Auschwitz Convent Controversy*

ZEV GARBER

Traditional Christian belief holds that Christianity is the fulfillment of biblical Judaism. Jews deny that Jesus Christ is the Jewish Messiah and thus fall short of their calling as God's Chosen People. Whether or not there is a direct link between nearly two thousand years of this Christian "teaching of contempt" and the Shoah, Christian culpability in the nearly total destruction of European Jewry cannot be denied. Nazi Germany came to power in the shadow of religious fratricidal teaching and applied this hatred to the murder of Jews. In light of the Shoah, however, the Roman Catholic Church confronted and fully rejected the age-old Christian canard that Jews killed Jesus Christ and are therefore hated by mankind. The Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, is the first document in the Church's history that takes seriously the view that Jews remain God's covenant people, whom the Holy See, in its understanding of God's Word in Scripture and tradition, is morally bound to defend and support. Indeed ever since 1965, Catholic efforts to combat worldwide antisemitism, to teach about the Shoah and its lessons, and to reconcile the Vatican and the State of Israel have been impressive. Yet several Jewish organizations (religious and secular) are "perplexed and angered at the way the Vatican is crafting its memory and symbols of the nadir of modern Jewish-Christian relations—the Shoah."<sup>1</sup> By confronting the acrimonious exchange of language between Jews and Poles on post-Shoah conflicts

such as the Auschwitz Convent controversy and the Jedwabne massacre, I argue for Jewish and Polish visions of the other without intolerance and prejudice.

### Words and Language

The international conference “Remembering for the Future II” (RFTF II) was held at Humboldt University in Berlin, March 13–17, 1994, with more than four hundred participants from the United States, Israel, and various other countries. Planned by an international committee in the tradition of “Remembering for the Future I” (RFTF I), held at Oxford University in July 1988, the Berlin conference heard more than two hundred papers presented by scholars from eleven countries.<sup>2</sup> Participants and the public at large were welcomed by national and local German officials as well as by representatives of the Jewish and Protestant communities. Daily plenary and general sessions augmented the twenty working groups devoted to a variety of topics on the Shoah, genocide, and the problems of national and interethnic conflicts from pedagogical, historical, theological, and literary perspectives. At this auspicious gathering mainly of Christians and Jews, where debate and dialogue were pervasive and persuasive, I was impressed by the power of words and language.

The sacred and the profane declare that man is a unique species in the animal kingdom—man is a producer of words. From the first embryonic word to the last word uttered by an expiring body—we are the word-making animal.

And in that rare species, those of us in education and religion are rarer still—we know the awesome power of words, and we should be more careful regarding words and how we make use of them.

We must be more selective in our choice of words for criticism, praise, and sarcasm.

We must avoid new words and overused words that mislead and confuse—words such as fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing, revisionism, “man’s inhumanity to man.”

We must limit verbosity and repetitiveness for the overgrowth kills otherwise healthy words and ideas.

We must discourage the cold, hot, lukewarm, and warmed-over wars of words among scholars. They are not productive but destructive.

We must practice more the basic words of humane vocabulary—words such as hello, sorry, are you OK?—I'm OK, peace.

In short, scholars and doers who are practitioners of words and not merely believers in words are making one giant step forward to humanize mankind.

So it is with language. Despite its omnipresence, we normally do not think much about language as an instrument to do good or to execute evil, nor do we understand the working of its medium (words and syntax) in expressing how we think, feel, perceive, or desire. Understanding the constraints of language on what we can and cannot do to ponder the imponderable became the focus of my initial study on the terminology of Judeocide.

At RFTF I, Bruce Zuckerman and I called into question the validity of the label "Holocaust" to describe the extermination of European Jews during World War II.<sup>3</sup> We pointed to the shocking use of a specific religious term for the genocide, which made the Nazi murderers priestly officiants of divine propitiation. We challenged Elie Wiesel's attempt to make the (aborted) sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis the biblical analogy for the "Final Solution." Going far beyond questions of terminological propriety, we discerned basic psychological attitudes in the conventional Jewish view of the Shoah: that the Event is limited to Jewish victims of the Nazis, and a fulfillment of the Jews' traditional role as God's people, chosen to suffer for the redemption of mankind. We decry all this as theological gerrymandering and see the Shoah as the tragic violation of the Torah prohibition "Thou shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), in which both murderers and victims are ordinary people in an extraordinary situation, a secular event without saints or demons.

We fear that the attitudes behind the continual use of the term "the Holocaust" may lead to Jews being seen as Christ killers or Christlike sacrificial "lambs of God," who willfully die for the sins of humankind. Still, on some profound level of meaningfulness, the Shoah (which means in the biblical Hebrew "destruction, ruin," suggesting no religious or sacrificial

overtones) must be taken as emblematic of man's inhumanity to man. If it is to remain the paradigmatic genocide, then it must be a paradigm that shows true horror; that is, what all people are capable of doing and what all people are capable of suffering; its message of survival must be shared with all who have suffered and will suffer.

At RFTF II, Zuckerman and I probed the language of Shoah disputation, and we pointed out the many complications and difficulties that accompanied the Auschwitz Convent controversy.<sup>4</sup> More than a text of faith and history as it was, the conflict is circumscribed by religious and cultural differences expressed in language predisposed by certain choices of interpretation. We are suggesting that people who speak different languages cannot share the same conceptual framework, and conversely, different conceptual forms cannot be expressed in the same language.

For communication to occur, some prior agreement must exist between speaker/sender and hearer/receiver. But if our need to communicate arises out of our social nature, then our group identity determines a significant part of what we perceive to be moral goodness or blameworthiness, including our obligation to do right, be good, and condemn evil. This may explain why controversy and not communication prevailed at the Auschwitz Convent as well as during the ballyhoo that followed the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Sąsiedzi* (*Neighbors*). International Jewish groups argue that the Jewish people, because of the murder of their six million, have acquired *the* final say in the conduct of affairs at Auschwitz and Jedwabne. In contrast, some Polish nationalist and religious segments maintain that Poland's national and religious identity is bound to the presence of the Carmelite convent and to what really happened on that dreadful July 1941 day in a small village forty miles west of Białystok, in the Łomża region in northeastern Poland. In their opinion, what nihilistic Nazis during World War II and atheist communists in the postwar era did not accomplish, the demanding voice of international Jewry and Zionism may well execute: the demise of Polish self-identity, religion, and sovereignty.

How to address the cycle of claim and counterclaim between the Jew and the Pole? We suggest that the antagonists in the dispute must move beyond thought control and "herd mentality." We must rediscover—and in

many cases, discover—the vision of the other in the language of dialogue and reconciliation. Since meanings are not given independently of language, we must come up with a suitable hermeneutic that honors the dead and does not abuse the memory of the living. The cry of “Never Again” must never deteriorate into the subtext of “Never Again for Us.” Both sides have created a seemingly impenetrable wall of accusatory words; but we must believe that the wall is permeable. And by exploring the inside and outside of the language of bias, we can confront the cycle of contempt and move from strife to Shalom.

### Language Violence

The question I want to ask now is: What happens when dialogue breaks down? When language recedes from cordiality to hostility? What to do about the continuing tensions unleashed by the Auschwitz Convent controversy and the Jedwabne massacre?

#### *Auschwitz Convent Controversy*

The erecting of a cross and a convent on the spot where thousands of Polish people, mostly Polish intellectuals, were murdered by the Nazis in 1940; demonstrations in the same spot, at the entrance to Auschwitz, where during the Nazi reign of terror more Jews were murdered in the furnaces of death than anywhere else; the rise of the Polish claim in determining “whose Auschwitz?”; the collapse of the Geneva Agreement among Polish ecclesiastics; the slow-paced intervention by the Vatican, suggesting that the Polish-born Pope John Paul II saw the controversy as a local affair; the statement from the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, preceding the convent closure (June 20, 1993), that “Auschwitz shall never again be a place of controversy,” which appeared to be premature, wishful thinking in the face of considerable opposition from Polish nationalistic elements in particular—connect the pieces and you get not dialogue but disputation, not conformity but perplexity.

The aspect of all this puzzlement that gets the most news coverage—the debate over the convent’s location—is the least of all worries. The Church, after all, motivated by the mystery of Christ’s redeeming love and in the

memory of the sons and daughters of Israel, has vacated the convent at Auschwitz, and the municipality of Oświęcim has terminated the lease with the Carmelite order. The nuns have moved either to new quarters across the road or to another convent altogether. Indeed in the place of the convent, there is now, off the grounds of Auschwitz, the Center of Information, Meetings, Dialogue, Education, and Prayer (and an adjacent new Carmelite convent). When construction began on February 19, 1990, the archbishop of Kraków, Franciszek Macharski, and Minister Jacek Ambroziak broke ground in a symbolic ceremony, which was graced with Cardinal Macharski's greeting: "May justice, peace and love radiate from this place. May people draw the strength here to overcome everything that divides them, for the sake of that good which is for us second only to God himself, the good of man."<sup>5</sup> The center opened its doors on February 28, 1992.

What "divides them" is "everything" when the parties involved in the convent debate use the language of prejudice and not the language of tolerance. The offensive language is of three types, separate and yet intrinsically connected.

The first of these we might call "natural bias"; that is, the ingrained bias of cultural antagonism, which is typically reflected in national, cultural, and political hues. When Jews and Poles clash over Auschwitz, who and how many died or were murdered there, whose rights were being violated by whom, the appropriateness and propriety of social protest, they are simply doing "what comes naturally." That is, they are simply falling in line with what within their respective societies is taken—without malicious intent—to be the given state of affairs.

A second type of the offensive language is often referred to conventionally as "the dislike of the unlike." This is a more conscious form of social prejudice that becomes manifest in any group as members premeditatedly consider their relationship with a distinctly different group. Economics, racial, ethnic, and/or religious differences are typically the engines that drive this more active form of prejudice. It is most commonly manifest in conflict between groups of unequal size—the persecution of the minority by the majority and the overt and covert hatred of the downtrodden for

the ruling class. Intolerance is often a source, component, or by-product of this conflict. Consequently it is “normal” prejudice, part of one’s cultural baggage, which leads to accepted persecution of minorities in many parts of the world. The history of Jewish-Polish relations reflects the typical consequences of this sense of hostility for the alien. Jews began living in Poland in approximately the tenth century. Individual Jewish communities coexisted tolerably with Poles “in this blessed land of refuge.”<sup>6</sup> Things were to change, however, with the coming of such traumas as the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–49, in which between 100,000 and 500,000 Jews were murdered by the Cossacks.<sup>7</sup> With all the successive acts of discrimination, fanaticism, ghettoization, persecution, and finally extermination that followed, the deep alienation between Jews and Poles became the foremost means by which these respective groups defined each other.<sup>8</sup>

The third type of prejudice embodies image-laden characteristics of antisemitism and antipolonism. The hatred of Jews as Jews is developed on two grounds. First, it is nurtured by the anti-Jewish bias of *contra-Judaeos* found at the crossroads of classic Christian preaching and teaching, which persisted for centuries in pre-Second Vatican Council Polish catechism. Typical of this type of religious anti-Judaism is the definition of the Jews as a deicidal and misanthropic people (1 Thess. 2:14–15, Acts 7:5–7), who as the children of the devil (John 8:42–47) oppose the truth (John 8:31–47) and have been a murderous race from the beginning of time (Matt. 23:34–36, Luke 20:49–50). Church leaders encouraged this virulent caricature, and the laity believed it. To illustrate, in a pastoral letter of 1936, Primate of Poland Cardinal Hlond, who supported the state’s anti-Jewish measures, wrote that a “Jewish problem exists and will continue to exist as long as Jews remain Jews.”<sup>9</sup> The Kielce pogrom was not condemned by Bishop Wyszyński on the grounds that the Jews engaged in ritual murder, and in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, a church organ player testified that Jews justifiably went up in smoke at Auschwitz because their fathers shed the blood of Jesus: “I heard their rabbi say, ‘His blood be on us and our children’” (Matt 27:25).

Second, this type of religious antisemitism is conditioned by Nazi-inspired vocabulary, ideology, and program. Jews are seen as looking upon

themselves as the “Chosen People,” who manipulate mass media worldwide to bring forth their objective, the mastery of the world. Poles have adapted this antisemitic theme to their nationalistic ends, and many have believed wholeheartedly in their God-given right of self-preservation in the face of Judaism, a dangerous world power, which Poland and Europe must endeavor to resist, if not suppress or destroy.

To illustrate, one can consider Cardinal Józef Glemp’s sermon given at Częstochowa on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II and in celebrations to mark the feast of the Most Holy Mary at the Polish shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa (August 26, 1989). The section “Dialogue with the Jews,” in its entirety, conveys a balanced, though debatable, view of Polish attitudes toward Jews: positive (“For many Jews, Poland was their Fatherland not only because of citizenship but also because of their authentic love for it”), negative (Jewish elitism, international media power, propensity to kill), and revisionist (Oświęcim-Auschwitz belongs to Poles; antipolonism is the cause of Polish antisemitism).

On the Jewish side, this prejudice is seen in the assumption that Polish people are antisemitic from birth. But this derelict thinking is flawed on three points. One, this belief is a biological non sequitur; that is, it has not been scientifically proven that Poles possess a fatal antisemitic gene.<sup>10</sup> Second, it means engaging in revisionist history, as no mention is made of Polish kings who welcomed and protected Jews. Also, the role played by partisans, intellectuals, clerics, peasants, and social groups who helped Jews at the risk of their own lives and property (e.g., the group *Żegota*, which is credited by Simon Wiesenthal with having rescued about forty thousand Jews), is being forgotten in such narratives. Third, the belief in Poles’ natural antisemitism does a disservice to today’s Pole of introspection and vision, who wishes to repair the chasm between the two peoples who suffer most from the memory of Auschwitz.

On this point one should note, for example, the intent of the Kraków Foundation for the Center of Information, Meetings, Dialogue, Education, and Prayer, by all means available to people of different nationalities, religions, and convictions, to be educated (through meetings, seminars,



congresses, dialogue) about Auschwitz: its causes, its victims, and its necessary legacy to build a better tomorrow, a tomorrow where all can live without fear and suspicion and none shall make them afraid. By stressing in particular the study of the cultural victimization of the Jews, the center not only does not dismiss the Jewish fate at Auschwitz but also confirms the obligation by the interfaith and the international community to know about it. For Jews to do less in knowing about the plight of the Polish people and other nationalities and groups who suffered at Auschwitz is therefore inequitable and deplorable.

### *Jedwabne*

After being controlled by Russia for two years, the small town of Jedwabne in northeastern Poland was captured by German forces on June 22, 1941. Less than three weeks later, on July 10, 1941, the Jewish community of Jedwabne, whose roots went back more than three hundred years, was efficiently eliminated by local Poles. In an insightful article published on May 5, 2000, in the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, Andrzej Kaczyński wrote: "Recently revealed eyewitness accounts by Jews who survived the Holocaust confirm this. Nor do Polish residents of Jedwabne who witnessed the tragedy deny it. From these same sources, it is also known that the Germans used Polish hands to commit similar massacres of Jews in Wąsosz, Wizna and Radziłów. Many of these documented testimonies were previously known to Polish scholars. These scholars did not, however, contribute to exposing the shocking truth about Polish involvement in the Nazi extermination of the Jews. The knowledge has reached us from abroad."<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, a reference to *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (*Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*) by Polish émigré Jan Tomasz Gross.<sup>12</sup> This hard-hitting, emotionally laden book indicted Jedwabne's mayor, village council, Catholic clergy, and its population in the murder of Jedwabne's Jewish community.

In the introduction, Gross states his objective: "The story I am about to present in this little volume falls to my mind, utterly out of scale: one day, in July 1941, half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half—some 1,600 men, women and children."<sup>13</sup> Based

on eyewitness accounts from non-Jewish townspeople and Jewish survivors, including the two depositions that Szmul Wasersztajn presented to the Jewish Historical Committee in Białystok in 1945, and other evidence, Gross chronicled the destruction of Jedwabne Jews.

Horrific details are laid out: beheading; suicide by drowning; burning, rape, stabbing, stoning, and whipping, all said to have been carried out by town ruffians armed with axes, clubs, and knives. However, ordinary villagers did not resist joining in the public display of mockery (e.g., shearing the beards of Orthodox Jews and ordering young Jews to carry the statue of Lenin in the public square while singing Soviet songs and chanting, “the war is because of us”) and in the beatings in the town square. Eventually hundreds of Jews were herded into the barn belonging to Bronisław Śleszyński and burned alive. In the aftermath the Germans, repulsed by the ghastly sight of dogs eating the flesh of cadavers and fearing an outbreak of disease, ordered the Poles to bury the burnt corpses.

The Polish version of the Jedwabne massacre (see endnote 15) differs considerably from the account presented by Gross. It questions his intent and the soundness of his methodology and historical research, including the veracity of his eyewitness sources. Gross states that ninety-two Poles actively participated in the pogrom, but the postwar communist regime tried only twenty-two Poles in Łomża in 1949 for the murder of the Jews in Jedwabne. Gross argues that the town’s Poles voluntarily murdered the Jews, but apologists, such as Father Edward Orłowski, the Catholic priest in Jedwabne, say that *szmalcownicy* (blackmailers), criminal elements, and the auxiliary police engaged in the operation against the Jews. The roundup and mistreatment of Jews in the town square were ordered by the German gendarmes, who also supervised the march of the Jews to the barn where they were burnt alive. Further, Gross ignores the fact that Jews participated in the communist occupation, inciting revenge on the part of the Poles. Also, prior to the completion of the investigation, Poland’s Institute for National Memory (IPN) reported in April 2001 that it is “highly probable” that Nazi death squads under the command of Herman Schaper committed the crimes in Jedwabne and surrounding areas, including Radziłów, Tykocin, Rutki, Zambrów, Wąsosz, and Wizna.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, innocent Poles became pawns in an act of murder inspired by Nazi ideology and executed by German hands.<sup>15</sup> Thus the inscription on a stone obelisk erected in the 1960s on the site of the barn as a monument to remember the murdered Jews of Jedwabne read: "A warning to posterity so that the sin of hate enflamed by German Nazism might never set inhabitants of this land against each other."<sup>16</sup> A second monument, made of black stone, was erected at a Catholic cemetery in Jedwabne after the communist years. However, public debates in Poland, in the wake of Gross's book, have effected a new direction in remembrance. The new memorial tablet at the Jedwabne barn site, unveiled at the sixtieth anniversary ceremony on July 10, 2001, reads: "In memory of Jews of Jedwabne and environs, men, women and children, co-stewards of this land, murdered and burnt on this spot on 10 July 1941." To the chagrin of many Jews, the murderous role of the Jedwabne Polish inhabitants remains unmentioned.

There are significant differences in the Polish and Jewish versions of what occurred in Jedwabne. Gross's book sends forth a strong message: "Had Jedwabne not been seized by Germans, the Jedwabne Jews would not have been murdered by their neighbors," the statement that has put Poles on the defensive. At the sixtieth anniversary of the Jedwabne pogrom, July 10, 2001, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski admonished: "Because of this crime we should beg the shadows of the dead and their families for forgiveness. Therefore, today, as a citizen and as the president of the Polish Republic, I apologize. I apologize in the name of those Poles whose conscience is moved by that crime. In the name of those who believe that we cannot be proud of the magnificence of Polish history without at the same time feeling pain and shame for the wrongs that Poles have done to others."<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek advised cautionary responsibility: "We are ready to face even the darkest facts of our history, in the spirit of truth, without searching for seeming justifications. Nevertheless, we cannot allow the case of Jedwabne to disseminate false ideas about Poland's co-responsibility for the Holocaust or innate antisemitism in Poland."<sup>18</sup> Less conciliatory were the remarks of Cardinal Glemp, who "didn't want politicians to tell the Church how it should express its sorrow for crimes committed by some group of its believers."<sup>19</sup> Glemp's terse comment and

his absence from the memorial service reflected the feelings of a considerable percentage of Polish people who object strongly to Kwaśniewski's call that the Polish nation as a whole accept responsibility for the crimes committed at Jedwabne.

There is no conclusive direction or agreement on why the Jedwabne massacre happened, even though there had been no unusual record of persecution of Jews in the area. There are, of course, educational, economic, political, religious, and social factors to consider. Whether Gross is right that a large Polish crowd murdered the Jews out of fanatical religious passion ("Jews are Christ killers") or whether, as some of his critics counter, it was the Jewish-Soviet collaboration and German involvement that fueled the massacre, there is no excuse for the Polish participation in the murder of innocents. Justice demands that claim and counterclaim, insider-outsider apologetics and polemics, where they are likely to lead to misconstrued contextualization and interpretation, be put aside. The victims deserve it and the living require it.

### Future Language

What of the future? Would the language of intolerance, which causes one to regress from correct talk to horrid incrimination, destroy forever the status quo, albeit shaky, in the Auschwitz convent dispute? Would consenting participants in mass murder of Jews in Jedwabne be exonerated by the explanation that "the Germans made us do it," or by pastoral sermons that Jews are forever cursed by their forebears' killing of Christ, or by medieval charges of blood libel and host desecration, or the lust for plundering? We think not and believe that both Jews and Poles can properly honor their heritage and memory by reigning in highly charged parochial emotionalism with social restraints. And by demonstrated mutual respect, a truth can be taught: good can come from evil and triumph over it.

However, how to establish historical memories without extremism? We advise self-criticism, interpersonal dialogue, humanitarian and spiritual sharing, and isolation of political and polemical antisemitism and anti-polonism. If no concerted effort is made to break the chain of accusatory charges and severe censure between the antagonists, fueled by long-stand-

ing indifference and suspicion, then there will be no escape from an unending whirlwind of mutual distrust leading to hate that will embitter the lives of Jews and Poles alike.

If the prospects of Jewish-Polish dialogue are not bright, then it is the business of responsible intellectuals and thinkers among the combatants to make them bright. Learning the complexity of the cultural, psychological, and political motivations, let alone religious and nationalistic factors, and understanding why Auschwitz is the symbol of Polish martyrdom under the Nazis, and why Jedwabne represents Polish resistance against imposed Nazism and communism, is imperative for Jews. Similarly, Poles must come to realize that neighbors murdered their neighbors in Jedwabne because they chose to do so. Also, they must recognize that about 90 percent of those murdered at Auschwitz were European Jews, who were bureaucratically processed to die; they were systematically degraded, dehumanized, and slaughtered.<sup>20</sup>

To raise a cross and a convent in memory of the Jews—not to mention the fifty crosses planted in the summer of 1998 outside the Auschwitz I death camp by Polish Catholic extremists, eager to exploit latent anti-semitism to boost their nationalist cause—is obscene and immoral; the crosses symbolically show disrespect equally to the Jewish dead and Jewish survivors. Both peoples must learn that blatant irreverent acts and/or speech, whether by individuals, the ecclesia, or the republic, can never be condoned; and that prejudicial, passionate ideology that feeds these atrocities must never be tolerated. The alternative is frightening: memory is polluted when vision of the other is blighted by cultural, national, and religious bias.

At all costs, optimism must prevail. The words of a Polish Catholic, Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz, on the “guardian mole”—that is, the eternal Jew, the keeper of the Torah, the truth of centuries—can serve as an inspiration:

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.  
He has swollen eyelids, like a patriarch  
who sat much in the light of candles  
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I a Jew of the New Testament  
 Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?  
 He will count me among the helpers of death:  
 the uncircumcised.<sup>21</sup>

When we can know each other's fear, see with each other's eyes, perhaps the Jew and the Pole can journey together from animosity to amity. May our sacred and profane journey to Auschwitz and Jedwabne and back, manifested by interdenominational dialogue, go from strength to strength in confronting the "continual agony" into the third millennium.

#### Notes

1. Institute of the World Jewish Congress, Policy Dispatch no. 36, November 1998 (e-mail received November 29, 1998).
2. The third international conference, "Remembering for the Future 2000," took place at Oxford and London, July 16–23, 2000.
3. For a discussion of the term "Holocaust" and the psychology behind its popular usage, see Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, "Why Do We Call the Holocaust 'The Holocaust'? An Inquiry into the Psychology of Labels," *Modern Judaism* 9, no. 2 (1989): 197–211. Reprinted in Zev Garber, *Shoah, the Paradigmatic Genocide: Essays in Exegesis and Eisegesis* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1994), chapter 3. A revised version appears in Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, *Double Takes: Thinking and Rethinking Issues of Modern Judaism in Ancient Contexts* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2004), chapter 1.
4. See Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, "The Führer/Furor over the Auschwitz Convent: The Inside and Outside of the Language of Bias," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, ed. M. Berenbaum and B. R. Rubenstein with H. R. Feibel and S. and Z. Garber (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1995), 95–109; also in *From Prejudice to Destruction: Western Civilization in the Shadow of Auschwitz*, ed. C. J. Colijn and M. S. Littell (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1995), 167–79. Reprinted and revised as chapter 3 in Garber and Zuckerman, *Double Takes*.
5. The words echo Jesus' great commandment, to love God and to love one's neighbor, in Matt. 22:37–39, Mark 12:29–31, and Luke 10:27. For the original wording

- and the difference in the *Sh'ma* commandment, see Deut. 6:4–5; on brotherly love, see Lev. 19:18.
6. So called because Poland welcomed Jewish refugees from the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish Expulsion of 1492. In Ashkenazic Yiddish, Poland is called *Polin*: “here we spend an over-night”; the “night” lasted a thousand years and then ended in the fiery dawn of the Shoah.
  7. The Chmielnicki massacres began in Nemirov on the Hebrew date of 20 Sivan 5408. The council of the Four Lands, the central institution of Jewish self-government in Poland and Lithuania from the middle of the sixteenth century until 1764, decreed this day as the Fast of Sivan 20, in memory of the thousands murdered. The *Gezerot Tah ve-Tat* are mentioned in the Knesset (State of Israel) law to establish *Yom ha-Shoah u-Mered ha-Geta’ot* (Shoah and Ghetto Revolt Remembrance Day), enacted April 12, 1951. On this, see Z. Garber, *Shoah, the Paradigmatic Genocide*, chapter 4.
  8. Most of Catholic Poland was silent on the issue of building the Auschwitz death camp. State policy and the Catholic hierarchy demonstrated deafness to Jewish cries before, during, and after the Shoah. Augustus Cardinal Hlond, Primate of Poland, issued a pastoral letter in 1936 urging a boycott of Jewish business. Ten years later, he and Bishop Stefan Wyszyński of Lublin (later Cardinal and Primate of Poland) did not condemn the murder and violence directed against Jewish survivors in the 1946 Kielce pogrom. On the tragic history of mid-twentieth-century Jewish-Polish relations, see Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 64–69.
  9. See Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 67.
  10. Similarly, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996) posits a special strain of “eliminationist antisemitism” in the German people that led to the murder of European Jews. This is understandable but not completely factual: the idea of *Vernichtung* (annihilation), admittedly German in origin, could never have been so successfully implemented without a multiplicity of *European* strands, each with its own special shading. See Franklin H. Littell (ed.), *Hyping the Holocaust: Scholars Answer Goldhagen* (East Rockaway NY: Cummings & Hathaway, 1997).
  11. Andrzej Kaczyński, “Burnt Offering,” in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. A. Polonsky and J. Michlic (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 50–59.
  12. Gross, *Neighbors*; first published by Pogrnicze in Sejny, Poland, in 2000, it came out in English translation in 2001.<sup>13</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, 7.

14. <http://fido.seva.net:8090/pipermail/holocaust/2001-April/000492.html>. The picture, however, is more complex. In December 2001, the Institute of National Memory, following earlier exhumations conducted in Jedwabne in the summer, completed the investigation into the number of Jewish victims murdered on July 10, 1941. It was concluded that the main grave contained 300–400 bodies, while the other smaller one contained 30–50 bodies. Additionally, in the pile of rubble nearby, fragments of bones and teeth (including children's milk teeth) belonging to at least 33 people had been found. Even though the figures confirmed by the institute turned out to be lower than those originally given by Gross in *Neighbors* (ca. 480 and not 1,600 victims), the evidence provided by the Institute of National Memory has foreclosed the possibility of denying, or diminishing, the scope and significance of the Jedwabne tragedy and Poles' direct involvement in it.
15. For Polish viewpoints on Jedwabne, see <http://www.polishnews.com>, and <http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/jedwabne/about.html>. See also Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's excellent article "Jedwabne: History as a Fetish," chapter 2 of the present volume.
16. [http://www.polishnews.com/fulltext/politics/2001/politics63\\_3.shtml](http://www.polishnews.com/fulltext/politics/2001/politics63_3.shtml).
17. English translation of the president's speech after Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 103.
18. [http://www.npajac.org/press/20010326\\_jedwabne\\_massacre.html](http://www.npajac.org/press/20010326_jedwabne_massacre.html).
19. [http://www.smcm.edu/academics/soan/smp/jewish\\_resilience/jedwabne.htm](http://www.smcm.edu/academics/soan/smp/jewish_resilience/jedwabne.htm).  
Cardinal Glemp's decision not to participate in the state-sponsored sixtieth anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre is explained in an interview with the Catholic Information Agency (KAI), May 15, 2001. See Polonsky and J. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 166–78. On remembering the Jedwabne massacre, Cardinal Glemp exhibited his quid pro quo apologetics. On the one hand, he recognized that Poles had contributed to the killing of Jews at Jedwabne and elsewhere, and on the other, he wondered about the Jewish silence regarding the Jewish Bolsheviks who persecuted Poles after the war. In this interview, he insinuated that Jewish anti-polonism was a factor in the murders. For an assessment of the Polish Catholic view on Jedwabne, see K. Gebert, "Parallel Monologues: Catholics, Jews and Jedwabne," in *Jews and Christians in Conversation*, ed. E. Kessler, J. Pawlikowski, J. Banki (Cambridge, U.K.: Orchard Academic, 2002), 143–67.
20. The Pole more prominent in the media than any other in history, Pope John Paul II, understands this. According to Israel's former chief Ashkenazi rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, who met with the Holy Father in September 1993, the pontiff's personal experience during the Shoah was a primary factor in his support for the Vatican's recognition of the State of Israel. The Vatican and Israel signed an agree-



ment of mutual recognition on December 30, 1993, which became official in June 1994.

21. From the closing stanzas of Czesław Miłosz, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," cited in Frieda W. Aaron, *Bearing the Unbearable: Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 185.

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# 14

## Forgiving, Witnessing, and “Polish Shame”

DOROTA GLOWACKA

The duty of thought stems from the following: the men who were murdered were thinking beings. The rest is only a symptom of shame because we have failed to accomplish this duty. PIOTR MATYWIECKI

Without forgiveness there is no future. ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

I went to Jedwabne on August 15, 2001. I had to go there after receiving an email from a Polish friend who had participated in the commemorative ceremony on July 10. She wrote: “I thought there would be more people there. But, apart from the representatives of Jewish communities, the President, a throng of journalists and hundreds of policemen, there was only a handful. It rained, and Rabbi Baker said that God was crying. The people of Jedwabne stayed home, peering from behind the curtains, because the priest told them not to go. I kept thinking whether today they wouldn’t do the same.” In Jedwabne, I stood at the site where the ordinary citizens of the town tortured, humiliated, and finally burnt in a barn the Jewish half of the town. Unbearable memory, inexpiable crime . . .

And yet, as a nation, Poles have not been able to attribute guilt unequivocally for that crime, to draw a line between good and evil.

### Forgiving

In his reflections on Auschwitz titled *The Drowned and the Saved*, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi asserts that considering the collapse of a clear

distinction between good and evil in what he calls the moral gray zone, he must withhold moral judgment and, as a consequence, also must relinquish his authority to grant or withhold forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> It seems that in Poland, as in Levi's example, this inability to assign guilt has put a question mark over the possibility of forgiveness between Poles and Jews. In the following discussion I argue, however, that the ashes of Jedwabne do not belong in Levi's gray zone, in which moral judgment must be suspended. On the contrary, I discuss Jedwabne in terms of ethical responsibility, insisting at the same time on what I see as a necessary correlation between forgiveness and bearing witness. The multilayered context of the Jedwabne debacle has also led me to believe that this relation pivots on the notion of "shame," as it has structured historical and cultural memory in postwar Poland.<sup>2</sup>

If, as I believe, rethinking the relation between forgiveness and witnessing is an urgent task for thought today, my personal responsibility as an intellectual is closely intertwined with my own Polish-Jewish heritage, a double legacy of pain, honor, and shame. Similarly to the Dreyfus affair in France at the turn of the century, Jedwabne has divided Polish society, revealing a profound rift in the nation's historical and social imaginary.<sup>3</sup> The right-wing nationalist camp has interpreted the efforts of Gross and his sympathizers as a hostile attempt to create "a society of shame" and thus corrode national unity, which they think is desperately needed under the conditions of new democracy.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand a sizable part of Polish society, including prominent left-wing politicians, reputable academics, and members of the clergy, has seen the crisis as an opportunity to wrestle with the painful legacy of antisemitism in Poland and to embrace the values of tolerance as part of the redefinition of patriotism.

At the unveiling of the new monument at Jedwabne, Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski declared: "Because of this crime we should beg the shadows of the dead and their families for forgiveness. Therefore, today, as a citizen and as the president of the Polish Republic, I apologize. I apologize in the name of those Poles whose conscience is moved by that crime. In the name of those who believe that we cannot be proud of the magnificence of Polish history without at the same time feeling pain and shame for the wrongs that Poles have done to others."<sup>5</sup> These words

were momentous not only because they constituted the first official apology extended to the Jews in Poland but also because of the president's unprecedented admission of shame. According to Marcin Król, a Polish historian of ideas, it is precisely the Polish lack of shame that has made it impossible for Poles to integrate the dark pages of their history into a national self-image. He writes: "In Poland, practically no one is ashamed. Communists are not ashamed of communism. The war collaborators are not ashamed of their acts of collaboration. And those who strayed from the path, of their mistakes. Finally, was there anyone who was ashamed of the fact that he had not helped the Jews during the war? Certainly, it was punishable by death and we cannot force anyone to be a hero, but did people feel at least awkward because they did not lift a finger when their neighbors were being deported? A Pole today considers himself clean—he has no guilt, no remorse, no shame."<sup>6</sup> The polarization of society into the defenders of Polish honor and the confessors of Polish shame indicates that the Polish national narrative of dignity, honor, and pride—which is based on the romantic heroic myth but is also historically justified by the impressive record of national uprisings and massive resistance effort during World War II—has been maintained at the cost of excluding disreputable moments of history. Within the narrative that prohibits shame as that which eradicates the glory, an apology, a plea for forgiveness, or even a mere admission of wrongdoing is seen as humiliating and perilous to the cohesion of the national myth.

Having sustained immense losses, fought heroically, and suffered the brunt of the Nazi onslaught on their own territory, Poles have always thought of themselves as the privileged witnesses to the victims of World War II. The question arises, however, whether they can be witnesses to the Jewish victims or whether they are only false witnesses, witnesses in bad faith.<sup>7</sup> It seems that the traditional Polish conception of nationality, as expressed in the slogan of "God, honor, fatherland," has been predicated on the foreclosure of the other, most notably the Jew; that is, on the withholding of dignity and honor to the Jew. Resulting from the interiorization of such deprecating treatment, another kind of shame—the shame of being Jewish—has been a bitter reality for some Polish Jews. In many

families, including my own, the parents' Jewish background was a carefully guarded secret. Maria Thau Weczer, a child survivor from Kraków, cites the words of one of her friends from the Jewish orphanage: "Being Jewish was so horrible, so disgusting, that even today, after so many years, when I confess it to a stranger, I do so in an artificial way, with a certain measure of defiance."<sup>8</sup> The very fact that in Polish one "confesses" to being Jewish ("przyznaję się, że jestem Żydówką"), as if one were admitting a crime, is telling.<sup>9</sup>

French writer and Holocaust survivor Jean Améry once described that kind of shame as "a deep-seated discomfort," a disconcerting psychic state of living in fear and distrust. Growing up in an assimilated Austrian family, Améry lacked a positive Jewish identity and, after the Nuremberg laws, could only experience his Jewishness as "a feeling of shame and being a foreigner to himself."<sup>10</sup> Améry observes that one can only be a member of the dignified abstraction "human being" if one belongs to a community. Yet can we speak of Polish Jews as part of the community or are they, and have they always been, strangers in its midst, neighbors but not necessarily fellow creatures, *sąsiedzi* but never "*nasi bliźni*"?<sup>11</sup> Poland's failure to come to terms with its "Jewish question" and subsequently to mourn the disappearance of its Jews has doomed to failure the debate on forgiveness, which, without a profound transformation of the entire cultural imaginary, can only continue on the margins of the politics of retribution. The possibility of bearing witness to the victims of the Holocaust in Poland is intricately related to the repressed shame, to the buried memory of what appears to be unforgivable, but what also, as I argue, necessitates a further discussion on forgiveness.

In her influential reflection on forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt insists, despite her unconditional affirmation of forgiveness in the public realm, that certain crimes are indeed unforgivable, and no punishment or expiation is adequate as a form of redress. In the wake of the Shoah, these are the crimes that have been known under the rubric of "crimes against humanity," and they constitute an assault on the very essence of what it means to be human. Arendt contends that people are "unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to pun-

ish what they are unable to forgive.”<sup>12</sup> The unforgivable transcends human potentialities and subsequently our ability to act meaningfully. Thus in order to begin answering the question of whether the space of meaningful dialogue about forgiveness can be forged between Poles and Jews, the very concept of forgiveness must be reevaluated in the post-Shoah context.

This task has been undertaken by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, among others. In his influential essay “On Forgiveness,” he comments on the proliferation of acts of atonement on the global scene during the last two decades, making it clear that certain political conditions must first arise for the question of forgiveness to be broached in the global context. It is not surprising that in Poland the emergence of the debate on forgiveness and Polish-Jewish relations has coincided with the collapse of the communist regime and with increasing democratization of political and social life.

Yet Derrida cautions against hasty and ubiquitous dispensation of forgiveness in the wake of political changes, as does the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who wrote: “The world in which pardon is all-powerful becomes inhuman.”<sup>13</sup> Levinas’s comment stems from the main premise of his philosophy: I am always responsible before the other, and it is only within the ethical relation of responsibility that I become a human subject (my identity is thus derived from the other). Because my responsibility is infinite and primordial, nothing I do or say can disburden me of the ethical obligation to be for the other. This means that even though I may be innocent of any misdeeds toward others, I am guilty nevertheless: of having taken someone else’s place under the sun or of not having done enough to come to another’s aid. Since this “guiltless guilt” can never be assuaged and only grows the more I try to help, I am always in need of forgiveness. Yet at the same time, at every instant of my existence I am also being forgiven by the other for the unwarranted usurpation of my “right to be.” In this way, the work of forgiveness never ceases.<sup>14</sup> Redrawing the parameters of forgiveness in the context of Levinasian ethics implies that, insofar as the possibility of forgiveness issues from the other, it is truly not in my power to forgive. The ethical relation entails that I relinquish power, including my power to grant or request forgiveness.

From the Levinasian perspective, any actual act of granting forgiveness would require that I remain entrenched in a position of sovereignty from which forgiveness could be dispensed. I thus raise myself above the other, dissolving my ethical commitment. Similarly, a plea for forgiveness, no matter how humble, entails an exercise of power in its implicit expectation that forgiveness shall be granted. Both poles of the relation, therefore, the plea for forgiveness and the issuing of pardon, contravene the foundations of a truly ethical encounter where priority is given to the other to whom I cede power.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless Derrida recognizes that in the social realm, the rituals of forgiveness are necessary, and they are imbricated with the relations of power. Most important, for the issue of forgiveness to be introduced into public discourse, the former victims must first come into voice and establish themselves as agents of history; that is, accede to a position of relative power in order to grant or refuse forgiveness, as happened in South Africa after the collapse of apartheid. Seeking to ground Levinas's ethics in social reality and history, Derrida proposes that we distinguish between conditional forgiveness—that is, concrete acts of forgiveness, which are always guided by political stakes—and pure forgiveness, which must remain singular and irreducible, grounded in absolute responsibility to a particular other and as such "impossible to attain and finalize."<sup>16</sup> In his essay "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," Derrida also implicates forgiveness (*le pardon*) in the logic of the gift (*le don*), without which, he says, there is no forgiveness.<sup>17</sup> A true gift is no more than a gesture that must remain unreciprocated, asymmetrical, and divorced from the economies of giving and receiving. Reciprocity, be it even a token expression of gratitude, transforms the gesture of giving into barter.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the symmetry of conditional forgiveness, which calls for a calculation between the assignation of blame and the distribution of responsibility, betrays ethical forgiveness as that which is always primarily a gift to the other. Here Derrida is also drawing on Levinas's thesis that the ethical relation based on responsibility is radically asymmetrical. The ethical logic of forgiveness can then be formulated as follows: I can only forgive and be forgiven because I have already given; forgiving (*pardonner*) arrives through giving

(*donner*), while in turn my ability to give already comes from the other who has dispossessed me of everything I have, including my right to be.

In order to elaborate the (non)concept of pure forgiveness, however, Derrida first attends to the category of “unforgivable.” In the context of his discussion the unforgivable is understood, perhaps paradoxically, in two senses. In the Levinasian sense, if I can ever be forgiven, it is because my existence is always marked by “the unforgivable, from which forgiveness issues,” the fact that by proclaiming my right to be, I have already appropriated someone else’s place.<sup>19</sup> At the same time “the unforgivable” refers as well to the sociopolitical meaning that has been assigned to it by Hannah Arendt: a crime that is so monstrous and unintelligible that it exceeds the very limits of understanding and of human justice and thus of the possibility of forgiving. Yet against Vladimir Jankélévitch, who proclaimed in *L’Imprescriptible: Pardonner? Dans l’honneur et la dignité* (1986) that forgiveness died in the camps because of the unforgivable nature of the offense, Derrida proposes that true forgiveness can only forgive the unforgivable. Forgiving what you are already prepared to forgive, thus converting forgiveness into a meaningful act, abrogates forgiveness *qua* forgiveness, just as mere recognition of the gift through a simple “thank-you” annuls it as a “pure” gift outside all economic imperatives. Paradoxically, the monstrosity of the unforgivable delivers us into a realization that we can only become capable of forgiving because it is not in our power to forgive in the first place. In a historical sense as well, as Derrida reminds us, we are always returned to the unforgivable because we are all, in one way or another, heirs to a “crime against humanity,” be it a revolution or a war, even one fought in the name of a just cause.

Derrida observes, apropos the Balkans, that the possibility of unforgivable, radical evil arises between neighbors who share “the same quarter, the same house.”<sup>20</sup> What has made the crimes in Bosnia inexpiable is that, for example, in the concentration camp of Omarska, the murderer-guard knew the first names of the victims, who were often his former neighbors. Despite vastly different historical circumstances, Derrida’s statement is applicable, then, to the intractable hostility that corroded Polish-Jewish



neighborly relations over the centuries and that also culminated in murder. Further, as becomes apparent from the voluminous literature on Jedwabne, the Polish discussion on forgiveness has become embroiled in the economies of what Derrida calls conditional, symmetrical forgiveness. The most spurious expression of such transactions has been the insistence of the "self-defensive camp" that Poles should ask Jews for forgiveness only if Jews apologize to them for the crimes of bolshevism. Aside from being mired in the antisemitic topos of the Judeo-commune, this correlative statement stakes its claim on a skewed interpretation of the first lines of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."<sup>21</sup> In the context of discussions about forgiveness for the crimes that were committed in Jedwabne, the letter written by the Polish bishops to the German Episcopate in the 1960s is often quoted as a precedent. The bishops wrote: "We forgive and ask forgiveness."

The symmetry of "I forgive and I ask forgiveness" excludes the asymmetry and irreducibility of each crime; the fact that it transpires between two human beings who cannot be reduced to a common denominator. It is not surprising that within the "self-critical" sector of the Church, the most progressive and conciliatory voices have sought to denounce such economies of reciprocity and to anchor the debate in an ethical foundation. As Father Michał Czajkowski has said, "Our plea for forgiveness is credible only when it is entirely disinterested, when we are not expecting a reaction."<sup>22</sup> Further, when forgiveness is construed in terms of transactions between guilt and innocence, the will to forgiveness, even if it is guided by the most noble of reasons, lacks respect for the other side's motives, such as his or her inability to forgive. Considering the poisonous legacy of Christian antisemitism, but also the leading role of the Church in encouraging the Jewish-Christian dialogue in Poland, it is striking how little attempt has been made, at least prior to the unleashing of the Jedwabne controversy, to consider what we mean by forgiveness in the first place and how this very meaning is embedded in different religious traditions. In the Christian creed, forgiveness is the founding tenet of the covenant of redemption through Christ's sacrifice. In Judaism, the meaning of forgiveness is revealed in the Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, which

conveys the sense of “returning to God,” with a resolve to repair the relationship with God and with those around us.<sup>23</sup> Despite the centrality of forgiveness in both religions, the difference in interpretation must be taken into account; for instance, according to Jewish law, the initiative for repentance must always come from the offender; therefore, contrary to the Christian precept of unconditional forgiveness (“for they know not what they do,” Luke 23:34), there is no mechanism within Judaism for forgiveness to be extended to perpetrators who did not repent and ask to be forgiven.<sup>24</sup> This incommensurability between Christian and Jewish understanding of the processes of forgiveness makes it even more urgent to keep in mind the asymmetrical, absolute forgiveness that is entailed by what Derrida calls “the unforgivable.”

The two poles of forgiveness: pure forgiveness, asymmetrical, unconditional, a gracious gift “granted to the guilty as guilty” and derived from my absolute responsibility to a particular other, and conditional forgiveness, which depends on reciprocity, the hierarchies of domination, and one’s general responsibility to a collectivity—are heterogeneous, yet they remain inseparable and mutually indispensable.<sup>25</sup> None of my decisions and actions can settle this irreducible conflict between the two poles of forgiveness, each of which is equally justifiable and equally necessary. Yet it is in the face of the tension between the unconditional purity of forgiveness and the order of conditions—psychological, social, political, and juridical—that each of us is compelled to respond and undertake meaningful action. Only in this way can forgiveness open up a space of social interaction in which concrete *acts* of forgiveness can be negotiated and the possibility of reconciliation and human justice can arrive.<sup>26</sup>

### Witnessing

For Levinas, the fact that in view of responsibility to the other, the self is always in need of forgiveness is inseparable from bearing witness to the other. Since we arrive into the world of others to whom we are beholden, our self-revelation as human subjects is first and foremost testimony to the life of another: “The subject, in which the other is the same, inasmuch as the same is for the other, bears witness to it.”<sup>27</sup> Before it can speak and

announce itself as "I," the self has been addressed by the other, and it cannot refuse to respond (even if this response may be a negative one, of turning away from the other). The other, the source of the subject's language, leaves a trace across the surface of his or her words. In going toward the other, as Levinas argues in *Otherwise than Being*, we assume the burden of the other's guilt, while our own speech is enabled by the return of the other's voice, even against our will. Thus, as ethical subjects, we put ourselves in place of another like a hostage, expiating, says Levinas, for his or her deeds.<sup>28</sup>

What is the significance of Levinas's ethics with respect to bearing witness after the Shoah? Does the logic of substitution bear upon the past? That is, if the Other was murdered, in what way is that annihilation of another's life inscribed in my own existence? It seems that, insofar as I am a witness after the Shoah, I am thrust into the impossible position of the victim, entering, in substitution, the unimaginable place where speech ceases, in order to bring that silence to speech.

Once again, I would like to address this paradox of post-Shoah witnessing by relating it to the question of forgiveness. Let us recall that in Judaism, the Jew is always called upon as a witness: "You will be my witnesses, says the Lord" (Isaiah 43:10). Since the duty to atone for one's misdeeds is commanded to a witness, the relation between repentance and witnessing is a necessary one. What Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* calls recurrence—a return to oneself for the sake of the other, which constitutes the ethical subject as a witness—could be seen as corresponding to the movement of repentance or *teshuvah*. Within Levinasian ethics, bearing witness means that I am accountable not only for the suffering of the other but also for the other's wrongdoing and, even more radically, for the other's responsibility, including the responsibility to repent for deeds done—that is, for the other's *teshuvah*—although we cannot command or even request it.

I would like to address Levinas's difficult precept by evoking an equally difficult example—of Simon Wiesenthal's life and work. Undoubtedly Wiesenthal's commitment to hunting Nazi criminals is fueled by the need to bring criminals to justice, before both the tribunal of law and the tribunal of history. Yet, as becomes clear from his autobiographical account in *The*

*Sunflower*, it arose not from the desire for vengeance but from the question about the possibility of forgiveness, contrary to popular opinion, expressed by Elie Wiesel, among others. (While a prisoner in a labor camp, Wiesenthal was asked by a dying Nazi soldier to forgive him for the crimes committed on the Jews.)<sup>29</sup> For Wiesenthal, forgiveness is inseparable from an ethical obligation to help the perpetrators understand the enormity of their crimes and to express contrition, so that they can enter the path of repentance.<sup>30</sup>

Incidentally, the specific crime that the Nazi officer asks Wiesenthal to forgive him is his participation in the burning of the Jewish inhabitants of a small town, and he is particularly troubled by a memory of one Jewish child who jumped with his parents out of a burning building and was shot by the officer's squad. The Nazi officer's request to be forgiven is problematic and, as several participants in the "Symposium on Forgiveness" following Wiesenthal's account have stated, even outrageous. Yet in this act of contrition, even he, the murderer, bears witness to the lives he has helped extinguish, although he is a reluctant and self-incriminating witness. Although one must make sure not to conflate the crimes of the Nazi execution squads with the murderous mob in Jedwabne, as if Poles had borne the same responsibility for the Holocaust as the Germans, both scenarios evoke the complexity and the necessity of considering even the guilty one as a witness. Perhaps, as in the case of the Nazi officer in *The Sunflower*, one must begin with the act of witnessing—yes, even of the criminal's witnessing—so that the question of forgiveness and the path toward healing can be opened up. Or is it, conversely, that the need for forgiveness and healing necessitates the recognition of oneself as a witness?

Yet if, as Levinas contends, ethical witnessing is the movement of substituting oneself for another (as that which makes it possible to proclaim oneself as a speaking subject), what does it mean in the context of a burning barn? In this case, it means that the impossible would have to be accomplished: that the witness abandons the position outside the barn and steps over into the place of the Jewish death, as if he or she had been there, trapped within the burning walls. No matter whether the person was the one who poured the gasoline, or the one who later moved into a vacated

Jewish apartment, or finally, the one who has dwelled within the national myth that has brought comfort and sustenance but only at the cost of expelling the Jews from its hearth, he or she is still designated in a primordial responsibility as a witness.

What does it mean to testify to the events of the Shoah? I would like to argue that the ethical significance of witnessing is related to the ethical movement of forgiveness. As we have said, one becomes capable of granting or receiving forgiveness because, ethically, one is always in need of being forgiven for the "guiltless guilt" of one's existence. Analogously, one can only become a witness, in the sense of giving testimony to the events, because as a subject, one is always already a witness to the other. That is, only because to be a subject means to be a witness is it possible to assume the concrete task of bearing witness and to become accountable for the ways in which this task is fulfilled. The witness, according to Levinas, occurs whether one wills it or not, but as Jonathan Hatley has remarked, "The question is not whether one should witness the victim but whether one is to embrace one's responsibility for that witness."<sup>31</sup> Such is the profound ethical meaning of a simple comment by Władysław Bartoszewski, a founding member of the Council for the Aid to the Jews and designated Righteous Among the Nations. He explains, "I am a witness, whether I want to be or not, and I do not want to be a silent witness."<sup>32</sup>

The self called upon to answer before the other and for the other, a hostage substituting for the other, speaks by proxy, for one who may no longer be capable of saying "I." It does so gratuitously, without expecting to receive anything in return. In its fundamental nonsymmetry, Levinas's notion of ethical subject as witness thus resonates with Derrida's elucidation of absolute forgiveness. Further, while as Derrida argues, all forgiveness issues from the unforgivable, witnessing arises from the "unwitnessable": in the case of Jedwabne, those who witnessed the true extent of the horror—the true witnesses—died in the barn. At the same time, just as absolute forgiveness must become involved with conditional forgiveness, by which token it becomes therapy, reconciliation, negotiation, or an adjudication of losses and reparation, so must ethical witnessing enter

the order of conditions, the social space within which the witness will be held accountable for the acts of witnessing or for the failure to engage in those acts.

### Shame/Promise

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi writes that the survivor experiences shame because he has survived in another's place and has often failed the test of human solidarity. He asks: "Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another? And in particular, of a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than you?"<sup>33</sup> I would like to attend to this peculiar feeling of shame, which for Levi stems from the sense of having taken another's place.<sup>34</sup> In an early essay titled "On Escape," Levinas writes that the subject's imprisonment within the confines of its own self is what guarantees it a sense of self-sameness and inviolability of its boundaries as well as indemnity against the risks of the unknowable future. Yet this "fact of being riveted to oneself . . . the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself" also produces a sense of malaise, a profound and ambiguous affect that Levinas calls shame.<sup>35</sup> Shame, then, is an affective event that breaks the horizon circumscribed by sameness and results in a desire to escape from oneself. Although Levinas develops this theme only in his later writings (and replaces the idiom of shame with other terms, such as "guiltless guilt"), shame can be seen as the initial moment of turning to the other, which allows the self to recognize its primordial assignation in ethical responsibility. Shame is an affect that threatens identity, in which one questions even the priority of one's feelings. If shame evokes the need to pry ourselves from the fetters of the ego in order to turn to the other, then perhaps shame can be called an ethical affect, a unique feeling that allows us to realize that I am always already a witness. Since the debate on Polish-Jewish relations in the context of Jedwabne has been deadlocked in the binary logic of dignity and shame, the transvaluation of the affect of shame I propose here may be necessary before the discussion may progress any further. Christian theologian Henry F. Knight writes, as if echoing Levinas: "The recognition of shame, as shame, is an experience of the moral claim of the other on the

one experiencing the shame."<sup>36</sup> Knight relates the process of facing shame to *teshuvah*; as such, this facing requires that we confront the other in whose presence shame has been experienced as a precondition for turning around and repenting.

When it remains a hidden, repressed emotion, shame can result in a destructive spiral of anger and hate. On the other hand, when it loses its solely negative sense of opprobrium, shame can be recognized as a part of social relations and integrated into the life of a community. It can become a basis for ongoing self-reflection and can be regarded as a restorative moment in the life of a community, leading to respect and hospitality, which are indispensable for peaceful coexistence with others. In the Polish context, Zygmunt Bauman's words ring particularly true: "The choice is not between shame and pride. The choice is between the pride of morally purifying shame and the shame of morally devastating pride."<sup>37</sup>

Primo Levi insists that even if the moral judgement on the survivor must be withheld, shame bears upon memory and is related to "the judgment the survivor believes he sees in the eyes of those (especially the young ones) who listen to his story and judge with facile hindsight . . . consciously or not, he feels himself accused and judged, compelled to justify and defend himself."<sup>38</sup> In the eyes of future generations of rememberers, a witness, even one who may also have been a victim, will always be held accountable. In his essay "The Nameless," from the volume *Proper Names*, Levinas refers to the victims of the death camps as "the tumor of memory" and raises the poignant question of whether the survivors have the right to pass on that tumor: "Should we insist on bringing into this vertigo a portion of humanity whose memory is not sick from its own memories?"<sup>39</sup> Despite his decision not to write directly on the subject of the Holocaust, the philosopher's own work constitutes a resounding answer that yes, we should. The subject as witness is oriented not only toward the past but also toward the unknown future in which his or her voice will continue to reverberate. It is in this sense that bearing witness is homage to the victims but also a gift to future generations. Levinas's "pardon" must be understood as that which always unfolds toward the unknowable future, toward the time of the other, but also as what connects me to the past, in

which the other has already affected me. Witnessing also arrives from the past, but it is a promise oriented toward the future and marked by the responsibility one generation bears to and for the other to carry on the voices of those who existed in the past.

In her reflection on forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt argues that forgiveness is inseparable from promise. The two faculties of forgiveness and promise together structure and equilibrate the social: forgiveness releases people from the deeds of the past, thus allowing for mending of the relation and a new start, while promises, in the form of social contracts, treatises, and agreements, give shape to collective existence. This means that the relation between promise and forgiveness is a necessary one: only because promise has established the possibility of dialogue and set up the ground for interaction can forgiveness operate in a meaningful way. Conversely, were it not for the possibility of forgiveness, the conditions for acts of mutual agreement would never arise. For Arendt, forgiveness, in conjunction with promise, is a condition of moving forward. Forgiveness, in flux and oriented toward the unknown, must always recommence its work, must be continually rejuvenated. This is why forgiveness is never complete and continues as an event yet to come. In relation to the memory of the Shoah as well, forgiveness has to be taken up again in each instance, as an expression of individual as well as generational responsibility. Despite the potentially reparative and therapeutic significance of symbolic acts of atonement, marked in official ceremonies and inscribed in the form of new memorial plaques, pure forgiveness is forever incomplete: because the offense itself is irreparable, it continues to trouble us and require forgiveness.

Neither is witnessing ever an accomplished task. The Holocaust witness's very act of giving testimony, even if repeated numerous times, does not assuage the need to testify, and the witness can never be disburdened of the task; on the contrary, the witness suffers the increasing demand to bear witness. Paradoxically, the witness's responsibility is augmented the more she or he testifies; the debt is not dischargeable, and it grows with each act of testimony. The future (im)perfect tense of forgiveness thus corresponds to the unfinished work of witnessing as a demand for more



witnessing, a continuous increase in debt. In light of the never-ending task of witnessing, Derrida's statement that forgiveness is never complete comes to the fore; we do not discharge ourselves of the debt by asking forgiveness, nor do we leave shame behind. On the contrary, this is how we take on the onus of the deed, thus becoming witness to it, regardless of whether we are in actuality guilty of the crime. This leads me to conclude not only that forgiveness and witnessing are intertwined on the ethical plane but also that *repentance and the work of forgiveness are in themselves acts of bearing witness*. It is also in its relation to witnessing that forgiving is *not forgetting*.

Derrida remarks that the proliferation of pleas for forgiveness today is related to "the urgency of memory," although we should note that this could mean both the urgency to remember or its opposite, the desire to free memory from the burden of the past. Numerous survivors and their descendants have reiterated a concern that in being oriented toward a new beginning, forgiveness allows for forgetting because it eradicates the hateful deed. As a result, some victims may withhold forgiveness for fear of renegeing on their duty to the past. Vladimir Jankélévitch expresses anxiety that forgiveness breeds indifference and historical and moral amnesia.<sup>40</sup> In Poland, however, the logic of Jankélévitch's statement appears to have been reversed: it is the historical forgetting of the Jews that has undermined the efficacy of forgiveness, in both an ethical and a political sense. At present, the task of remembering the fate of Polish Jews has been complicated by the change of emphasis in the Polish war narrative from the German to the Soviet occupation. Auschwitz-Oświęcim, up until recently also the emblem of Polish martyrology, has been replaced by Katyń, which was a Soviet concentration camp where thousands of Polish officers were murdered, the crime (like Jedwabne) formerly attributed to the Germans. This shift has deeply affected Poles' self-understanding of their collective national identity in an important way, but at the same time, it has also reinforced the antisemitic topos of Jewish collaboration with the Soviets.

The exclusionary nature of Polish historical self-identification and the repression of "national shame" have made it impossible for Poles to mourn the death of Poland's Jews and the Jewish culture, or even to bear witness

to that disappearance. Without engaging in a conscientious process of the travail of memory, the danger remains that even if Poles achieved a semblance of reconciliation or proclaimed a truce, the debate on forgiveness in Poland would dwindle into a meaningless rite or into the triumph of yet another ideology. At the moment, even if the Polish goal of atoning for the dishonorable past were to be attained through repeated acts of contrition, what still disappears from view is the possibility of an ethical meeting ground in which a genuine Jewish-Polish dialogue would be possible. As Father Czapkowski and others have recognized, as long as forgiveness is viewed solely as a reciprocal structure, in which guilt and expiation are unequivocally apportioned, the debate will remain inefficient: the choice is between either having to subscribe to President Kwaśniewski's gesture of atonement or spurning it. The parameters of the discussion have foreclosed the ethical dimension of forgiveness, of the imprescriptible nature of individual responsibility for the past, for the present, and for the future, which in Derrida's words "interrupts the ordinary course of historical temporality."<sup>41</sup>

For Poles, who had to forget the Jews in order to remember their own historical narrative, Jedwabne is, to borrow Giorgio Agamben's apt phrase, "the larva that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgotten with [which] we must reckon."<sup>42</sup> In a way, in the course of the official investigation into the crimes of Jedwabne launched by the Institute of National Memory, the digging up of human remains in the graveyard where the barn once stood has become a symbolic exhumation of shame. Thus it is at the site of the conflagration at Jedwabne, of the unforgivable crime and the unwitnessable event, that Poles must experience deep shame, as well as deep sorrow, and thus begin engaging their responsibility as witnesses.

Almost two decades after *Historikerstreit* in Germany Polish intellectuals, for the first time, are taking part in a debate of that magnitude about the historical events of the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> In assuming a leading role, they fully realize Poles' responsibility for how the past is remembered and for accepting their complicated legacy of having been both good neighbors

and ruthless persecutors. I suggest that their own expressions of repentance and acts of asking forgiveness for the crimes of the past, both individual and collective, are in fact instances of acceding to their responsibility as witnesses, of accounting for the past before the future. This is why they experience shame when the members of the "self-defensive camp," such as the otherwise respected Polish historian Tomasz Strzembosz, turn away from addressing the past and become advocates for a revisionist position, laden with antisemitic overtones.

If both forgiveness and witnessing are open-ended processes, in which responsibilities are continually reevaluated, never accomplished, and thus always on the verge of collapse, it is only through willingness to expose ourselves to the risk of the unknowable that we can engage the possibility of a new beginning, the promise of a future. By assuming this risk, we can reshape the contested memory as well as the precarious hyphen in the phrase "Judeo-Christian," to forge a discursive space in which a conversation between the neighbors can happen as a gift, continually renewed, offered in generosity and without reserve.

To return to Piotr Matywiecki: "Someone has survived humanity, save its shame (and I am not talking about the murderers). The witnesses have survived. Will they take up its shame?"<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

1. Levi's main example of the gray zone—that is, the sphere in which one can no longer tell the difference between good and evil, victim and perpetrator—is the behavior of the members of *Sondercommandos* in the death camps. He also discusses the actions of the Jewish Councils in the ghettos of occupied Europe, whose members were forced into a "choiceless choice" of collaborating with the German authorities. See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*.
2. "Shame" is the title of the article from which my first epigraph is drawn: "Obowiązek myśli bierze się stąd tylko: ci, których zabijano myśleli. Wszystko inne jest objawem wstydu z powodu uchylania się od tego obowiązku"; Piotr Matywiecki, "Wstyd" (Shame), in *Kamień graniczny*, 28.
3. See Andrzej Leder, "Jedwabne: Polska sprawa Dreyfusa?" *Res Publica* 153 (2001): 13–19.

4. See Joanna Michlic, "The Dark Past: Polish-Jewish Relations in the Shadow of Jedwabne," in this volume. I will henceforth refer to Michlic's distinction between the "self-defensive" and "self-critical" camps.
5. English translation of the president's speech after Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 103.
6. Marcin Król, "Akt skruchy i co dalej?" (translation mine). Similarly, Andrzej Leder points out the dearth of Polish shame for participating in the theft of Jewish property, be it a house or a single eiderdown.
7. See Erica Lehrer, "Bearing False Witness? 'Vicarious' Jewish Identity and the Politics of Affinity," in this volume.
8. Maria Thau-Weczer, *Powroty*, 4 (translation mine).
9. I would like to thank my friend Dr. Dorota Wolska for pointing that out to me, on the occasion of my own "confession" to her.
10. Jean Améry, excerpt from *At the Mind's Limit*, in Morgan, *The Holocaust Reader*. The title of the original is *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (Beyond guilt and atonement).
11. The Polish word *bliźni* (a fellow creature), like the French word *le prochain*, is etymologically related to *blisko*, which means "close proximity." It is interesting and perhaps educational in this context that the Jewish law prescribes different rules regarding the obligation to grant forgiveness to the repentant sinner, depending on whether the penitent is a member of the community or a stranger. See Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
12. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.
13. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 21.
14. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 283.
15. As Maurice Blanchot has written, "Do not forgive. Forgiveness accuses before it forgives. By accusing, by stating the injury, it makes the wrong irredeemable. . . . Forgive me for forgiving you." In *The Writing of the Disaster*, 63.
16. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 31–32.
17. Derrida, "To Forgive," 22.
18. Derrida, "The Time of the King," in *Given Time*, which is a polemic with Marcel Mauss's anthropological analysis of the gift, and in *The Gift of Death*, 21.
19. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 30.
20. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 49.
21. On the Judeo-commune, see Lehrer, "Bearing False Witness?" note 29.
22. Father Michał Czajkowski, "Dlaczego deklaracja 'Dabru Emet,'" 80 (translation mine). Similarly, Archbishop Henryk Muszyński refuses the logic of recip-

- rocal forgiveness between Poles and Jews when he says, "The Polish bishops said to the Germans, 'We forgive you and ask forgiveness.' We cannot say this to the Jews, because this would mean putting them on equal footing with the Nazis. Here we can only say, 'We ask forgiveness.'" In "A Poor Christian Looks at Jedwabne: Adam Boniecki and Michał Okoński Talk with Archbishop Henryk Muszyński," in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 158 (translation mine).
23. Completing *teshuvah* involves three stages: confronting the person one has wronged; turning to God and confessing one's sins, with a resolution never to act that way again; and finally completing *teshuvah gemurah*, when an individual finds himself or herself in the same situation in which he or she has sinned and chooses not to repeat the act.
  24. See Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, book 2, treatise *Hilchot Teshuvah* (*Laws of Repentance*). For discussion, see Peter J. Haas, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Jewish Memory after Auschwitz," in *After-Words: Post-Holocaust Struggles with Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Justice* ed. David Patterson and John K. Roth (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).
  25. The quote is from Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 34.
  26. While I have attempted to situate Jedwabne within the horizon of "crimes against humanity," it should be noted that the Polish crimes against the Jewish neighbors have never received that label, and they fall into the category of "war crimes." In the trials of 1949, conducted by a pro-Soviet communist regime, twenty-two identified perpetrators of the Jedwabne murders were brought before the court on charges of collaboration with the enemy; that is, of helping the German occupiers to achieve their exterminationist goals.
  27. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 147.
  28. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, chapter 4, "Substitution."
  29. Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*.
  30. Simon Wiesenthal Center's recent initiative in Eastern Europe has stirred a controversy in Poland. The center has offered ten thousand euros for a tip leading to the conviction, before a Polish court, of the local Nazi informants and people who participated in the murders of Jews.
  31. Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, 94.
  32. Bartoszewski, "Mamy szukać wspólnoty," 59.
  33. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 81.
  34. My interest in the notion of shame has been partly inspired by Giorgio Agamben's discussion of Levi's shame in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
  35. Levinas, *On Escape*, 64.

36. See Knight, "From Shame to Responsibility," 56.
37. Bauman, "On Immoral Reason and Illogical Morality," 297.
38. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 76.
39. Levinas, "The Nameless," 119–23.
40. Jankélévitch, *L'Imprescriptible*, 59.
41. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32.
42. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 81.
43. For an explanation of the term please see note 1 in chapter 2.
44. Matywiecki, "Wstyd" (Shame), 42. Translation mine.

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# 15

## “Who Is My Neighbor?”

*Ethics under Duress*

JOANNA ZYLINSKA

Tower block living, an urban experiment designed to facilitate the cohabitation of different social classes, is a dream turned sour in postcommunist Poland. Dirty staircases, noisy refuse chutes, and stinking lifts covered in graffiti testify to the failure of the promise of a blissful communal life. And yet in this project of enforced neighborliness, multiple networks of proximity, friendship, and affection develop along the gray concrete corridors. But sometimes it can take a while for the delicate threads of these networks to become visible.

When we first meet Jan Kochanowski, the main protagonist of Maciej Karpiński's short story, *Cud purymowy* (The miracle of Purim), he is yet another anonymous character trapped in the alienation of caged living.<sup>1</sup> Kochanowski is your average Polish guy, living with his wife and eighteen-year-old son in the city of Łódź on one of those tower block estates so beloved by communist city planners. Everything about Kochanowski—a Polish antihero who spends his days complaining about the hardship of everyday life and more often than not blaming it all “on the Jews”—seems to be just average. Everything apart from his name, that is, which he shares with the greatest Polish Renaissance poet, whose name remains engraved forever in the memory of all those who have been through the Polish educational system.

### Neighborly Revelations: The Miracle of Purim

Early in the story we see Kochanowski going up in a scruffy lift to his flat. He lets his eyes wander aimlessly over the layers of graffiti, in which foot-



ball slogans compete with sexual jibes, only to stop at a faded drawing: it is a picture of a gallows with the Star of David hanging from it. Surreptitiously, Jan pulls out a pencil from his pocket and retraces the contours of the drawing. When he is almost finished, the lift comes to a sudden halt and Jan is met by his neighbor, Mr. Holzman, a gray-haired man with a dog on a leash. Holzman looks at Jan for a little while longer than the principles of neighborly anonymity in a block of flats require and then gets into the lift.

This would have been just an insignificant episode in the sequence of apparently meaningless neighborly encounters if one day Kochanowski's life had not suffered a double blow. Not only does he find out that he has inherited a princely sum of money from a wealthy relative in the United States, someone about whose existence he did not even know; he also learns that his relative was Jewish and that, in fact, Kochanowski's true name is Cohen. On top of that, the inheritance can only be accepted on the condition that Jan's family observe the principles of the Jewish faith. Torn between greed and self-hatred, Jan turns to his neighbor, Mr. Holzman (whom he had always "suspected" of being a Jew), for information on how to celebrate Purim properly. He then prepares a festive meal, only to learn that his inheritance has already been claimed by another relative. The story ends in a drunken celebration, in a truly Purim fashion, with Jan Kochanowski-Cohen dancing with joy to the applause of his wife, son, and their new friend, Mr. Holzman.

Commenting on the film version of this story, Polish critic Tadeusz Sobolewski writes:

In "The Miracle of Purim" we see the contemporary petit-bourgeois family . . . the professors of morality where all faults can be blamed on "others." But "The Miracle" is not just a politically correct satire, able to reach only the converted. It is a subversive joke, conducted in the spirit of the Purim holiday, where the participants wear costumes, where the black and white division between "us" and "others" is blurred, and where the terrible antisemitic little Polacks are revealed to be ethnic Jews. And even though the riches they were hop-

ing for turn out to be only a mirage, the protagonists are raised from the level of contemporary troglodytes to that of human beings.<sup>2</sup>

The story provides a narrative framework for the ubiquitous question of Judeo-Christian theology: “Who is my neighbor?” But rather than see it as a theological quandary underlying the debate between Jewish particularism and Christian universalism, I propose in this chapter to read this question as a broader politico-ethical injunction, one that envelops the complexities of neighborly relations on both the personal and sociopolitical levels. The term “neighbor,” I argue, contains a structural ambivalence, which defines a relationship of proximity between two individuals, families, tribes, or states precisely via their separation and difference. Seen as both a moral concept designating the physical and emotional proximity of dwellers and a political concept used to tie a community together, neighborliness is in fact predicated on the preservation of boundaries. It is thus always already threatened by antagonism and violence. I want to explore here the consequences of this structural ambivalence of neighborliness for Polish-Jewish relations before, during, and after the Holocaust. In particular, I want to argue that the injunction inherent in the question “Who is my neighbor?” compels us to address the issues of proximity, separation, and belonging in a way that goes beyond the *moral* discourses on “loving thy neighbor as thyself” on the one hand, and the *political* discourses on nationhood, national identity, and international conflict on the other.

As well as exploring Polish-Jewish neighborliness in terms of physical proximity and distance, I thus consider the complicated networks of affection contained by this term. Contesting the oft upheld cliché that “Poles have sucked antisemitism with their mother’s milk” and that they hate the Jews, I want to propose that Polish-Jewish neighborliness encompassed a whole spectrum of conflicting and not always accounted-for emotions: from hate through to contempt, indifference, envy, obsession, desire, and even love. I also want to suggest that the mechanisms of *self*-love and *self*-hatred in operation on both sides of the neighborly divide complicate the picture even further.

The question of the ambivalent geographico-affective nature of neighborliness also makes us face the original *ethical* problem of an obligation toward the other whose otherness precedes my consciousness and makes me aware of the fact that my "place in the sun" is not really mine. Instead, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues, this place belongs to the other whom I may have oppressed, starved, or driven away from my home, my life, and my space.<sup>3</sup> My drawing of a distinction between the concepts of morality, ethics, and politics here derives from the thought of Levinas, who claims that "while morality . . . operates in the socio-political order of organizing and improving our human survival, it is ultimately founded on an ethical responsibility towards the other."<sup>4</sup> For Levinas ethics is always already primary; it is an unconditional demand placed "before-time" on conditioned beings that find themselves put in question and challenged by what is absolutely other to them. Inspired by Levinas's ethical thinking, I contend here that a responsible political inquiry into the Polish-Jewish past needs an ethical (and not just religious or moral) supplement, if it is not to be limited to the "settling of accounts," a mathematical calculation of guilt and blame.

Let me make two qualifications here. The theological orientation of the question "Who is my neighbor?" cannot of course simply be left out of the political investigation of Polish-Jewish neighborly relations. The very formulation of the problems informing these relations more often than not remains steeped in the religious language of the shared Judeo-Christian tradition (even if the hyphen in the adjective "Judeo-Christian" often serves as a seemingly unbridgeable caesura between the two). Further, any debate about neighborliness cannot simply adopt the "local" perspective of "area studies." The interrogation of the very concept of neighborliness needs to be situated between the complex and sometimes contradictory demands of particularism and universalism inherent in the concepts of local, ethnic, or national loyalty, the ideas of chosenness and land ownership, and the multiple ideologies of humanism, pan-Europeanism, and cross-national collaboration.

Trying to bridge the disjointed geographies implicated in "neighborliness," I intend to explore the structural ambivalence of this concept by

focusing on one particular event: the event of Jedwabne—in which the Polish inhabitants of a small town in the northeast of Poland murdered their Jewish neighbors on July 10, 1941—and on the politico-ethico-theological debates this event has provoked. In doing so, I also postulate that, situated at the crossroads of historical and contemporary discourses about history, memory, politics, and national identity, what I want to call “event Jedwabne” can become a transformative experience and that in order for this transformation to take place, a certain universalization needs to be allowed. This universalization of “event Jedwabne” will enable me to think differently about Polishness, Polish-Jewish relations, and the broader issues of proximity and neighborliness in the transnational political landscape of the early twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> It will also allow me to sketch “an ethics of neighborliness” as an alternative not only to the increasing xenophobia of contemporary Western democracies but also to the more politically correct multiculturalism that advocates intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity.

#### From the Revelation to the Transformation: “Event Jedwabne”

I develop the notion of “event Jedwabne” from the work of Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg—theorists of the Holocaust whose work is informed by the tradition of continental philosophy (including the thought of Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida).<sup>6</sup> Milchman and Rosenberg propose to see *das Ereignis Auschwitz*, “event Auschwitz,” as a transformative experience, an occurrence so significant that it has the power to reshape the human landscape. *Das Ereignis Auschwitz*, however, is not transformative per se: Milchman and Rosenberg ascribe the task of facing this event and reconfiguring it into a new idea of history and new way of thinking about the present and the future to the philosopher and the cultural critic. The Holocaust thus carries for them an ethical injunction, something the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has expressed most poignantly in the following statement: “If there is today an ethical or political question and if there is somewhere a *One must*, it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*.”<sup>7</sup> I am turning to Derrida here as one of the most important contemporary thinkers on ethics and politics. His philosophy

draws on both the Judaic and Hellenic systems of knowledge in an attempt to create a displacement within them but also to allow for a rearticulation of the fixed discursive arrangements seen as belonging to separate traditions, heritages, and legacies.<sup>8</sup> It is in particular Derrida's (Levinas-inspired) rephrasing of "deconstruction" as hospitality and ethics that makes it a propitious framework for my interrogation of Polish-Jewish relations after the Holocaust in ethical terms.<sup>9</sup>

The hesitant "if" in Derrida's phrase—"if there is today an ethical and political question"—indicates a suspicion toward all ethical positions and political programs defined in advance and then systematically consolidated into applicable policies, in the name of a political urgency that occludes or even forgets its own foundational violence. And so Derrida seems to postulate that if we are to think about politics and ethics today, if we are to attempt to raise ethico-political questions, this needs to occur against what I might term "horizon Auschwitz": a rupture in the modern narrative of civilization and progress or in, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it, "the general program of a certain Humanity."<sup>10</sup> For Nancy, it was precisely modern technicity and progress that had been mobilized in order to ensure the "success" of the Holocaust. Drawing on the work of Nancy and Zygmunt Bauman, Milchman and Rosenberg conclude that the Holocaust was a possibility rooted at the very heart of our modern technoscientific civilization, rather than being merely its aberration.<sup>11</sup>

I would like to propose here a change of scale and recalibrate our focus on what I will call *das Ereignis Jedwabne*, using Milchman and Rosenberg's concept of "event Auschwitz." "Event Jedwabne" needs to be seen as part of the Polish narrative of the Holocaust and should not, I argue, be reduced to an aberration in the Polish mythos of martyrology and heroism. We need to acknowledge that its unspeakable and horrifying singularity, its position as an "individual case" perpetuated by the "marginal elements" of Polish society, links up with some other "isolated cases" in the story of World War II in Poland—the establishment of the profession of *szmalcownicy* (blackmailers) who made their living from threatening to reveal the hiding places of the Jews, the pogroms of Radziłów (1941) and Kielce (1946).<sup>12</sup> This is not to deny the relative rarity of such events or the fact

that a number of Poles were involved in rescuing the Jews—indeed, one should mention here that among the 21,310 recipients of the Righteous Among the Nations title awarded by the Yad Vashem Institute to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, there are 5,941 Poles.<sup>13</sup> But giving an account of justice based on the exact calculation of all good and evil deeds is not what interests me here.<sup>14</sup> Instead, I want to propose that even if Jedwabne had been *the only* event of this kind, it could not be relegated to the margins of Polish national history.<sup>15</sup> *Das Ereignis Jedwabne* makes us face up to the fact that “it is our history as such that has been put in question and in abeyance.”<sup>16</sup> I also want to postulate that if the Holocaust was a possibility rooted at the very heart of our modern technoscientific civilization, Jedwabne was a possibility rooted at the center of premodern “multicultural” neighborliness. In this premodern neighborliness physical proximity coexisted alongside unresolved hostility and fear of the other who forever remained other, although neighborly relations were occasionally tinged by fascination or even affection.

Alarmed by the tone and direction of some of the debates on the “Jedwabne revelations” in Poland so far, I propose to view *das Ereignis Jedwabne*—which encompasses not only the actual occurrence on July 10, 1941, but also the ensuing debates, confrontations, denials, apologies, and calls for forgiveness—as a transformative event, enabling us to recreate and remold the landscape of Polish historiography, politics, and national identity. This will involve more than collecting historical knowledge about the crime, however—more than gathering evidence, checking the facts, testing research methodology, or counting the dead. Milchman and Rosenberg remind us that for a transformative experience to take place, knowledge needs to be accompanied by understanding, as a result of which the scholar’s own position, status, or even integrity may be called into question. “Event Jedwabne,” I argue, carries with it an ethical demand, an injunction to *understand* it, to respond to it, and to take responsibility for it. Specifically, it calls on us to reconsider the notion of hospitality and to delineate a new model of neighborliness that could be enacted in the political landscape of the twenty-first century, with its “crises” over asylum and immigration, its as yet unresolved Israel-Palestine conflict, and its European

Union, which "welcomes" new members while strengthening its borders against "aliens" and "illegal immigrants."

### Who Was My Neighbor?

In order to conduct this interrogation of hospitality—and its possible failure—in the context of "event Jedwabne," I propose to turn to the historical context of the neighborly relations between Poles and Jews immediately before and during the World War II. In particular, I want to look at some of the ways in which the etymology of the Polish word *sąsiad* (neighbor) as "he who sits together with somebody else" was enacted in multiple instances of Polish-Jewish cohabitation and in exploring the structuring conditions of this proximity.<sup>17</sup>

It is well documented that in cosmopolitan and business-driven towns like Kraków or Łódź, Chassidic Jews, secularists, wealthy industrialists, and assimilated professionals lived alongside their Polish neighbors. However, as Rafael Scharf, a graduate from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 1933 and a writer on the subject of Polish-Jewish understanding, reminisces some fifty years later: "At the time I lived in Poland in the inter-war years, not once did I go into a Polish house or flat. . . . I took it to be the most natural thing in the world. . . . There were no social contacts."<sup>18</sup> Even if we do not take Scharf's relation as representative of all instances of Polish-Jewish urban cohabitation before the World War II, his is a story of failed neighborliness, in which physical proximity did not coincide with emotional closeness.<sup>19</sup> There are numerous resonances between Scharf's memories and Eva Hoffman's account of life in a prewar shtetl—a small town in which Jews lived side by side with the local Polish population. Hoffman's narrative of the "parallel coexistence" of two poor, traditionalist, and fairly incongruous subcultures—Orthodox Jews and premodern peasants—is particularly important in my investigation of neighborly "hostipitality" in the small town of Jedwabne.<sup>20</sup> This is how she describes this "experiment in multiculturalism *avant la lettre*":

Morally and spiritually, the two societies remained resolutely separate, by choice on both sides. Yet they lived in close physical proxim-

ity and, willy-nilly, familiarity. . . . This was where both prejudices and bonds were most palpably enacted—where a Polish peasant might develop a genuine affection for his Jewish neighbor despite negative stereotypes and, conversely, where an act of unfairness or betrayal could be most wounding because it came from a familiar. As an example of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II, the shtetl offered the most extreme scenario. The villages and small towns were where Jews and Poles were at their most exposed and vulnerable, and where ongoing political conflicts were at their sharpest. This was where Jewish inhabitants experienced acts of the most unmediated cruelty from their neighbors—and also of most immediate generosity. In the dark years of the Holocaust, the shtetl became a study in ordinary morality tested, and sometimes warped, by inhuman circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

So what does it mean to say that Poles and Jews used to be neighbors in both big and small towns? Significantly, both the Scharf and Hoffman narratives quoted focus on the mechanisms of separation and differentiation between the two communities. Could we thus conclude that Polish-Jewish neighborliness in the prewar period actually depended on the exclusion of hospitality and welcome? Even though it involved physical side-by-side coexistence, neighborliness in fact seems to have *preserved the distance* between the Poles and the Jews, while also preventing affinity and emotional closeness. Devoid of the religious connotations of the French *le prochain*, the ethos of neighborliness in prewar Poland relied instead on separation as a condition of being-together. And yet we need to be aware that this is by no means a fair summary of the several centuries of Polish-Jewish coexistence on Polish soil, where Poland/Polin was interpreted as a promised land for Jews living in exile. Also, to grasp fully the complications involved in this proximity without closeness in the period immediately preceding World War II one would need to analyze the precarious conditions of Poland's lost and newly regained independence, the increased influence of the nationalist ideals disseminated by Roman Dmowski's party Endecja, and last but not least, the strengthening of anti-semitic sentiment in the whole of Europe that accompanied the rise of fas-



cism. Perhaps the fact that Poland had itself been the victim of "neighbors to the east and west" through the eighteenth-century partitions (1772, 1793, 1795) enacted by Russia, Prussia, and Austria can help us to understand at least partly—even if not excuse—the lack of an ethics of neighborliness, where hospitality would be extended beyond and across cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries.<sup>22</sup>

According to Michael C. Steinlauf, witnessing—which implies precisely the kind of proximity without closeness I talk about here—was one of the dominant features of the Polish experience of the Holocaust. This is not to deny that Poles were also victims of the Nazi terror or that they actively participated in the resistance movement. But it is to point to the fact that before their very own eyes, their close-but-distant neighbors were dying as a group. "It is Poles who saw the ghetto walls go up and watched their neighbors imprisoned behind them. Poles watched the ghettos burn, saw their neighbors herded into sealed trains, watched the so-called transports arrive at their destination, smelled the smoke of the crematoriums." Steinlauf claims that the sudden termination of this unreconciled proximity may account for the inability of many Poles to respond to the disappearance of the Jews, or even for the denials that Poles had anything whatsoever to do with the Holocaust. He explains: "Such a sequence—to dislike one's neighbors, to wish them gone, then to observe their horrendous total annihilation, and finally to inherit what had been theirs—can only produce profound psychic and moral disturbance."<sup>23</sup> While I postulate here that the spectrum of affective relationships between the Polish and Jewish neighbors was quite complex and must not be reduced to Poles' dislike of Jews, I consider Steinlauf's analysis significant, especially as he makes it clear that one should not impose a causal link between Poles' negative emotions toward their Jewish neighbors—perhaps indeed sometimes manifesting themselves on the fantasy level in wishing them gone—and the actual act of their disappearance. He allows us to ask whether this uncanny linkage of the negative fantasy and its most terrible fulfillment (as if in some sort of nightmarish dream someone had listened to their prayers when they were only fooling around) might be one of the causes of Poles' unresolved guilt and their inability to talk about the Holocaust without falling into either denial or rage.

### Hotel Poland: Few Vacancies Left

And yet “Polish hospitality” is something on which Poles have always prided themselves, comparing it favorably against “Western” disinterestedness, calculatedness, or “coldness.” The age-old saying “Guest at home, God at home” expresses the ideal of hospitality that knows no measure and that is owed before guests even present themselves on our threshold, speak to us, ask favors, or show us their true colors. This kind of open and unconditional welcome approaches the ideality of Derrida’s notion of hospitality, about which he says: “Radical hospitality consists . . . in *receiving without invitation*, beyond or before invitation. . . . If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the *hôte* as invited, there is no hospitality.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, for Derrida this ideal hospitality is always haunted by its other—the hostility, self-preservation, and auto-immunization that allows the host to reaffirm a position of authority and belonging in the face of the other to whom welcome is to be extended (or not). Because “It does not seem . . . that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home, without any implication of ‘make yourself at home’ but on condition that you observe the rules of hospitality by respecting the being-at-home of my home, the being-itself of what I am.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Poland-as-Polin—a joint inhabitation title deed that in Hebrew means “here thou shalt lodge” in exile—should rather be read as Hotel Poland, a place of public welcome, in which hospitality was subject to the tariff drafted by the hosts, in their language and with reference to their law.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly Jan Błoński, author of the 1987 critical essay “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” which inaugurated the public debate on Polish-Jewish relations after the Holocaust, uses the hotel trope when talking about Poland’s need to address the disappearance of Jews, only to discard it immediately: “Our country is not a hotel in which one launders the linen after the guests have departed. It is a home which is built above all of memory; memory is the core of our identity. We cannot dispose of it at will; even though as individuals we are not directly responsible for the actions of the past. We must carry it within us even though it is unpleasant

or painful. We must also strive to expiate it."<sup>27</sup> The hotel-home opposition that Błoński evokes seems to set the transient, superficial but perhaps also mercenary hospitality offered by the hotel, in which traces of the guests are erased as soon as they have settled their bill and stepped outside, against the long-lasting, deeper, and less calculated hospitality found in the home. But the question needs to be raised whether Poland indeed served as much more than an (extended-stay) hotel for the Jews who inhabited its territories. (The fact that "Europe" could easily be substituted for "Poland" here does not resolve our problem of miscalculated hospitality and conditional and transient welcome offered to the Jews in prewar Poland. This ties in with the larger question of where it is that Jews are actually "at home" and opens onto a yet larger debate concerning the United States, Israel, and Near Eastern neighborly relations.) When we read Błoński's article further, it becomes clear that even though Jews were taken into the Polish home, this domestic hospitality was dependent on a series of conditions that the guests needed to fulfill in order to be welcomed properly: "We must say first of all—Yes, we are guilty. We did take Jews into our home, but we made them live in the cellar. When they wanted to come into the drawing-room, our response was—Yes, but only after you cease to be Jews, when you become 'civilized.'"<sup>28</sup> In the context of the Jedwabne murders, an inevitable question arises here: What if the cellar into which we took the Jews turned out to be a neighbor's barn?

### Ceremony

Occurring under the dark umbrella of wider sociopolitical conflicts in Europe, the crime of Jedwabne was a failure in the ethics of neighborly hospitality, in which the preservation of the integrity of our "home" happened at the expense of the not-always-wanted neighbor's death. Interpreted in the wider context of narratives of Polish antisemitism that can be seen as a manifestation of this failure, "event Jedwabne" tells a story of both absolute alterity and incised selfhood, of communal psychosis and singular desire. The death of the Jedwabne Jews in a neighbor's barn (inevitably leading to horrendous, even if problematic, associations with death in a camp) can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to "enclose"

alterity, to put an end to it. We can describe it as an act of “devouring the Jews” alive, internalizing them by an inverted reenactment of antisemitic stories claiming that Jews use the blood of Christian children to make matzo. However, the act of taking one’s neighbors hostage was also a most perverse act of neighborly hospitality, manifested in a desire not only to open one’s doors to the strangers but also to close the door behind them, to keep them in their “new” place, to make them stay. Elizabeth Grosz argues that the Jew—as an idea of radical heterogeneity and the familiar neighborly presence—“represents a resistance to the norms governing the citizen, the neighbor, and the (Hellenic/Christocentric) subject.”<sup>29</sup> But what kind of resistance to the neighborly norms did the Jew offer and what were those norms actually? By resisting domestication into the monoreligious Catholic landscape, perhaps “the Jew” exposed the precariousness of a neighborly community and the pervertibility of the hospitality upon which it was allegedly based? Never at home wherever they were, “the Jews” seemed to be impossible neighbors, posing a challenge to the idea of neighborliness seen as consolidation of identity devoid of difference, the identity of the self-same.

Can we thus suppose that the Polish neighbors of Jedwabne attempted to eliminate a threat to their fantasy of neighborliness, to close the door to the other within oneself, to kill the Cohen within the Kochanowski? The tragedy of Jedwabne in which neighbors killed neighbors presents itself as either a logical impossibility or an act of self-killing, self-implosion. Homi Bhabha has argued that “the ambivalent identifications of love and hate occupy the same psychic space; and paranoid projections ‘outwards’ return to haunt and split the place from which they are made.”<sup>30</sup> However, the narcissistic confinement of the wounded self accompanied by the aggression projected onto the other results in “the unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty” and the enhancement of narcissistic neurosis, if the “self” and “other” are found to be inhabiting the same territory, if they form constitutive parts of one national discourse.<sup>31</sup>

Jedwabne thus seems to expose a contradiction in traditional theories of war and conflict because here the enemy, as the Latin *inimicus* (a non-friend, a military or political adversary), turns out to be someone with

whom a different sort of relationship had previously been established. And even if the physical proximity of the Jedwabne neighbors did not always go hand in hand with a sense of emotional, cultural, ethnic, or religious closeness, it is not possible to overlook the multiple threads of socioeconomic and physical intimacy in place in the shtetl. As Szewach Weiss, Israel's ambassador to Poland, ex-deputy chairman of the Knesset, and prolific writer, dramatically puts it: "When the Germans were murdering the Jews, they would shout: 'Jude Raus!' One says that in Jedwabne neighbors burnt 1600 Jews. Let it be 900, 200, or even fewer than that. But how did they call for them? 'Come out, Rachele! Come out, Lejbeje! Out, Mordechaj! Out, Baker!' They called them by their names because they had known them for years! This makes the whole issue a million times more horrible!"<sup>32</sup> David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, echoes this sentiment: "The people in Jedwabne were not murdered by the cold, faceless Nazi death apparatus that Hannah Arendt characterized as the 'banality of evil'—but rather were beaten, bludgeoned, and burned alive by Gentile neighbors, by people with whom they had had a passing acquaintance for most of their lives. This was not state-sanctioned killing, but, in essence, fratricide."<sup>33</sup>

The details collected by Jan Tomasz Gross and available through witnesses' testimonies disallow the neutral description of the killings in the language of war casualties. But what is most striking about these testimonies for me is that they paint a picture of a semireligious ceremony, a murderous whole-day ritual in which the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne were being sacrificed by their Polish neighbors: they were stoned, butchered with knives, decapitated, stabbed with sharpened stakes, drowned in a pond, herded to the cemetery, and eventually buried alive.<sup>34</sup> In the words of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, on July 10, 1941, in Jedwabne people were being killed "like animals." While Nowak-Jeziorański merely seems to want to highlight the perversely inhuman way of murdering the Jedwabne Jews (as if animals could unproblematically be treated like that), his comparison raises questions to which there is no answer: How is one supposed to "kill one's neighbors"? What would an "appropriate" way of killing them be? At the same time, by describing in detail the elaborate murderous

acts—which makes them look as if they had been conducted with some higher or, dare we say, “religious” purpose in mind—Nowak-Jeziorański situates “event Jedwabne” in a ceremonial framework in which the neighbors’ murder becomes a ritualistic sacrifice.

In *History and Memory after Auschwitz* Dominick LaCapra claims that the mass murders of the Jews committed during the Holocaust frequently took the form of a ceremony. He draws special attention to the perpetrators’ elation at the moment of the persecution of their victims: the moment when inexpressible horror at the atrocity of which one is part leads to *Rausch*, delight, or better, fascination. Quoting from Saul Friedländer’s *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews in Europe*, LaCapra describes one of the components of *Rausch* felt by the perpetrators as the effect of “a growing elation stemming from repetition”; it is an instance in which perpetrators are seized by a compelling, interminable lust for killing on an immense scale.<sup>35</sup> *Rausch* here seems to arise out of an act of survival—at the cost of the sacrifice of the “other,” whose ceremonial death has already been predecided.

A similarly disturbing image of carnivalesque celebration can be found in Gross’s account of the Jedwabne pogrom, in the testimony provided by Szmul Wasersztajn and included in *Neighbors*:

On Monday evening, June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town. And as early as the 25th local bandits, from the Polish population, started an anti-Jewish pogrom. Two of those bandits . . . walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children. . . . [On July 10th] local hooligans armed themselves with axes, special clubs studded with nails, and other instruments of torture and destruction and chased all the Jews into the street. As the first victim of their devilish instincts they selected seventy-five of the youngest and healthiest Jews, whom they ordered to pick up a huge monument of Lenin that the Russians had erected in the center of town. It was impossibly heavy, but under a rain of horrible blows the Jews had to do it. While carrying the monument, they also had to sing until they

brought it to the designated place. There, they were ordered to dig a hole and throw the monument in. Then these Jews were butchered to death and thrown into the same hole.<sup>36</sup>

In introducing this quote in the context of LaCapra's argument I am not intending to pursue an analogy between the Poles and the Nazis. I am aware of many Poles' concern that this analogy is being imposed on them to "slander" the name of their suffering nation (whose narrative of martyrology has always competed against the story of the Jewish suffering). Retracing the complex intertwinings of Polish-Jewish relations, Lisa Appignanesi explains that "Poles, on the whole, do not understand how they, the victims of the Nazis, have come in the West to be associated with the killers. . . . Of some six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, three million were Polish. Of the six million Polish nationals who died, three million were Jews and three million Christians. . . . In Polish eyes, the Poles' national suffering equals that of the Jews."<sup>37</sup> However, mentioning the fundamental and irreversible difference in power, historical circumstances, political allegiances, and actual comportment between the Poles and the Nazis is not intended as a justification or absolution of the Poles. On the contrary, recognizing this fundamental difference is an attempt to situate the Poles in a position of responsibility vis-à-vis Jedwabne, albeit a *different* position from the one applied to the Nazis. Because, as Ireneusz Krzemiński bitterly observes in Anna Bikont's ethnographic study of the Jedwabne tragedy, "There is something that links the two groups—the belief that one can mark someone and exclude them from humanity, and the conviction that people excluded from the jurisdiction of the law are simultaneously excluded from the jurisdiction of conscience."<sup>38</sup>

Let us now return to Wasersztajn's testimony as recounted by Gross, and ask whether the theatrical aspect of the pogrom described here was intended to diminish its "realness." Did the staging of the surreal parade with Lenin's bust, accompanied by enforced music and dancing, signal that the event was really "out of the ordinary," that a strange and unprecedented sacrifice was taking place in the village?<sup>39</sup> Or was it just one more reiteration of performative antisemitism, which had to culminate in

the collective death of the Jews? Did the Polish “bandits” and “hooligans” playing the accordion and flute, and making their victims sing and dance, celebrate in this way their own survival, their redemption through the sacrifice of the village scapegoat? We have to remember that Wasersztajn’s testimony opens with the mention of the arrival of the Germans in town—a silent audience to this performance—but at the same time, there is no indication that the pogrom had been instigated by them. Can the Jedwabne murders be interpreted as an offering made to the Germans (enemies in war but brothers in faith), an offering supposed to redeem the fragile and poverty-ridden community whose sense of Catholicism, morality, and rightness was to be bizarrely reinforced by removing the “stain” from its heart? Perhaps its role was also to affirm the survival of the Polish nation and Polish independence and to ward off the phantoms of loss (still real after the years of partition) that would be haunting the Poles?

The images “of a polluting or contaminating other,” seen as “an impurity or stain,” can be interpreted, according to LaCapra, as “a phantasmatic projection of one’s own anxieties onto the other that wasn’t so wholly other.”<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein (although this interpretative “similarity” is predicated upon a fundamental difference between the Poles and the Nazis, as I explained earlier), the rituals of sacrificialism and victimization enacted in Jedwabne can perhaps be read as a reflection of a desire to seek purification through the enclosure of the event in a ceremonial framework (in our case, a theatrical parade with the monument of Lenin, accompanied by singing and dancing), which ties the precarious neighborly community together. The degradation and sacrifice of the unrepresentable radical alterity (identified here with the Jew) seems to aid the strengthening of communal morality. It thus acts as a secular displacement of the sacred, involving an attempt to transvalue trauma into a disconcerting source of elation and transcendence. It also exposes some of the mechanisms involved in the production of the idea of national unity, which has to bar, exclude, and annihilate any forms of alterity that threaten it. The ethos of neighborliness thus emerges in place of an ethics of hospitality toward the other. By taking the other hostage, the self consolidates the fantasy of its self-possession and fullness.



### The Politics and Ethics of Hostage Taking

But what would an ethics of neighborliness and hospitality look like then? Would it be enough if we simply reversed the directionality of hostage taking as a way of repaying "ethically" for the deeds committed? Indeed, I want to turn around the murderous schema of "event Jedwabne," in which Polish neighbors took their Jewish neighbors hostage and burnt them to death. This is not, however, a case of a straightforward substitution—as noted, I am not proposing here to "settle accounts" and thus forgo the question of Poland's responsibility by seeing the Poles as the hostage-victims of the Jewish collaboration with the Red Army during the war and with the communist authorities after 1945 (even if such instances have been documented); nor am I suggesting that Poles resort to some form of masochistic self-injury in order to provide "repayment" for the Jedwabne murders. Instead, by attempting to see the Poles as hostages I want to sketch a different idea of hospitality, one that does not need to enclose, bar, or even murder the neighbor in defense of one's own sovereignty. I am drawing here on Levinas's ethical conception, in which the self is already a hostage to the other, before being able to respond to this other with hostility, hospitality, or indifference. The act of taking ethical responsibility consists in acknowledging this imprisonment and persecution by the other, and thus replacing the violence of murder with the "good violence" of remaining open to the alterity of the other: even if not renouncing the mastery of one's own home (Derrida acknowledges that such an act of radical hospitality would actually amount to madness), then at least accounting for it and seeing it as always already a usurpation.

Levinas justifies this ethical position of the host as hostage by exposing the foundational preconceptions of the ethics of individualism: "Why does the other concern me? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. . . . It is through the condition of

being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity.”<sup>41</sup> In the ethical vision that needs to underlie any responsible local, national, and international politics, being hostage is something that one is—not what one does to the other.

### Borderland Crossing

“Piłsudski used to say that Poland was like a bagel: best at the edges. And this is where that ethnic mix used to be . . . Cultural borders are always most creative.”

“And so are cultural encounters. Polish literature, Mickiewicz, Tuwim. Antisemites look for Jewish features in them. Even antisemites need Jews in order to hate them.”<sup>42</sup>

In the concluding part of this essay I would like to draw on the failure of hospitality in “event Jedwabne,” and the possible reversal of the position of the hostage, in order to consider one “practical” possibility of rearticulating the discourse of neighborliness in contemporary Poland in ethical terms. To do this, I want to propose that Hotel Poland as a place of limited hospitality can be counterpoised with another form of neighborly dwelling, one that will enable a less calculated interaction with “the other.” If ethics and hospitality are “always about answering for a dwelling place, for one’s identity, one’s space, one’s limits, for the ethos as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home,” then the perception of Poland as a Jewish cemetery and a place from which Jews are missing, or a site of the Holocaust trauma, post-Jewish melancholia, and antisemitic mania can perhaps be reconceptualized along the lines of what we might call “the space of encounter,” where the host-as-hostage waits for the other but also knows that the host is bound to be surprised.<sup>43</sup>

I would like to consider one such place of encounter in which hospitality is being enacted by a host less sure but also less protective of its own boundaries. This is Fundacja Pogranicze—the Borderland Foundation—the activities of which involve running the “Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations” Center, a publishing house, a theater, a Klezmer music group, cultural heritage classes, and an art gallery as well as maintaining a vir-

tual space of cross-encounter at <http://www.pogranicze.sejny.pl>. Fundacja Pogranicze is based in Sejny in northeast Poland, close to the border with Lithuania. As the founders explain on the Borderland website:

We have chosen Sejny, a small town near the Lithuanian border, because elements of the material and spiritual legacy are still present here. The main street with the White Synagogue recalls Jewish presence; the little evangelical church reminds us of Protestants. The Polish and Lithuanian presence is a reality of today's Sejny. In the vicinity of the town one can also find many traces of Russian "Old-believers," and if we move further to the south and to the east, we may find more vast territories of cultural interpretation: Tartar, Karaites, and Armenian districts, all of Belarus and Ukraine. We are trying to gather the wisdom and richness of borderlands—a wealth which results from co-existence of different traditions and beliefs. We are searching for a path that begins in ancient times and goes toward the present day, for a language which can make the elders' wisdom available to the young generation and which can inspire new artistic, pedagogical and scientific research. The main objective of the Borderland Foundation and the Center is to contribute to strengthening the environment through its initiatives, processes, and groups of people as well as individuals rebuilding the identities of their living environments and traditions, but at the same time respecting ethnic differences and cultural diversity. In other words, their goal is to develop everyday practices which create open communities in areas where different national, ethnic, religious and cultural minorities co-exist, and to find and develop means to preserve traditional cultures, sometimes also minority cultures.

Providing a space of discussion and debate, the foundation attempts to embrace the productive indeterminacy of the term *borderland* as "a shadow cast by the border on the nearest neighborhood," "a life-giving buffer zone . . . that protects diversity." As the Polish scholar of postcolo-

nial legacies Dorota Kołodziejczyk argues, the borderland revival of which the foundation is part refutes the myth of the province as familiar, and of provincial identity as more communitarian and based on unself-conscious belonging. Instead, the borderland—which is more than a mere decoration on the rich and patterned tapestry of national culture—becomes a space of hosting difference, prompting us to reconsider our whole understanding of the “space of culture.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, it was the Pogranicze publishing house that issued the Polish edition of Jan Tomasz Gross’s *Neighbors*, and it is through the Borderland Center and website that the cross-cultural and multilingual debate on the Jedwabne tragedy took place. We can thus suggest that the Borderland Foundation can be seen as delineating a multifaceted program of neighborly coexistence for twenty-first century Europe, a Europe that not only needs to work through the vicissitudes of its Judeo-Christian heritage but also faces the increased cultural, spiritual, and increasingly physical proximity of Islam.

Indeed, the ethico-political issues of neighborliness today call on us—students of the Holocaust, of Polish-Jewish relations, and of cross-cultural encounters—to consider the hospitality extended to, or more often withheld from, Muslims. Even if the proposition of seeing oneself as a hostage of the Islamic “other” might seem preposterous to some in the light of 9/11 or the atrocities committed on “Western targets” in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, it is only through rethinking the relations of dependency and power structuring the traditional concepts of friends and enemies that a more hopeful international politics can be developed. “Event Jedwabne” can thus encourage us to think beyond the spaces of enclosure, such as the neighborly barn of death or Camps Delta and X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay, and envisage instead the new borderlands of encounter, more hospitable renewed asylum and immigration policies, and less polarized and exclusionary politics of immigration. Because, as Levinas reminds us, “It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity. . . . The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity.”<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

1. Karpiński, *Cud purymowy*. A film version of *Cud purymowy* (directed by Izabella Cywińska, screenplay Maciej Karpiński, Poland, 2000) received several awards, including the Special Prix Europa at the Prix Europa 2000 festival in Berlin on behalf of the European Parliament, Willy Brandt's Award for building tolerance, the National Council for TV and Radio Award at the 25th Gdynia Film Festival, and the Golden Nymph.
2. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Cud purymowy," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 30, 2000 (translation mine).
3. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 82–85.
4. Levinas and "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 29.
5. It is precisely at the crossroads between particularity and universality—a crossroads Jacques Derrida identifies with an aporia (a blocked passage we must nevertheless attempt to traverse) between politics and ethics—that my discussion of neighborliness is conducted. The reason for this analogy is that events such as Auschwitz, Jedwabne, or 9/11 need to be seen as singular, irreplaceable occurrences that speak to every one of us in a most direct, perhaps even an *aggressively* direct way, appealing to our *ethical* sensibilities while also demanding a *response* from us. (We can think here of the intrusion of the images of 9/11 into our singular field of vision, and the way they disturbed our sense of the mundane, our situatedness in time and place.) On the other hand, such events are framed by communal acts and responses that draw on, test, and reformulate the notions of politics, justice and reparation or reconciliation, which we as members of the Western democratic public sphere are all supposed to share to some extent. And it is under the aegis of hospitality that I want to place my interrogation of neighborly duties and failures, where hospitality is used as a determining concept of "an ethics and politics of good neighborliness."
6. See Milchman and Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście*. Milchman and Rosenberg in turn borrow the concept of *das Ereignis Auschwitz*, "event Auschwitz," which was originally put forward by the social theorist Dan Diner.
7. Jacques Derrida's contribution to "Discussions, or Phrasing 'After Auschwitz,'" 387.
8. More specifically, Derrida has made us alert to the need to examine the concepts that inform our political agendas and their ethical justifications. This is not to be done at the expense of slowing politics down, or diluting it in the games of linguistic trickery (as some of the critics of Derridean "deconstruction" have argued), but precisely in order to avoid a naïve, irresponsible, or even oppressively demagogic politics, which in its accelerated urgency will not have time to realize

- that “every concept shelters or lets itself be haunted by an other concept, by an other than itself that is no longer even its other” and that “no concept remains in place any longer”; Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 364.
9. See Derrida, *Adieu* and *Of Hospitality*; see also Jacques Derrida, “‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility’: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), and his *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). For Derrida, “Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home” (*Acts of Religion*, 364). But it also stands for a welcome, “tending toward the other, attentive intention, yes to the other” (*Adieu*, 22).
  10. Nancy, “Our History,” 101.
  11. Milchman and Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty*, 36. See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
  12. This “rhetoric of exception” was frequently used in Polish responses to the “Jedwabne revelations.”
  13. See <http://www.yad-vashem.org.il>, accessed June 2006.
  14. Dorota Glowacka’s article in this volume discusses the issues of forgiveness, reciprocity, and repayment in much greater detail.
  15. In light of recent findings by the Institute of National Memory (IPN) in Poland, we know the Jedwabne massacre was not *unique* (which is not to say that it was not exceptionally rare). The IPN is investigating witnesses’ testimonies about a pogrom in Radziłów, a town not far from Jedwabne, and in four other nearby settlements.
  16. Nancy, “Our History,” 101.
  17. We can trace a semantic similarity between the Polish *sąsiad* and the English *neighbor*, which stands for “he who dwells near” (*neah* = near, *gebur* = dweller).
  18. Rafael Scharf’s contribution to “Ethical Problems of the Holocaust in Poland: Discussion Held at the International Conference on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry in Jerusalem on Monday 1 February 1998,” in Polonsky, “*My Brother’s Keeper?*” 192.
  19. In response to Scharf, another participant in this debate, Victor Erlich, said: “My experiences were a little bit different. I had Polish friends; naturally most of the homes which I was in were Jewish but there were also Polish ones. It is true that the social contacts between the two communities were restricted and, I might say, sociologically lopsided, in that they occurred mainly in the milieu of the socialist, communist, and generally radical intelligentsia. . . . [But] Mr Scharf’s remarks do not conform with my own personal experience” (“*My Brother’s Keeper?*” 221).

20. "Hostipitality" is Derrida's neologism, which is supposed to reveal the haunted etymology of "hospitality"—a "Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility'" (Derrida, "Hostipitality," 3). For Derrida hospitality carries within itself both a promise and a threat (*Acts of Religion*, 359).
21. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 12–13. For an excellent account of Polish-Jewish neighborly relations in northeastern Poland in the early twentieth century, and their significant deterioration after 1936, see Anna Bikont's study, *My z Jedwabnego*.
22. The quote is from David Engel, "Introduction to the Hebrew edition of *Neighbors*," in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 410.
23. Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust," 263.
24. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 263.
25. Derrida. "Hostipitality," 14.
26. The quote is from Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 10.
27. Jan Błoński, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," in Polonsky, "My Brother's Keeper?" 35.
28. Błoński, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," 45.
29. Grosz, "Judaism and Exile," 61.
30. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 300.
31. Some of the ideas discussed in the last few paragraphs have been taken from my earlier article on Jedwabne, "'They're All Anti-Semitic There': Aporias of Responsibility and Forgiveness," *Culture Machine* 4 (2002), <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/joo4/Articles/zylinska.htm>. For an extended discussion of Polish antisemitism in the context of unresolved affective attachments (especially those related to mourning and melancholia) see Ewa Plonowska Ziarek's piece in this volume.
32. *Ziemia i chmury: Z Szewachem Weisssem rozmawia Joanna Szwedowska* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2002), 106 (translation mine).
33. Quoted in "Introduction to Part VII: The Discussion Outside Poland," in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 403.
34. Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, "A Need for Compensation," in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 88.
35. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 33. Some of the ideas discussed here concerning sacrificialism and victimization have been borrowed from my article "Mediating Murder: Ethics, Trauma and the Price of Death," *Journal for Cultural Research* 8, no. 3 (July 2004).
36. Gross, *Neighbors*, 167–19.
37. Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*, 139.

38. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, 19.
39. See Gross, *Neighbors*, 19–20.
40. LaCapra, *History and Memory*, 187–89.
41. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.
42. *Ziemia i chmury*, 23 (translation mine).
43. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 149–51. I have borrowed the term “the space of encounter” from the title of Daniel Libeskind’s *The Space of Encounter* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), in which he discusses various of his architectural projects, among them the Jewish Museum in Berlin.
44. Kołodziejczyk, “Provincial Cosmopolitanism,” 233–53.
45. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

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# 16

## Melancholic Nationalism and the Pathologies of Commemorating the Holocaust in Poland

EWA PLONOWSKA ZIAREK

There was also—after a brief initial period of commemoration and documentation—the wider pathology of silence. During the postwar decades, the specific history of the Holocaust, the Jewish aspects of prewar Polish culture, even the Jews themselves, became untouchable, even gradually forgotten, subjects. EVA HOFFMAN, *Shtetl*

Coming sixty years after the tragic event, the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book about the massacre of the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors, and the belated national debate about Polish antisemitism, shame, guilt, and responsibility that followed, have raised difficult questions about the failures of Polish collective memory and the distortions of historical knowledge about the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Why did it take sixty years for this unspeakable event to register not only in popular collective awareness but also in historical knowledge, even though the "facts" were not particularly hidden by communist censorship? (In fact, the court records of the crime and its prosecution were accessible.) Why is it, as Gross so poignantly puts it, that the history of the Jedwabne massacre includes as an "essential" aspect the disappearance of this crime from history and memory?<sup>2</sup> What does this disappearance and the belated traumatic resurgence imply about the formation of Polish national identity and the remembrance of the atrocities of World War II?

### Commemoration of Losses and Loss of Mourning

Sixty years of silence about the unspeakable crime of Jedwabne is a symptom of pervasive lacunae in Polish national remembrance, namely, the erasure of collective and individual memories of Jewish life in prewar Poland, the lack of mourning for the Jewish tragedy, and the overwhelming loss of awareness of the absence of Jews and Jewish culture in contemporary Poland. According to Gross, the Poles, “themselves the victims of the German occupation,” did not mourn the tragic Jewish losses they witnessed: “We have never properly mourned the fate of our Jewish fellow citizens. We have not suffered through and lamented the Jewish disaster during the war.”<sup>3</sup> One does see frequent nostalgic evocations of the Jews as a “symbol” of the old, idealized multiethnic Poland.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite this, for the majority of Poles, as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir bluntly notes, historical “memory is a place without Jews.”<sup>5</sup> For Adam Michnik, this failure of witnessing and the absence of mourning are themselves criminal because they repeat symbolically the annihilation of the victims in the realm of memory: “After they died they were murdered again, denied a decent burial, denied tears, denied truth about this hideous crime, and . . . for decades a lie was repeated.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Michael C. Steinlauf calls the failure of Polish mourning of the Holocaust a profound psychic aberration, which could not be explained purely in terms of the trauma of witnessing the unprecedented—“murder on such a scale, at such close range, for such a long time.” In the Polish case, the trauma of witnessing the Holocaust was further exacerbated by the widespread antisemitism of the 1930s and by the frequent appropriations of Jewish property during and after the war: “Such a sequence—to dislike one’s neighbors, to wish them gone, then to observe their horrendous total annihilation, and finally to inherit what had once been theirs—can only produce profound psychic and moral disturbance.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one of the most striking symptoms of such “disturbance” is what Eva Hoffman calls the pathology of silence, which not only represses shameful Polish indifference, betrayal, and the irruption of criminal aggression against powerless Jewish neighbors but which eventually erases the Jewish tragedy from collective awareness: “On the Polish side, the great pitfalls in rela-

tion to wartime past have been amnesia on the one hand, and the willfully tendentious uses of memory on the other.”<sup>8</sup>

I want to focus on this pathological amnesia and the loss of collective mourning for the Holocaust because this pathology has marked my generation so thoroughly that it too belongs to the history of Polish-Jewish postwar relations. Hoffman’s perceptive description of the experience of Zbyszek Romaniuk, an amateur local historian of the Brańsk Jews, and one of the main characters in Marian Marzyński’s documentary, *Shtetl*, mirrors in many ways my own formation—and, I would dare to say, my generation’s (meaning the second generation born after the war; that is, the generation who could only have learned about the Jewish communities of their towns from their grandparents). Hoffman writes: “After all, Zbyszek grew up without knowing any Jews or hearing much about them. That he didn’t learn about this important part of Polish history in school is, of course, to the discredit of the educational system under which he grew up. . . . Still, given this utter blankness of information, I cannot help but think that . . . the discovery of a layer of the past so close to the surface and yet so perplexing must have seemed, for a moment at least, uncanny. The information he was digging up had been a part of the familiar world, and yet it was thoroughly unknown.”<sup>9</sup>

Like Zbyszek, I grew up without knowing any Jewish people or learning about the Jewish history of my town—I didn’t learn it from my parents (neither of whom was a native inhabitant) or from school, and certainly not from the official commemorative ceremonies of the local war tragedies. These erasures of memory and local history are all the more shocking given the fact that my town, Bielsk Podlaski (another small town in northeastern Poland, not far from Brańsk), was the place of one of the oldest Jewish communities in eastern Poland. According to some hypotheses, it dated all the way back to the tenth century, when the first Jewish settlements were established there after the fall of the Khazar empire.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century Bielsk was more than half Jewish, with the Jewish population reaching four thousand in 1897. Most of these people, together with the Jews from the surrounding communities, were sent to the Treblinka death camp when the Nazis liquidated the Bielsk ghetto in November of 1942.

My “education” in forgetting was not atypical. As the 1997 report of the Jewish Historical Institute commissioned by the Polish Ministry of Education concludes, in Polish history textbooks “Jews appear one knows not how or why: as a rule, there is no mention of what they did, why and from where they arrived in Poland, where they lived . . . , what their role was in society and what role they played in its development. It is in essence a history without a beginning and without an end, since there is also no sense under what circumstances and for what reasons Jews vanished nearly entirely from the Polish landscape.”<sup>11</sup> Such evasions and distortions of national history were even more pronounced in the case of the local histories of Jewish communities. Like most of the young people of my town, I was taught only most general and not always correct “facts” about the Jewish population of the town. The information about the terrifying and hard to imagine disaster of the Bielsk Jewish community was so abstract that it seemed to be disconnected from the lived experience of the town’s history and topography. It was as if the Jewish tragedy were associated with those other terrible and dystopic names like Treblinka, Majdanek, or Oświęcim, but it could not have happened “here,” where “we” lived. I have found the concrete details about the life and tragic fate of the Bielsk Jewish community on the Internet in the digital version of the Bielsk Yizkor Book, which has become my phantom memory, my virtual prosthesis replacing the amputated history of my town. It is from Internet sources that I learn, for instance, that the popular conviction that the Bielsk Jews were transported to the Białystok ghetto is distorted, as if the town were not capable of confronting their death: only skilled laborers were taken to Białystok; everyone else was sent directly to the Treblinka death camp with the exception of the two hundred sick and old, who were shot at the Jewish cemetery and buried in a mass grave.<sup>12</sup>

The only exception to the lacunae in the collective memory of my town were the snippets of recollections from my grandmother, who moved to Bielsk a few years before the war, escaped back to her village shortly after the Germans entered town in 1941, and did not return until 1956. Her recollections of prewar Bielsk were interwoven with fond memories of her Jewish landlords, of the Jewish doctor who cured my grandfather’s asthma,

of the market days when my grandfather was selling his barrels together with Jewish merchants. There were also darker recollections about the ghetto, about starvation, about bread thrown over its walls, but I was too young to see the connections between these two worlds—the prewar and war memories of my grandmother, and the place of my childhood. It was as if she were talking about a different world, a foreign country (a strange world in which, for instance, one had to work all day for two pounds of sugar) that had nothing in common with my own reality. Because of this sharp divide between my grandmother's past and my childhood—a divide augmented by communist propaganda, which blamed all the evils and disasters of the past on the capitalist regime, with which the socialist society in which we lived had nothing in common—it did not occur to me to ask my grandmother to show me the traces of the material referents of her recollections, such as the location of the Jewish districts, synagogues, markets, theaters, the Jewish cemetery, and finally, the ghetto. I asked these questions almost thirty years later, when I returned to Bielsk after having watched in the United States Marian Marzynski's documentary film *Shtetl*, about the Jewish history of the nearby town of Brańsk.

Marzynski's documentary was a shocking revelation of the enormity of the Jewish absence in my town. That haunting absence, that loss, that tragedy, was no longer abstract; it was no longer a distant inconceivable "fact" of the three million Polish Jews and the similar number of ethnic Poles (as communist education was always quick to add) killed during the war. The film also made me realize why my grandmother's memories did not evoke in me a similar intimate sense of loss and mourning, although I imagine they did for her. It was not only because I was too young to realize what her memories actually meant: that half of my town's inhabitants, some of whom she had known intimately, others whom she had passed daily on the streets, that all these people had perished. It was also because her memories of the Jewish neighbors, her personal sense of their loss, were not connected to any other, either official or unofficial site of collective mourning and commemoration of the victims of Nazi atrocities. My grandmother's memories were floating in a vacuum, not linked, not even resonating with the local commemorative rituals of the town.

These annual commemorative ceremonies were emotionally intense not only because of the local war tragedy they mourned—the mass murder of the Bielsk intelligentsia, including their families and children, as well as of the Catholic priests, in the nearby Pilicki woods—but also because of the ideological and ethnically split struggle about who was the proper guardian of these memories. The ceremony organized by the local communist authorities was usually in May, coinciding with the anniversary of the town's liberation by the “fraternal” Soviet Army. Each year there were marches to the mass graves in the woods, the laying of wreaths and flowers, and long speeches exhorting us to remember the victims of Nazi atrocities and the heroism of the Soviet and Polish communist soldiers who liberated us. Because of the complicated local politics, which exploited ethnic tension for the legitimation of the communist regime, the Byelorussian, Greek Orthodox population of the town identified more closely with that commemoration. Every July, on the actual anniversary of the murder, the Catholic Church organized an alternative ceremony, a memorial mass at the local cemetery, next to a towering white monument dedicated to the “Victims of Barbarism.” Sermons by the well-known local orator Father Olszewski were transmitted through megaphones well beyond the boundaries of the cemetery, as if to make sure that all those who were afraid to participate in the open (the Catholic members of the Party) or those who were recording these words secretly (the agents of the police) could hear what was being said. These sermons exhorted the gathered crowds to remember not only the victims of that particular Nazi crime but also all the victims of totalitarian regimes (an indirect reference to the Soviet occupation and the current communist regime). The sermon always ended in the same way—with the reading of a long list of the names and ages of those murdered in July 1943. It was that gesture that sustained a more personal mourning, and through that mourning created an alternative sense of collectivity opposed to the communist regime.

What made this semi-official memorial ceremony in the life of the ethnic Poles so important was not only the remembrance of the victims but the almost flaunting symbolic reenactment of collective defiance under the guise of religious observance: by skillfully mobilizing the well-entrenched

collective identifications with national martyrdom for the purposes of resistance against the current regime, the ceremony, through metonymic displacement and double speech, performed in public a forbidden collective testimony of the crimes of the Soviet regime; in particular, of the Katyń massacre of Polish soldiers. This encoded double function of the commemoration of those victims who could be named and those who could not was especially important for families like my father's, who had lost relatives in Katyń and were forbidden to speak about it. It was the only occasion when those suppressed but carefully preserved countermemories could be registered in public.

However, what I did not realize at the time, but what seems so painfully obvious now, is that this double commemoration—reenacting annually the ideological struggle over who were the victims, persecutors (just the Germans, or the Germans and the Russians), and custodians of mourning—was also a public ceremony of collective forgetting. The two monuments to victims of the Nazi massacre of the Bielsk intelligentsia, one in the cemetery in town and the other in the nearby woods, point to the third monument to victims of mass murder, located at the Jewish cemetery—a monument so well hidden from collective awareness that until recently I did not know of its existence. Erected in 1967 by the inhabitants of Bielsk, it is a monument dedicated to the Bielsk Jews killed by the Nazis, to the memory of two hundred old and sick people shot in one day at the Jewish cemetery and buried there in a mass grave during the liquidation of the Bielsk ghetto. I do not know the history of this monument; I became aware of its existence for the first time thanks to the Internet site of the virtual Jewish cemetery in Bielsk.<sup>13</sup> It was on the Internet that I saw the monument for the first time and only later that I managed to verify its existence when on my last trip home, I asked my uncle (the oldest son of my grandmother) to show me the Jewish cemetery. Although he knew the location of the cemetery, he was aware neither of the monument nor of the tragedy it memorialized. Confronted by this amnesia, I am struck by the bitter irony and ambivalence of the monument's inscription dedicated to honoring the memory of the dead. The inscription reads as follows: "The Place of Execution of Polish Citizens of Jewish Nationality Shot by the



Police and Gestapo of Nazi Germany in 1941–44. More than 200 People Rest Here in the Common Grave. Honor to their Memory. The Inhabitants of Bielsk. September, 1967” (translation mine). It is as if the Polish inhabitants of Bielsk were compelled despite themselves to honor the claim of the dead and to write in stone what they wished to erase from their collective awareness. In contrast to all the memorial rituals and the ideological struggles they enacted—rituals in which I participated or was forced to participate—I do not recall a single public ceremony in Bielsk mourning the tragic death of two hundred Jewish inhabitants of my town. Nor am I aware of any public remembrance of the more than five thousand—in some accounts seven thousand—Bielsk Jews, most of whom perished in Treblinka after the liquidation of the Bielsk ghetto. And there is still no memorial at the site of the ghetto honoring their memory. In fact most people born in Bielsk after the war do not know where the ghetto was.

These two tragic yet diametrically different war histories of my town give rise to two or perhaps three sets of collective memories: the first two are commemorated by the ethnic Polish and Byelorussian inhabitants of Bielsk in their annual local ceremonies, the third one is commemorated by the Jewish survivors and their descendants in the Bielsk Yizkor Book, the text of which is accessible to the current population of the town primarily on the Internet, along with other memorial sites devoted to the Bielsk Jews.<sup>14</sup>

### **Exclusions, Disjunctions, and the Ideological Appropriations of National Memories**

When we move from the loss of mourning for the Jewish neighbors in the local, lived memories of Polish towns to the formation of the Polish national memory of World War II, we are confronted by two additional distortions: first, by the ideological appropriations by the communist regime of both the memory of the Holocaust and the popular self-representation of Poles as innocent victims of foreign aggression; and second, by the strenuous repression, in both the political and psychological senses of the word, of any public discussion of Polish antisemitism and Polish criminal acts of betrayal, hostility, and aggression against the Jewish population.

Indeed, as Polish and Jewish scholars point out, the political manipulation of the Holocaust remembrance for the sake of the legitimization of the communist regime, and the persistence in the postwar period of the compensatory paradigm of Polish nationality, associated with the topos of messianic suffering, are in large measure responsible for the deformations of Polish collective knowledge about WWII and for the sharp disjunction between the Polish and Jewish remembrance of the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup>

These two types of distortions of national memory are mutually reinforcing. The conflict between the national paradigm of innocent suffering and the dark pages of Polish-Jewish relations during WWII—the history of Polish indifference, betrayal, and anti-Jewish violence—facilitated in a great measure the communist regime’s ideological reworking of the history of the Holocaust. As Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, the editors of *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, point out, the memory of the Holocaust, after the brief frank discussion after the war, has been subjected to “a far-reaching process” of ideological rearticulation in order to provide the communist regime with a degree of national legitimation.<sup>16</sup> One aspect of this ideological appropriation was the “internalization” of the Jewish victims of death camps—that is, the erasure of their Jewishness by their nationalities: “This was nowhere more apparent than in the commemorative rituals at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site, where the word ‘Jew’ was hardly mentioned and the Jewish victims were encompassed in the nationality of the countries from which they came.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, both in the educational system and in the controlled public commemorations, by stressing the parallels between the Jewish and the ethnic Polish suffering, communist authorities have managed to blur the distinctive character of the genocide of the Jewish people and to integrate the memory of the Holocaust into the framework of Polish national “martyrdom.” At the same time the question of Polish antisemitism was minimized, the criminal acts against the Jews were associated exclusively with marginal criminal social groups (with the so-called *szmalcownicy*, blackmailers), while the solidarity between the two persecuted groups was emphasized.

It should be added that the memory of the ethnic Polish war losses and

resistance was also subjected to communist manipulation and censorship, but what was at stake here was the erasure of Soviet war crimes and Polish anticommunist resistance from the collective consciousness. As Eva Hoffman points out, an example of the paradoxes of the communist “administration” of national mourning was the fact that “on the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a monument was erected on its site,” while “the Warsaw Uprising—the desperate insurrection of Poles against the Nazis—was not honored with a comparable commemoration.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, any mention of the Soviet massacre of Polish soldiers in Katyn was strictly forbidden. Under these conditions, the communist ideological appropriation of Holocaust memory and its reinscription within the distorted paradigm of national mourning served several interrelated purposes: it produced the ideological fiction of the unified national memory of collective victimization by covering over conflicts, differences, and erasures in that memory; it assuaged the repressed collective guilt and facilitated collective forgetting of the “dark” pages of the war history; and most important, it legitimated the Party as the self-appointed custodian of collective mourning. Through these manipulations of collective grief, the repression of guilt, and the symbolic equating of Jewish and Polish suffering, the Party hoped to produce national identifications with the communist regime and to minimize anticommunist opposition. The official regulation of the collective work of mourning was thus the main site of the formation of an ideological compromise: the Party promised to preserve the national myth of innocence and redemptive suffering, and to protect this myth against any charges of antisemitism, but only at the price of the repression of anticommunist resistance during and after the war and the erasure of public memory of this.

Even if official public knowledge about Jedwabne and the Holocaust was not possible under the communist regime, Gross’s book nonetheless confronts us with a devastating failure of collective counterknowledge and countermemory. Although this unofficial secret counterknowledge, transmitted usually through family ties and the links of friendship, has managed to preserve the collective memory of numerous events erased from the communist version of history (such as, for instance, the Soviet

massacre of Polish soldiers in Katyn) and to produce alternative accounts of the Warsaw Uprising and the noncommunist resistance against the Nazis (the Home Army, or AK), it has failed to preserve the truth about the Holocaust, the memory of Jewish victims, and awareness of the enormous loss of Jews and the Jewish way of life in postwar Poland. Adam Michnik's poignant self-questioning evokes indirectly this failure of countermemory: "Why then did I not look for the truth about the murdered Jews of Jedwabne? . . . After all, I was among those who actively pushed to reveal the truth about the Katyn massacre of Polish soldiers, I worked to tell the truth about the Stalinist trials in Poland, about the victims of the Communist repression."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps in response to Michnik's question we should look at the second, and much older, formation of Polish national memory dominated by the idea of redemptive suffering. Almost all of the critical-revisionary voices in the Jedwabne debate point to the tenacious endurance of this sacrificial paradigm of nationhood, characterized by the "obsession with innocence," to use Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's apt phrase, as one of the main causes of distortions of Polish collective memory of WWII and the failure of Poles to witness the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> This type of nationality emerged as a response to 150 years of colonial partitions of Poland. As David Engel points out in his introduction to the Hebrew edition of Gross's book, ever since the partitions in the eighteenth century and the erasure of the Polish state "from the European political map at the end of the eighteenth century, Poles have cultivated a self-image that presents their nation as the eternal innocent victim of the rapacity of their neighbors."<sup>21</sup> Because of the partitions of Poland, Polish nationality-without-a-state had an entirely imaginary character, not supported by political institutions or public symbolic articulations. The most striking feature of this national imaginary is the idea of collectivity formed through the identification with messianic suffering. As Eva Hoffman writes about the period of partitions, "Poles developed a sense of their nation's martyrdom to rival the Jewish sense of being singled out for special suffering. The symbol of Poland as the Christ of nations competed with the allegory of eternal Jewish wandering."<sup>22</sup> By transforming into masochistic fantasy the collective historical experience of harsh

political reprisals after the series of futile national uprisings against the occupying powers, such a sense of identity, reinforced by the mixture of Romantic and Christian ideologies, linked the idea of sacrificial yet redemptive suffering with the promise of national and international freedom. Needless to say, the imaginary character of Polish national identity was deeply compensatory: it refused the loss of national independence, it sustained collective resistance in the face of political catastrophe, and it provided an antidote to the humiliating colonial stereotypes of Poles as primitive, stupid, drunk, and unruly (echoes of which one still hears in the infamous Polish jokes in the United States). This romantic image of national suffering was reinforced during WWII and was revived again during the period of martial law (1981–83) after the communist suppression of Solidarity.

These distortions of Polish national memory, created by the paradoxical complicity of the messianic paradigm of innocent suffering and the communist appropriations of Holocaust remembrance, have produced a deep rift between Polish and Jewish memories of World War II. At its most extreme, this rift is characterized, as David Engel puts it in a nutshell, by the “stark contrast” between the Polish self-image as the innocent victims of German and Soviet aggression and the “Jewish historical consciousness . . . of Poles as a nation consumed by Jew-hatred, whose children ‘imbibe antisemitism with their mothers’ milk.’”<sup>23</sup> Eva Hoffman, whose work aims “to explore, decode, and deepen the terrain of memory” and to diagnose its deformations, suggests that this generalized representation of all Poles as antisemites is perhaps an effect of another distortion, produced by the metonymic linking of Poland with the dystopic place of genocide.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, she argues that although the particular Jewish memories of the Polish crimes of betrayal, hostility, and aggression are always painfully correct, the generalizations created on the basis of these particulars perform a certain displacement of hatred from the anonymous German machine of genocide to the more personal, familiar persecutors: “In survivors’ memories one can often discern, besides the fully justified hate, a kind of elision of hatred, a transference of it from the first order cause of their suffering to the one nearer at hand. After all, it is hard to direct true, living hatred

at an impersonal death machine, at the monolithic Nazis. The German soldiers in Brańsk had frightening, hard faces . . . but they existed at such a remove of power and terror that they were hardly individual; they were embodiments of an abstract force. But the Polish behavior—the ‘catching,’ the informing, the trading in Jewish lives—had the nastiness of intimate betrayal. In addition to being deadly, such deeds were piercingly, consummately wounding.”<sup>25</sup> For Hoffman the bitter bifurcation of Polish and Jewish memories of the war is further exacerbated by the distortions of the memory of the West, which tended to reduce the nations behind the Iron Curtain to the category of alien, static, and monolithic otherness. As a result of these multiple distortions and generalizations, “the Holocaust in Poland, and all of Polish-Jewish history, continues to be the embattled terrain of three different and sometimes bitterly competing sets of collective memory: Jewish memory, Polish memory, and the memory of the West.”<sup>26</sup>

### Melancholic Nationalism and Its Pathologies

Even though the embattled disjunction between the Polish and Jewish memories has recently begun to be analyzed by Jewish and Polish historians, producing for the first time important joint publications (such as the essay collection *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust*), this division continues to raise a difficult question about “how one should respond to the past and deal with a shared but divisive memory.”<sup>27</sup> In response to this question, most of the Polish critical voices in the *Jedwabne* debate point out that to confront this horrible crime, the shameful legacy of Polish antisemitism, and the distortions of Polish memory of the Holocaust requires a vigorous critique of the national myth of innocent suffering. Yet despite numerous ideological/historical critiques, the largely unconscious hold of this myth on the collective imagination has not been sufficiently diagnosed. Although the ideological exposure of collective self-deceptions and the historical analysis of the impact of the recurring foreign invasions and partitions of Poland in the last two centuries are necessary first steps in this diagnosis, they cannot fully explicate the persisting “obsession” with national suffering even after the fall of the communist regime and the

pathological influence of this obsession on Polish-Jewish relations. Ultimately, to explain and to challenge this deeply entrenched national ideal of innocent suffering, we have to account for the transformation of the traumatic events of Polish history into an unconscious collective fantasy and for the enjoyment this fantasy provides. And such an analysis of the political/historical role of collective fantasy indeed calls for psychoanalysis, as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir argues.<sup>28</sup>

By turning to psychoanalysis, I propose to diagnose the “pathology” of the Polish collective memory of Polish-Jewish relations in terms of national melancholia, developed in response to 150 years of imperialist partitions of the country. What makes melancholia a useful diagnostic tool in the case of Polish nationalism-without-a-state is Freud’s claim that this disorder can arise in response not only to the death of a loved person but also to loss of a more “ideal” kind, for instance the loss of “some abstraction,” such as “Fatherland,” or “liberty.”<sup>29</sup> In both cases, the melancholic condition is characterized by the psychic refusal of the loss. For Freud the melancholic ego seeks to preserve the lost love through its incorporation—that is, through a narcissistic regression from the object relation to an identification with what was lost. Such a melancholic, cannibalistic incorporation of the lost love changes the structure of the ego by turning it into an “open wound,” or a fantasmatic crypt for the dead. The two conditions that are conducive to this transformation of the “exterior” loss into the “inner” wound of the psyche are ambivalence about the lost object and the narcissistic character of the object relation. However, in the context of the more “ideal” collective losses, such as the loss of the nation, the Freudian paradigm of melancholia does not seem to work, because what is lost is not exactly the object relation but a certain model of collective identification. Thus if we can speak here of loss of an object relation at all, it is a relation that has always already been transformed into collective identification. Consequently, melancholic nationalism confronts us with a question about the enigmatic, unconscious character of the loss and about the transformation of national identifications produced through the melancholic incorporation of this loss.

Freud’s association of the destruction of the nation with the loss of

“Fatherland” (an association also implied in the Polish word “ojczyzna”) suggests that this loss has something to do with the political function of the father in the formation of (homosocial) collectivity. The role of the paternal function in the formation of nationhood is discussed extensively in Freud’s earlier work, *Totem and Taboo*, where he associates the emergence of social bonds with the death of the primal father. By arguing that the repressed origin of the social bond lies in the filial act of parricide, Freud demonstrates how the sons’ murder of the primal father was transformed into collective identifications with the empty place of lawful symbolic authority. The first moment of this transformation occurs through the joyful cannibalistic incorporation of the attributes of the dead father during the totemic feast.<sup>30</sup> Under the influence of remorse, parricidal violence is eventually sublimated into symbolic negativity facilitating symbolic identifications with the empty place of paternal authority. Yet, as Lacan and his interpreters argue, despite this sublimation of the original crime into symbolic negativity, and despite the institution of symbolic paternal authority, the sadistic *jouissance* of the murder and the ambivalence between joyful appropriation of the paternal attributes and longing/mourning for the lost father do not disappear but become partially repressed as the obverse side of the social order and partially internalized as the sadistic superego, the cruelty of which becomes more powerful than the power of the living father.<sup>31</sup> Although Freud’s psychoanalytical interpretation of the social order stresses primarily the transformation of the murderous rivalry with the primal father into imaginary and symbolic identifications with the paternal authority, perhaps we can also hear in this story traces of the archaic and ambivalent homosexual object relation (brothers’ hatred and erotic love of the father), the loss of which, as in the case of melancholia, is also replaced by identification with the dead object. In any event, by emphasizing the death/loss of the father at the repressed origin of sociality and moral consciousness, Freud stresses not only guilt and rebelliousness as “the two driving forces” of sociality but also collective mourning, motivated by fear and the disclaiming of responsibility for the father’s death.<sup>32</sup>

The juxtaposition of “Mourning and Melancholia” with *Totem and*



*Taboo* explains the unconscious libidinal connections between nation and “fatherland” and clarifies the complicated nature of the collective loss involved in the partition of the country. What seems to be lost is both the pleasure of the identification with the paternal power and the more paradoxical loss of the dead father; that is, the loss of the empty symbolic place of paternal authority. By usurping and destroying the symbolic place of national identifications, the foreign occupying powers in a way resurrect the specter of the ferocious primal father and its tyrannical violence. It is thus not only the narcissistic benefit of nationality that is lost but also the emptiness itself sustaining the function of the law and the symbolic order. This double loss can produce different collective reaction formations. As Julia Kristeva, for instance, points out, it can reactivate parricidal violence as the libidinal force motivating political struggles against political oppression.<sup>33</sup> Yet I would like to argue that when political struggles for national liberation fail and lead to increased subjugation and repression rather than to the constitution of a new form of political authority of the sovereign nation—as was the case with the Polish national uprisings in the nineteenth century—then the futility of rebellion can regress to another form of psychic refusal of the loss, a kind of collective melancholia. In this instance the parricidal violence of the failed political rebellion is turned inward, at the collectivity itself.

The most striking symptom of such a melancholic formation of Polish nationality in the nineteenth century was the replacement of symbolic identifications with the empty place of political authority and law by collective identifications with messianic suffering, exemplified by the figure of a partitioned Poland as the crucified Christ of nations. Through this identification, the melancholic collectivity substitutes its suffering for the rebellion against the primal father, whose intolerable specter was resurrected and embodied by the occupying imperial forces. As Freud’s discussion of the ambivalent function of Christ’s sacrifice suggests, the aim of this sacrificial substitution is in fact to reenact the father’s murder through the death of the sons: “The very deed in which the son offered the greatest possible atonement to the father brought him at the same time to the attainment of his wishes *against* the father. He himself became God, be-

side, or, more correctly, in place of the father.”<sup>34</sup> Such a substitution of the suffering of the collectivity for the death of the primal father also evokes Freud’s analysis of the sadistic tendencies of melancholia, when the ego satisfies its hatred of the incorporated object by putting itself to death: “The self-torments of melancholiacs . . . signify . . . a gratification of sadistic tendencies and of hate, both of which relate to an object and in this way have both been turned round upon the self.”<sup>35</sup> We see a similar unleashing and the masochistic turning inward of sadistic violence at work in the national identification with Christ’s suffering. Thus the identification with messianic suffering “compensates” for the lost symbolic identification with the dead father but at the price of a regression from symbolic negativity to the violence of the death drive.

The juxtaposition of Freud’s analysis of Christ’s death with his interpretation of the inward turn of the sadistic tendencies in melancholia can illuminate further both the proximity of and difference between Polish nationalism and the clinical picture of melancholia. In a striking contrast with clinical melancholia, Polish messianic nationality manages to achieve what Slavoj Žižek, in his analysis of masochistic fantasy, calls a “deception of the superego.”<sup>36</sup> By turning sadistic violence into inward masochistic suffering, such a deception provides the collectivity with a double alibi: first, the alibi of innocence and second, the alibi of existence. In a crucial reversal of the self-blame of the melancholic, the masochistic suffering, produced through the identification with Christ’s sacrifice, provides Polish nationalism with the unshakable conviction of its innocence. Such a reversal of melancholic self-accusations into the collective assurance of innocence is enabled by the religious function of atonement inscribed in Christ’s death. As Freud observes in *Totem and Taboo*, “in the Christian doctrine, therefore, men were acknowledging in the most undisguised manner the guilty primeval deed, since they found the fullest atonement for it in the sacrifice of this one son.”<sup>37</sup> Consequently the national fantasy of innocent suffering allows for sadistic gratifications either by displacing the guilt for Christ’s death onto those who are outside the bounds of collectivity or else by acknowledging the guilt of parricide in its redeemed form; that is, through religious atonement. This coexistence of sadistic

gratifications with religious atonement for guilt brings us to the second form of deception of melancholic nationalism—to the fantasmatic assurance of national existence. By refusing the loss of the dead father, by repeating the parricide in the form of masochistic suffering, is not the melancholic collectivity also refusing the loss of sadistic *jouissance* in social life? Thus instead of sublimating the death drive into symbolic negativity, the melancholic sacrifice enables a compromise formation between paternal death reenacted through filial suffering and sadistic enjoyment. As Žižek suggests, the persistence of sadistic enjoyment provides the suffering collectivity with a deceptive alibi for its collective being: “Its deceptive gesture is ‘Look, I suffer, therefore I am, I exist, I participate in the positive order of being.’”<sup>38</sup> The passionate attachments to this collective fantasy of “real being” are of course further augmented through the historical loss of political existence of the nation. Thus melancholic nationalism mobilizes masochistic suffering in order to compensate for the lost political and symbolic existence through this deceptive evocation of the suicidal semblance of “real being.”

If Polish melancholic nationalism provides a fantasmatic compensation for the traumatic historical losses of the state and political sovereignty, the deadly combination of sadism, innocence, narcissistic gratifications, and the semblance of “real being” makes this compensation not only deceptive but also dangerous. Even though the ostensible ideal of Polish political messianism in the nineteenth century was the political struggle for freedom “ours and yours,” and even though this ideal inspired numerous instances of commendable solidarity with other oppressed groups and nationalities—including solidarity between Poles and Jews, for instance during the Kosciuszko Insurrection in 1794, the 1830 November Uprising, or the January Uprising of 1863—this ideal has also been haunted by its obverse pathological double.<sup>39</sup> In its darkest manifestations, the narcissistic regression of national melancholia obliterates the rights and the suffering of the Other; its religious alibi of innocence makes it impossible to acknowledge any wrongdoing and thus protects it from any internal and external criticism; its sadism makes it prone to explosions of violence; and finally its alibi of existence reinforces time and again passionate attachments to the sacrificial fantasy despite all critical attempts to dispel it.

We see all these pathological aspects of melancholic nationalism in the distortions of the Polish memory of the Holocaust and in Polish-Jewish relations. If viewed in the context of collective melancholia, the Polish silence about the Holocaust and the loss of mourning for Jewish tragedy is not so much a mere forgetting of genocide but rather a symptom of the ambivalent narcissistic identification with the traumatic suffering of the other. Paradoxically, then, it is not only Christ's sacrifice but also Jewish suffering that becomes an enviable model for Polish national martyrdom. However, this unconscious internalization of Jewish suffering does not enable witnessing of the other's trauma.<sup>40</sup> On the contrary, it obliterates the distinctive character of the Holocaust either by absorbing it into the national martyrdom or by creating hostile competition between Polish and Jewish war tragedies.<sup>41</sup> At its most extreme, the narcissistic withdrawal of melancholia, its cannibalistic incorporation of the other's suffering, destroys the very alterity of the other and converts the other's tragedy into what Freud's calls an insatiable wound in the ego. Such an obliteration of the other's alterity and the exclusive preoccupation with one's own wounds, in addition to narcissistic gratifications, feeds sadistic aggression and the hatred of the other by turning it upon oneself.

When coupled with antisemitism and the historical experience of the brutal Soviet and Nazi occupations, the sadism of melancholia not only manifests itself through the enjoyment of one's own suffering, intensified by the insatiable fantasmatic incorporation of the suffering of the other, but, as the Jedwabne massacre demonstrates, can lead to outbreaks of horrific violence. As Eva Hoffman argues, under the extreme circumstances of the Nazi occupation, which destroyed sociopolitical structures and created a cynical perversion of morality where help for the other became a capital offense and betrayal of the other—became a "virtue," melancholic victims could turn into vicious aggressors. In light of Hoffman's analysis, the dangerous reversal of melancholic incorporation of rejection and destruction into sadistic violence, evident in Polish war acts of criminality and betrayal against their Jewish neighbors, might have been facilitated by the transference displacement of aggression, impotence, and rage for the defeat by the Germans and Russians onto the much more vulnerable Jew-

ish population: "There may have been, for some Poles, an awful element of transferred aggression—rage deflected from its actual, unattainable target to a much more vulnerable one. Attempts to take armed action against the Germans were countered with wholesale carnage. In 1943, the village of Rajsk, near Brańsk, was burned to the ground, and all of its 140 inhabitants murdered, in retaliation for the killing of four Germans."<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, we still hear the echoes of such transferred aggression and blame in the historically inaccurate antisemitic generalizations that present most Polish Jews either as collaborators with the Russians or as members of the communist repressive apparatus (the infamous *Żydokomuna*). Needless to say, such horrific transfers of aggression from the inaccessible occupying powers onto the Jewish neighbors were enabled by economic, religious, and political antisemitism, which characterized Jews as the betrayers or the enemies of Polish national interests.

These reversals of narcissistic identifications with Jewish suffering into anti-Jewish violence during and after WWII reveal a dangerous complicity between the pathological aspects of melancholic nationalism and the virulent manifestations of political and religious antisemitism, one of which blames the Jews for damage to the well-being of the nation, while the other blames them for Christ's death. As we have seen, the fantasy behind the myth of innocent suffering allows for sadistic gratifications by displacing the guilt for Christ's death onto those who are positioned outside the bounds of melancholic collectivity. In the context of Polish national identifications with Christ's suffering, the religious antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as Christ killers not only exclude them from the national collectivity but also present them as the destroyers of Polish nationality. This reversal of the melancholic incorporation of Jewish suffering into the sadistic rejection of the threatening Jewish alterity is consistent with the libidinally ambivalent role of Christ's sacrifice, which reenacts the father's murder through suffering and expiation. It is this complicity between melancholic nationalism and religious/political antisemitism that historically made Jewish communities extremely vulnerable targets of transferred blame, political frustrations, and aggression intensified by political impotence.

Despite this complicity between Polish antisemitism and the pathological forms of collective melancholia, the entrenched combination of sadism and innocence characteristic of messianic nationalism makes it impossible to acknowledge and claim responsibility for the violent outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence and for antisemitism in all of its manifestations. Thus it is not only the communist censorship and its deliberate distortions of Polish history that are culprits here; in fact, the failures of Polish countermemory point to something much deeper and more difficult to eradicate: to the unconscious fantasy providing a deceptive alibi of collective innocence, which in turn promises existence to the collectivity haunted by the recurring threat of political nonexistence. Because of the libidinal and political investments in this fantasy, melancholic nationalism obliterates from collective memory any dark moments of Polish history that would challenge in any way the entrenched topos of redemptive suffering. Yet what is at stake in these defensive disavowals of the criminal or shameful events in Polish history—in particular, the disavowals of antisemitism—is not primarily the question of guilt but the unbearable threat of nonexistence, a threat that intensified during WWII not only in the brutal Nazi and Soviet occupations but also in witnessing the unprecedented genocide of the Jewish population.

According to Gross what makes it so difficult for Poles to face the massacre of Jedwabne is both the unspeakable character of the crime and its challenge to national imaginary. By exposing the ordinary citizens of Jedwabne not only as the victims of Nazi/Soviet aggression but also as the vicious murderers of their neighbors, the traumatic revelation of the Jedwabne crime shatters the very myth of innocent national suffering.<sup>43</sup>

This shattering of the distinctions between victimization and brutality, innocence and criminality, presents an intolerable blow to the melancholic national imaginary. In a more conspicuous way, it reveals an ethical ambiguity threatening to undermine the clarity of moral and religious categories. In a less obvious way, this ethical ambiguity is also a symptom of the repressed libidinal ambivalence of guilt and atonement, hate and narcissistic gratification, characteristic of the persisting melancholic national identifications. What makes the ambiguity of victimization and

criminality so insufferable is that it brings into the open the most deeply repressed and the most pathological aspect of melancholic nationalism: the sadistic gratification behind the passionate attachment to messianic suffering. It is as if protesting their own innocence, the Poles were at the same time defending Christ's innocence and repressing the ambiguity of the divine sacrifice, which reenacts the father's death through the very atonement for the guilt of parricide. Thus the defensive protestations of national innocence in fact inadvertently admit the repressed sadism and guilt, which is always already constitutive of melancholic identifications, and call for their absolution. Furthermore, because the question of innocence is so closely intertwined in the collective unconscious with the fantasmatic protection of national existence, the claiming of responsibility for the Jedwabne crime is still intertwined with the intolerable threat of national nonexistence. Yet it is only by acknowledging this unconscious threat and by "traversing" the destructive fantasy that promises to protect us against it that contemporary Poland stands a chance of inventing new, more ethical modes of collectivity and solidarity, no longer predicated on the narcissistic investment in its own suffering but more concerned with the responsibility for the suffering of others.<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

1. This debate culminated in the publication of the two-volume study by the Institute of National Memory of the archival documents and historical investigations of the pogroms in 1941 in the Białostocki region (Machcewicz and Persak, *Wokół Jedwabnego*. For analysis of the public debate about Jedwabne and its impact on Polish identity, see Paweł Macewicz's article "Wokół Jedwabnego" in the first volume, 9–63).
2. Gross, *Neighbors*, 11.
3. Gross, *Neighbors*, 265.
4. For discussion of the nostalgic image of the Jew as a symbol of the lost idealized Poland, see Ewa Berberysz, "'The Black Hole': Conversation with Stanisław Krajewski, 'a Pole and a Jew in One Person,'" in Polonsky, *"My Brother's Keeper?"* 108.
5. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Obsessed with Innocence," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 26, 2001, reprinted in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 75–86.

6. Adam Michnik, "Poles and Jews: How Deep the Guilt?" *New York Times*, March 17, 2001, reprinted in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 434–39.
7. Michael C. Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust in Poland." In Zimmerman, *Contested Memories*, 263.
8. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 13. It is precisely in order to address and to redress this pathology of silence and the loss of mourning for the Jewish victims that Archbishop Życiński calls for the expression of expiation and "the spiritual solidarity" that was missing during the war and, we should add, in the postwar period; see "Banalizacja barbarzyństwa," <http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/0103jz.htm>, accessed March 12, 2003.
9. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 25.
10. This hypothesis is made, for instance, by the authors of the Bielsk Yizkor Book, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bielsk/Bieo01.html>, accessed March 12, 2003.
11. Jerzy Tomaszewski, Feliks Tych, and Hanna Węgrzynek, "Wnioski z analizy funkcjonujących obecnie podręczników szkolnych do nauczania historii, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sposobu przedstawiania dziejów Żydów i Państwa Izrael w wykładzie historii Polski oraz historii powszechnej," *BZIH* 3–4 (1997): 26–41, quoted in Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust," 266. For further discussion of the way the Holocaust was taught in communist Poland, see Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust," 264–68.
12. [Http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bielsk/Bieo01.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Bielsk/Bieo01.html), accessed March 12, 2003.
13. [Http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Bielsk\\_Podlaski/memorial.htm](http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Bielsk_Podlaski/memorial.htm).
14. The Bielsk Yizkor Book, edited by Haim Rabin, was published in 1975 in Tel Aviv, Israel, by the Bielsk Societies in Israel and the United States.
15. For discussion of the communist manipulation of the representation of the Holocaust, see Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust," 264–68, as well as the excellent introduction to *The Neighbors Respond* by Polonsky and Michlic, 1–13.
16. Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 5.
17. Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 6.
18. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 248.
19. Michnik, "Poles and Jews," 438.
20. Tokarska-Bakir, "Obsessed with Innocence," 75.
21. David Engel, "Introduction to the Hebrew Edition of *Neighbors*," in Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 410.
22. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 111–12.
23. Engel, "Introduction to the Hebrew Edition," 411.



24. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 14, 3. For another analysis of the stereotypes of Poles and Polish antisemitism, see Zvi Gitelman, "Collective Memory and Contemporary Polish-Jewish Relations," in Zimmerman, *Contested Memories*, 283–87.
25. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 244–45.
26. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 3.
27. Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*, 15.
28. Tokarska-Bakir turns to psychoanalysis to diagnose Polish antisemitism as a mass neurosis; see "Obsessed with Innocence," 83.
29. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 153
30. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 176.
31. See, for instance, Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 313–22.
32. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 188.
33. Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, 13.
34. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 191.
35. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 162.
36. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 280.
37. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 191.
38. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 281.
39. For discussion of Jewish-Polish solidarity during the national uprisings, see for instance Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 69–70, 110–25.
40. My discussion of national melancholia thus introduces another complication, and perhaps another layer of explanation of the failure of Polish witnessing discussed by Steinlauf, "Teaching about the Holocaust," 263–64.
41. My reading of melancholia as a "pathology" of memory is diametrically opposed to Ankersmit's interpretation of melancholia as a refusal to assimilate trauma. Ankersmit stresses in particular the psychic wound and the refusal to let go of the loved object as crucial to witnessing the Holocaust; see Ankersmit, "Remembering the Holocaust," 110–13. My reading, on the contrary, emphasizes the narcissistic and the ambivalent (the mixture of love and hate for the lost object) aspects of melancholia and its cannibalistic imagination.
42. Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 227.
43. "Odnaleźć siebie w historii: Rozmowa o historii i świadomości zbiorowej." Z profesorem Janem Grossem rozmawiają Zbigniew Bauer, Henryk Czubała i Bogusław Gryszkiewicz. "Rozmowa Konspektu," *Konspekt* 8 (September 2001), <http://www.wsp.krakow.pl/konspekt/gross/index.html>, 13.
44. For an excellent discussion of the aporias of ethical responsibility in the aftermath of Jedwabne, see Joanna Zylinska, "'They're All Antisemitic There': Aporias of Responsibility and Forgiveness," *Culture Machine* 4 (2002), <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/joo4/Articles/zylinska.htm>

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