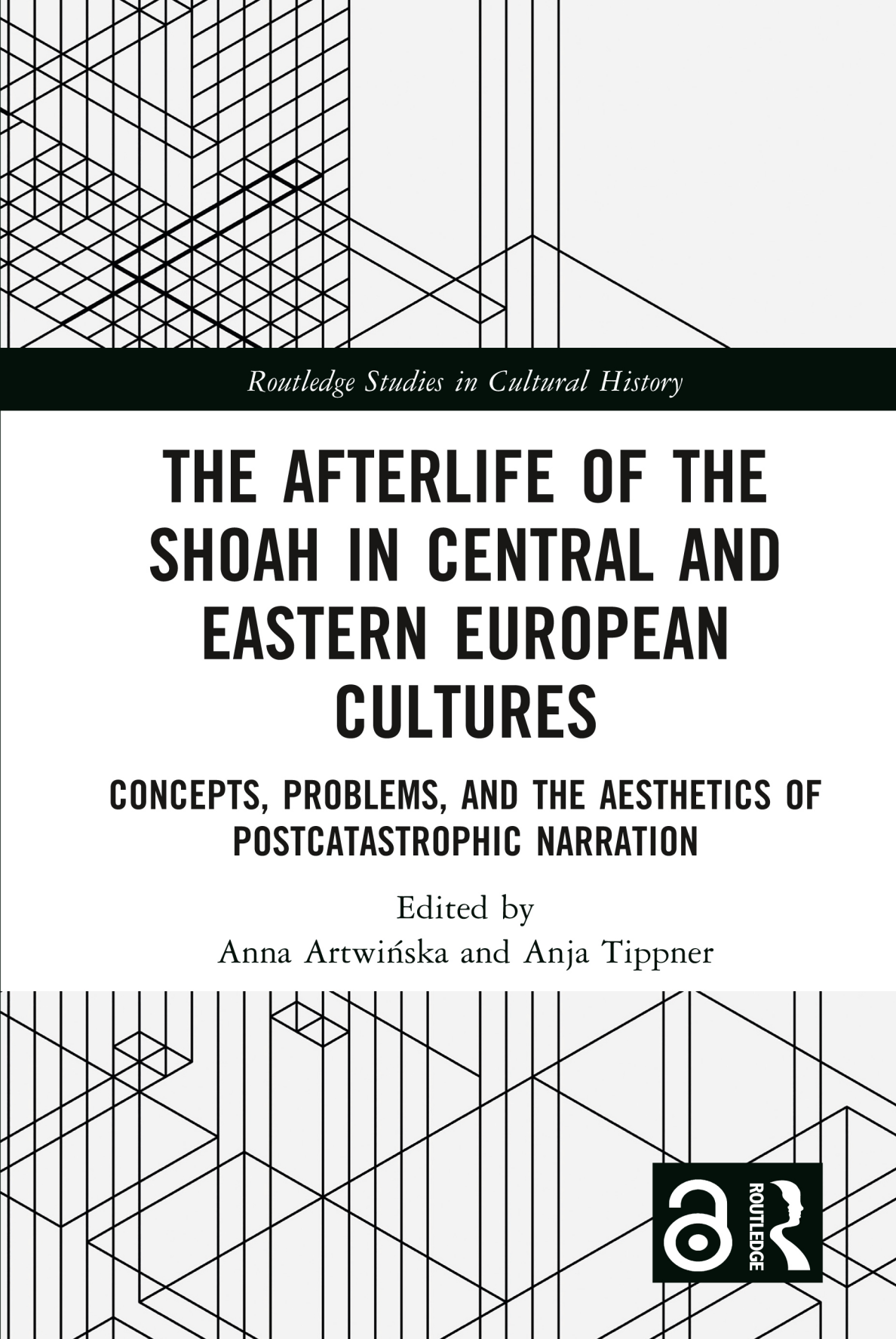




Routledge Studies in Cultural History

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE SHOAH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN CULTURES

**CONCEPTS, PROBLEMS, AND THE AESTHETICS OF
POSTCATASTROPHIC NARRATION**

Edited by
Anna Artwińska and Anja Tippner



The Afterlife of the Shoah in Central and Eastern European Cultures

The Afterlife of the Shoah in Central and Eastern European Cultures is a collection of essays by literary scholars from Germany, the US, and Central Eastern Europe offering insight into the specific ways of representing the Shoah and its aftereffects as well as its entanglement with other catastrophic events in the region.

Introducing the conceptual frame of postcatastrophe, the collected essays explore the discursive and artistic space the Shoah occupies in the countries between Moscow and Berlin. Postcatastrophe is informed by the knowledge of other concepts of “post” and shares their insight into forms of transmission and latency; in contrast to them, it explores the after-effects of extreme events on a collective, aesthetic, and political rather than a personal level. The articles use the concept of postcatastrophe as a key to understanding the entangled and conflicted cultures of remembrance in postsocialist literatures and the arts dealing with events, phenomena, and developments that refuse to remain in the past and still continue to shape perceptions of today’s societies in Eastern Europe.

As a contribution to memory studies as well as to literary criticism with a special focus on Shoah remembrance after socialism, this book is of great interest to students and scholars of European literary history and those interested in historical memory more broadly.

Anna Artwińska is a Professor of Slavic Literature and Culture Studies and Chair of the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Leipzig, Germany. Her main research interests are the memory of communism, postcatastrophic representation of the Shoah, the concept of generation, auto/biographical writing and gender, and postcolonial studies.

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Introduction: Living and Writing in Postcatastrophic Times



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1 Postcatastrophic Aesthetics

Anna Artwińska and Anja Tippner

From Catastrophe to Postcatastrophe

Central Eastern and Southeastern Europe's temporal and emotional landscape is marked by the catastrophes of yesterday. The Shoah, two World Wars, the Holodomor, Stalinism, Chernobyl, the massacres of Srebrenica, and environmental disasters still haunt societies in the geographical space between Berlin and Moscow and produce a perception of "now" as "after." Both these extreme events and their legacies are very much present in contemporary art, film, and literature. Texts such as *Noc żywych Żydów* (2012) [*Night of the Living Jews*] by the Polish author Igor Ostachowicz¹ convey a sense of living in postcatastrophic times, moving within postcatastrophic spaces and dealing with the aftermath of past events. Literature, film, and art all face the same problem, namely how to deal with events, phenomena, and developments that refuse to remain in the past and still continue to shape perceptions of today's societies. The idea of postcatastrophe seeks to answer this conceptual need and is informed by the knowledge of other concepts of "post" such as postmemory or the posttraumatic. It shares their insight into forms of transmission and latency. However, in contrast to them, it explores the after-effects of extreme events on a collective, aesthetic, and political rather than a personal level.² The concept of the postcatastrophe focuses on temporal disjunctions determined by the experience of catastrophe and manifesting themselves in models of transmission, retroactivity, or *télèscopage*. It also seeks to grasp the new ways of organizing spatial and material relationships that govern the postcatastrophic condition, as becomes evident in recent films such as *Lidice* [*Lidice. The Fall of the Innocent*] by Petr Nikolaev (2011), new concepts for the building of memorial complexes such as the "House of Terror" in Budapest (2002), and new practices of cultural remembrance such as re-enactments, books, and theatrical works such as *(A)pollonia* by Krzysztof Warlikowski (2014). In these artefacts, it is the after-effect of catastrophes which are the dominant coordinates for charting both the present and the retroactive power of extreme experiences.

The literary critic Judith Kasper defines catastrophes as “shocking, sudden events with extreme destructive potential” (Kasper 2013, 13). She asks what should happen after such a “leap” in the timeline and how society should deal with it.³ In the context of the Shoah, it is important to keep in mind that its effects—unlike those of natural disasters—are irreversible, and its after-effects are therefore of a much more fundamental nature. Catastrophic figuration provides two conceptions of the prospective and retrospective way of dealing with catastrophes, namely those of an emancipatory or paralyzing catastrophism, that is, the idea that catastrophes could lead to a turning point, a reversal, a recollection, or the notion of an inescapable dynamic. Maurice Blanchot differentiates between “paralyzing” experiences and general catastrophes. He describes the former as a “disaster,” that is, as an incident that “ruins everything and yet allows everything to remain as it is” (Blanchot 2005, 9), a condition that is complicated by the impossibility of verbalizing its debilitating effects. For Blanchot, disaster, unlike catastrophe, is not cathartic and cannot be charged *ex post facto* with meaning. Emancipatory interpretations often depict catastrophes as conversions inducing new attitudes and an increased awareness of the *conditio humana*. A crucial aspect of catastrophes is the fact that they are mass phenomena that affect both larger communities and individuals at the same time and therefore have to be understood as collective events with regard to causes as well as effects. Unlike common depictions of catastrophe, which—throughout the second half of the 20th century—often view it as a synonym for experiences of crisis (Briese and Günther 2009, 191–195), the term postcatastrophe emphasizes something different and refers to the significance of the past and especially the Shoah for the experience of collective and individual reality. Here, “post” is meant to imply “a constellation” which takes into account the lingering effects of a catastrophic event which manifests itself in the rhythm of repetitions and after-effects, or to quote Bal again a certain “multitemporality” (Bal 2018, 234, *ibidem*) or “multidirectionality”. Thus, where posttrauma highlights individual ways of dealing with the cataclysm of the genocide and postmemory point us towards the modes of remembrance and transmission of experience across the generational gap, the concept of postcatastrophe pays more attention to the fact that the after-effects of the Shoah often play out not within the family frame but within a wider societal context and are felt deeply even by those with few or even no personal ties to the events. Still, there is a common sense in the broader field of study of “post” phenomena that enable the persistence of effects of past events in the present and the obligations they create which are both “retrospective and prospective” (Miller and Tougan 2002, 7).

In deciding to adopt the concept of postcatastrophe as the overarching descriptive category for the present volume, we are also posing questions

about the methodological and aesthetical usefulness of this concept. Does this concept facilitate a fresh look at modes of Shoah remembrance and representation in European literature and culture? Does it help us to understand the Shoah as well as its ramifications? Does it help us understand the ways in which the Shoah and other extreme events of the 20th century are dealt with on an everyday basis but also in memorial culture? In testing the potential of this category with regard to Eastern, Central, and Southeastern European narratives, we focus on the period after the event, after catastrophe, viewing catastrophe as a process and as a condition. In doing so, we wish to stress the heuristic potential of postcatastrophic approaches to European postwar cultures. On a meta-level, postcatastrophe provides concepts and ideas for understanding the political-cultural situation after the Shoah, and on the aesthetic level, it can be understood as modes of representation.

The spacetime of postcatastrophe is still marked by past extreme experience and confronts us with the problems arising from this past, lying dormant for some time and erupting unexpectedly. Borrowing the concept of “latency as the origin of the present” from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2013),⁴ one can view present conflicts as products of the past, aggravated by silences, temporal shifts, and the overlap of the practices of remembering and forgetting. Jacques Lacan has referred to this condition as *après-coup* (used to translate Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*—belatedness) that is the delayed onset of trauma that transports us back to the catastrophic event and which allows us to understand its significance *ex post*. “History is not the past. History is the past insofar as it is historicised in the present” (Lacan 1988, 12). The temporal, spatial, and social dimensions each play a defining role in the conception of postcatastrophe. However, it is the specific temporality of postcatastrophe that affects the other two dimensions. This is made possible by the aforementioned shift in the understanding of testimony. The concept of secondary or postmemorial testimony to catastrophe is legitimized by the privileged position of the following generations with regard to accessing historical facts. Later generations are not only in possession of survivors’ and participants’ testimonies, they also have access to archives and can take in the bigger picture, thus positioning themselves as affected but uninvolved observers. Here, the temporal distance implied by the prefix “post” becomes epistemologically and aesthetically operative, leading to a new perspective on the Shoah, characterized by its specific temporality, its own topography, and a particular access to the objects and stories of this catastrophic past. These practices and methods differ from previous examinations of the Shoah mainly because they stress the assumption that catastrophe can only be grasped by understanding its consequences. The search for new approaches that account for temporal displacements takes on the role of an important *aporia* of postcatastrophe.

While all of Europe was ravaged by the two World Wars, Central Eastern Europe was the epicenter not only of warfare, but also of the

Shoah, and continued to experience totalitarian violence and cataclysms of change after the Second World War. In writing about the continuation of violence, we are far from equating Nazism and Stalinism with communism in Europe. On the contrary: we concur with the latest studies that demonstrate the dangers of such identification, leading not only to relativization of Nazism but also to the mythologization of the postwar era. We rather seek to call attention to the fact that for societies of Central Eastern Europe, the trauma and violence did not end in 1945; instead, to use the term coined by the historian Marcin Zaremba in relation to Poland, the “great fear” continued (cf. Zaremba 2012). When studying the continuity of extreme experiences, one must pay attention to the problem of overlapping roles of perpetrators and victims, or to the fluid permeation of these two roles, in both the wartime and the postwar reality.⁵ The waves of vengeance, ethnic cleansing, and civil war punctuating the years after 1945 only heightened the traumatic legacies of the war and the Shoah. The notion of postcatastrophe serves to conceptualize the experience of temporal disorientation and destabilization that is brought about by these events and their aftermath. Central Eastern and Southern European societies struggle to come to terms with the historical overload of extremity, trauma, and violence. It goes to the heart of this effort within intellectual and artistic communities in Poland, Ukraine, or the Czech Republic, who try to convey the need to acknowledge the devastating effects of these catastrophes, who try to raise awareness, and who are also deeply invested in the question of how to right past wrongs. They take on the task of reading testimonies of past catastrophes as well as the labor of excavating archival material, objects, and traces of unrecorded extreme events and experiences, and they attempt to pull these events back into the collective imaginary, to make them common knowledge. This postcatastrophic work is infused by a feeling of obligation to the past, present, and future communities. It is also marked by a continuous struggle against the commodification of these experiences.

Entangled Catastrophes

For postcatastrophic generations, the Gulag, Chernobyl, or the massacres during the Civil War in ex-Yugoslavia are reminiscent of and conceptualized by the ultimate extreme experience—the Shoah. As Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have demonstrated, the Holocaust is no longer an exclusively Jewish or German concern but a template for other narratives of crisis and atrocity and a framework for interpreting contemporary as well as historical acts of injustice (Levy and Sznaider 2006). The Italian historian Enzo Traverso has pointed out that without contextualization, the Shoah becomes an “epistemological obstacle.” Thus, in order to avoid this effect, it is necessary to acknowledge that,

while being an unprecedented event, the Shoah also functions as a model enabling us to study other phenomena of violence (Traverso 2011, 180).⁶ For this reason, it is impossible to refrain from observing the “similarity of catastrophes” (Stockhammer 2005, 62). From our perspective, works of this type offering a comparative approach are an important point of reference. At the same time, we need to emphasize that the concept of postcatastrophe exceeds the boundaries of the comparative perspective: it is not a theory of how to write about various types of violence; rather it is a reaction to the fact that literature and art that take up the subject of violence often merge various historical experiences, of an intertwining of different temporal layers, strategies of remembering and forgetting and incessant re-writing of the roles of perpetrators, victims, and witnesses (Artwińska and Tippner 2019). Postcatastrophic fictions are ways of reordering the past and the present, and aligning them with an imagined future by actively combining different experiences of violence and trauma. They are clearly related to other kinds of catastrophes or “modernist events,” as Hayden White describes them, which help to shape the disastrous history of our time. Postcatastrophic narratives are also a way to keep memory personal and close to home instead of distancing ourselves from them by linking the Shoah to other catastrophes. They also contribute to the feeling of living in times marked by events that have thoroughly shattered a society, destroyed cities, and displaced persons and objects. The problem of mutual permeation of catastrophes and the need for a holistic examination of the violence of the 20th century has been well addressed by the Belorussian Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, who wrote in her book on Chernobyl:

Everything we know of horror and dread is connected primarily with war. Stalin’s Gulags and Auschwitz were recent gains for evil. [...] In Chernobyl, we appear to see all the hallmarks of war: hordes of soldiers, evacuation, abandoned houses. (Alexievich 2016, 27)

Two catastrophes coincided: a social one, as the Soviet Union collapsed before our eyes [...]; and a cosmic one—Chernobyl. [...] What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl is life afterwards: the possessions without owners, the landscapes without people. [...] It sometimes felt to me as if I were recording the future. (Alexievich 2016, 32–33)

In her view, the aftermath of the catastrophe is almost as important as the event itself. The strategies of engaging with the effects and the detritus left by catastrophes not only evokes past catastrophes, such as the Shoah or the Gulag but also foreshadows future catastrophes that will add to the feeling of being engulfed. Following Dan Diner, one could interpret the

juxtaposition of the Shoah and other histories of violence such as communist repressions and the Gulag, acts of ethnic cleansing such as the deportation of Sudeten Germans in the late 1940s or those in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the contemporary refugee crisis, as a form equalizing simultaneity, that is, a de-historicizing and fusion of memories that were originally fundamentally opposed to one other. Fusing different layers of time and historical events in postcatastrophic narratives serves as a backdrop to contemporary demands of commemorating and compensating past wrongs. Ultimately, we must explore whether this kind of displacement of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders locates politics elsewhere and absolves contemporary and future audiences. The fusion of different historical experiences of disaster lies very much at the bottom of postcatastrophic narratives, since they tend to be the result of frictions, that is, the engagement of different narratives, more often than not Jewish and non-Jewish, national and global. The enduring presence of the Shoah has brought about forms of engagement with the past that are characterized by a specific temporal, spatial, and collective dimension. It is especially the distinct temporality of postcatastrophic narrative, a temporality that can be found in texts like Ewa Kuryluk's *Frascati* (2010), Jáchym Topol's *Chladnou zemi* (2009) [*The Devil's Workshop*, 2013], W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) [*The Emigrants*, 1996],⁷ or Daša Drndić's *Belladonna* (2012) [*Belladonna*, 2017]. These texts are constitutive for our concept of postcatastrophe, as they show that the history of violence set in motion by the deprivation of the rights of the European Jews, the expropriation of their property, their expulsion, and their murder has yet to reach its end. Aiming to show to what extent today's society is still characterized by the consequences and the aftermath of the disasters of 20th century, they take as their starting points objects (Sebald), places (Topol), or collective self-images (Kuryluk, Drndić) and, in performing historical research, seek to trace their stories to the point of disaster and beyond. At the same time, they comment on today's memory culture and prove to be informed by it; in a certain sense, they realize Zygmunt Bauman's demand that the Shoah should not be regarded as a "special field" but should rather be inscribed in a general European history (Bauman 1989) which now extends "from Athens to Auschwitz" (Meier 2005). These authors share with others an interest not only in the aesthetics of the postcatastrophe and the documentary, but also in the ethics of dealing with victims, survivors, and perpetrators through the lens of fiction.

Postcatastrophic art or architecture, then, produces artefacts and spaces that exist in the shadow of the catastrophic. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, the 9/11 Memorial in New York, but also the ruins and remnants of synagogues or churches destroyed by the war,

the dents of artillery fire on the façades of houses in St. Petersburg, are all reminders that we inhabit spaces marked by catastrophe. Ruins and the now almost ubiquitous use of the void strive to supplement the present with the past, the one that was destroyed, and the act of destruction itself. The catastrophic past is thus visible in places organized especially for the purpose of its commemoration (museums, monuments), in traumatic places such as concentration camps, which are the direct witnesses to the crimes, as well as in places that at first sight look incidental, “innocent,” with no clear connection to the catastrophe. It is especially this last category of places that reveals the postcatastrophic configurations particularly well, because their retroactive influence is tied to discourses of the present and determined by them. The aforementioned ruins serve as a fitting example: traces of life from before the catastrophe, many of which only recently gained the status of special, memory-forming places, thanks to interpretations from the perspective of the 21st century.⁸ Literature and art offer numerous attempts to deal with the catastrophic past by way of referencing its topography and material remnants. Christian Boltanski, in *The Missing House* (1990), examines an empty space where a tenement house inhabited by Jews once stood in Berlin. The artist placed plaques with names of former residents on the walls of buildings surrounding this void. In this way, the neighbors who once lived here and who are now gone symbolically surround this empty Berlin space which to this day is a special place where the past cohabits with the present. Berlin is not an exception. All of Europe bears similar topographic and material remnants referencing catastrophes. As the historian, Tony Judt put it: “Post-war Vienna, like post-war western Europe—was an imposing edifice resting atop an unspeakable past” (Judt 2005, 3). In Poland, Czechoslovakia, or countries of the former Yugoslavia, we use the topography to observe not only the long shadow of the Shoah but also the shadows of what followed. The Croatian author Daša Drndić states in her novel *Belladonna*:

On her return from the camp, Susana Atlas found the family house occupied by unknown people [...] She never set foot in her house again. After the war Susana Atlas sees personal items [...] in her neighbours’ houses. [...] Today, the building accommodates a branch of Milošević’s Socialist Party of Serbia. (Drndić 2017, 290)

“The consequences of the Shoah for Jewish material culture” (Auslander 2017, 837) are evident from the postcatastrophe perspective not only because it is interested in reconstructing the history of specific things and objects that formerly belonged to Jews, but also because it draws attention to the emotions involved in the “second life” of Jewish material culture. These emotions point to the condition of societies in the

aftermath of a catastrophe, to the conflicts characteristic of that condition, resulting from an inability to cope with the past, especially with one's own responsibility for it.

Postcatastrophic Configurations in the Arts

"Rather quickly I came to realize [...] that our occupation with the Holocaust is something from which we simply cannot free ourselves. Particularly us, the generation that came into being at the peak of its darkness—for us the sun is forever obscured" stated the Polish-American literary scholar and author Irena Grudzińska-Gross, who left Poland in 1968 because of the antisemitic campaigns during that year (Grudzińska-Gross 2018, 281).⁹ For many Polish-Jewish families, the year 1968 brought back their darkest memories of the Second World War. The expulsion of the Jews from Poland interlocked with the deprivation and suffering that had befallen them in the course of the Shoah. As Grudzińska-Gross states: this disaster has become a matter that constantly affects us—even in the so-called time "after the catastrophe." The metaphor of "a sun forever obscured" stands for the omnipresence of the Shoah disaster and its retroactivity in the 21st century.¹⁰ In terms of aesthetics, both postcatastrophic and postmemorial writing manifest themselves through "album-like procedures" (Kramer and Pelz 2013), collage-like style, displaced temporality, and a documentary impetus. This includes, *inter alia*, compilations of heterogeneous materials in the text as well as citation of photographs, roughly sketched depictions, and patristic anthologies. On the thematic level, most of the texts show a tendency to intertwine narratives of different disasters. In this way, they evoke a world in which not only individual biographies, but also social conditions and topographies evoke a catastrophic character.

There is ample material for this postcatastrophic configuration in contemporary discourses and literatures from Central Eastern and Southern Europe, be it Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, or Polish. For instance, in *Belladonna*, Daša Drndić recalls many of the horrors of the past century: in her parable, the nationalism of present-day Croatia is directly linked to the extermination of the Jews of Šabac, whose names are listed in a register in the middle of the book. Here, the author cites a list of murdered Jewish refugees on display at the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade. In a way, this list—in addition to the list of the names of the 2,061 children deported from the Netherlands to concentration camps from 1939 to 1945—both checks the box of historical evidence and simultaneously marks a "disruption" in the text. As in her earlier novels, Drndić combines facts and fictions with various narration techniques (the main protagonist Andreas Ban, for example, reads the book *Sonnenschein* (2007) [*Trieste*, 2012] by Daša Drndić)¹¹ and confronts the reader by questioning the limits of individual and collective

memory. Both lists interrupt the narration of the protagonist's biography as a no longer practicing intellectual and psychiatrist whose physical illnesses metonymically stand for the ill state of Southern Europe which—after the horror of the 20th century—cannot be returned to health. The lists are also quasi-material elements of the text and make it easy to recognize “the irritating ambivalence of symbolism and non-symbolism” (Kimmich 2018, 21) inherent in all things in literary texts. In addition to the aforementioned lists, the novel also contains pictures, musical notation, postage stamps, and coupons, including the picture of the eponymous plant belladonna:

[...] also known as deadly nightshade, devil's berries, death cherries, beautiful death, devil's herb, which sounds terrifying and threatening. [...] Up until the First World War, in Europa *most belladonna was cultivated in Croatia*, in Slovenia and southern Hungary. [...] Belladonna conceals its poison in beautiful mauve-black berries, and in its leaves and roots. (Drndić 2017, 316)

Just as the hidden poison constantly spreads, the coordinates of the catastrophe are extended into the present.

In Czech literature, there are a whole slew of novels that write Czech history during and after the war as intrinsically linked. Novels such as Hana Andronikova's *Zvuk slunečních hodin* (2001) [*The Sound of the Sundial*, 2015], Radka Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera* (2006) [*Money from Hitler*, 2009], Jáchym Topol's *Chladnou zemí* (2009) [*The Devil's Workshop*, 2013], or Jakub Katalpa's *Němci. Geografie ztráty* (2014) [*The Germans. A Geography of Loss*] deal with wartime events as well as the aftermath of 1945.¹² While they see not only a chronological, but also a causal link between the Shoah, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, and socialist repressions, their other main concern is to establish a proper memorial culture that acknowledges the effects of these catastrophic events. These texts perceive the present as a post-catastrophic era, a time marked by loss and suppressed memories. Past and present are not just simply juxtaposed but simultaneously mobilized through spectral writing. Protagonists are “haunted” by the past, either by their own or those of their grandparents or parents, never completely free of its effects. Radka Denemarková's novel *Money from Hitler*—a prime example of spectral writing—uses this device to point out the detrimental effect of deficient and false historical self-representations circulating in Czech culture. The novel recreates the fate of Gita Lauschmannová, a Czech Shoah survivor of German and Jewish descent after the war. In 1945 Gita Lauschmannová returns from a concentration camp to her home in the village of Puklice, believing that even though none of her loved ones had made it, the worst period of her life had just come to an end. Yet the dream of “returning home” proves

illusory: after the war, the Lauschemann mansion and property were taken over by the locals, who, in line with the postwar propaganda, believed the former owners to be “traitors,” “collaborators” and, importantly, “Germans.” The rhythm of Radka Denemarková’s prose is marked by the returns of the heroine to her birthplace—there are seven more after the first, in 1945. They take place after 70 years, in 2005, after the official rehabilitation of the Lauschemann family. Gita comes back to symbolically compensate for the past harm. She is initially only interested in erecting a monument to the memory of her own parents. She is not interested in legal action to reclaim her old property, but over the course of events, she changes her mind. The greater the hostility of Puklice’s inhabitants toward Gita, the more willing she becomes to fight—not only for symbolic justice but also for concrete objects and other items of property.

Literary artefacts like Topol’s *The Devil’s Workshop*, Markéta Platzová’s *Aaronův skok* (2006) [*Aaron’s Leap*, 2014], or Denemarková’s *Money from Hitler* embed real events in imaginary, phantasmagoric structures. Using individual stories allows for identification but complicates discourse on a collective level. Or, as Michael Rothberg has put it, “the haunting of the past cannot be harnessed in the present without unforeseen effects” (Rothberg 2009, 223). Very often they are not so much about factography as they are about showing, based on family histories, a photograph found accidentally or a curious topography, that the history of the Shoah did not end in 1945, that its effects are still felt today, in a way forcing new generations to make new discoveries and interpretations. It is obvious that the reception of the Shoah in the 21st century differs from that immediately after the war or during the period of the Iron Curtain. What seems less obvious is the fact that the Shoah affectively engages subsequent generations, keeps writing its continuations, and exerts an influence with the aid of what could not be clearly said before. What is coming to the fore in new humanistic studies is “the unexplained, the unspeakable, that which eschews linguistic expression. That which lacks its own semiotic system, which affects the recipient rather than engages him or her in a relationship that we could refer to as communication with the use of signs” (Sendyka 2009, 15). This, of course, does not mean that the inconvenient truth that Poles or Czechs murdered Jews during the war is not addressed. On the contrary: literature, art, and scientific discourses are outdoing each other in supplying new “evidence in the case.” Thus, the point of this is to call attention to the affective power of these inconvenient truths. The retroactive power of catastrophe is revealed in many contemporary literary works, movies, and theater plays. Not only will it not allow us to forget it, but it also forces us constantly to come up with redefinitions, new readings, and revaluations of affective characters. “One skeleton is laid in the ground, another surfaces” (Drndić 2017, 195), are the words spoken by the

narrator of Drndić's novel, commenting on the moment the protagonist finds out that his mother's brother is likely to have been a member of Ustaša and has Jewish blood on his hands.

Postcatastrophe and Transnational Memory Cultures

Similarly to contemporary concepts from the field of memory studies that emphasize the need to work out a multidirectional and transnational memory of 20th century's catastrophes—suffice it to mention Michael Rothberg, Astrid Erll, or Aleida Assmann—the concept of post-catastrophe also points to the need to break through the templates of national memory and to connect the narratives on extreme events with each other. Literary texts, movies, or theater plays from Eastern Europe struggle to integrate the diverse catastrophes of the 20th Century and ever so often the catastrophes that occurred after the Shoah, such as the antisemitic witch-hunt in communist Poland (Artwińska 2015) or the civil war in Yugoslavia, are described through its filter. This “multi-directional memory” (Rothberg 2009) is especially poignant in Topol's *The Devil's Workshop*, which addresses the transnationalization of memorial cultures as well as suppressed and entangled histories. The residents of Terezín battle with city councils, tourists, and scholars for their right to inhabit former camp buildings, pursuing their own version of preservation and commemoration of these buildings. In contrast to other contemporary Czech authors, Topol does not draw a parallel between victims of the Shoah and former (German) inhabitants of the town of Theresienstadt; rather he discusses the afterlife of the Shoah and the trauma of deportation within an economic framework, asking who is allowed to profit from the “Holocaust business” and how we deal with postcatastrophic sites. The dispute about heritage tours to the camp and the selling of ghetto pizza is another form of recall. In negotiating memorial practices, mainly the rights of the present citizens of Terezín and the rights of survivors, the novel presents the reader with different attitudes towards history and asks how we can integrate memorial practices into our everyday life without being overwhelmed by them. Topol's novel also confronts Czech narratives with those formed by a global culture of remembrance. Here, once again, the complexity of the relationship between literature and memory theory becomes apparent.

Not only does literature often know more than theory, but most of the novels and artwork pertinent to the question of postcatastrophe are informed by literary and cultural theory. Thus, in Ulrike Draesner's 2014 novel *Sieben Sprünge vom Rande der Welt* [*Seven Leaps from the Edge of the World*], for example, we can find the following scene: after the father of the narrator recounts his flight from Breslau at the end of the Second World War using impressive images, the narrator comments on his memories, classifying them as “film pictures. Re-enacted images, [...],

broadcast somewhere. Fantasies about the past,” since she very well knows that “he had never been on the refugee route” (Draesner 2014, 46). His memories are “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg 2004), that is, memories shaped by cultural images that sometimes superimpose themselves. The same use of memory theory in order to create a sense of postcatastrophe can be found in Maria Stepanova’s award-winning novel *Pamięci pamięci* (2017) [*In Memory of Memory*, 2021] or in Katja Petrowskaja’s novel *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) [*Maybe Esther: A Family Story*, 2018]. The very title of Stepanova’s novel refers to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, striving for a recreation of the past that acknowledges theoretical as well as private truths. Informed by a century of travel and migration due to wars, work, and love, Stepanova’s and Petrowskaja’s protagonists are no longer defined by one nationality or even bi-nationality; they have become truly transnational. These texts create a Central European memory space that is infused by the catastrophes of the 20th century and not only covers the bloodlands of Eastern Europe but extends their boundaries well beyond Germany, Austria, and France. They also tackle the specific memorial culture in the Soviet Union and point us to the problems of remembering a very different type of Shoah within the frame of Russian (post)soviet memory politics.

At the same time, and we would like to stress this emphatically, the literature and art that we have dubbed postcatastrophic is very often stuck in a conflict between the regional, national, and local and the transnational. This conflict is clearly visible in the tension between the need to reconstruct the traumatic history of one’s own region, which has not yet been the subject of artistic representations, and the need to analyze mechanisms of violence as such. This confirms the thesis of theoreticians of transnational memory, according to which

There is no necessary or linear “progress” from the familial, to local, to national to global memory [...]. Indeed, the term transnational itself crucially serves here as a reminder of the fact that even in a so-called post-national age ‘the national’ as a framework [...] is still a powerful one. (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 6)

In his seminal work *Przeżniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (2014) [*An Over-Dreamed Revolution. Exercises in Historical Logic*], the philosopher Andrzej Leder interprets Polish history from 1939 to 1956 as a “cruel, brutal, externally imposed” social revolution (Leder 2014, 7) the significance and consequences of which have yet to be worked through by Polish society. The after-effects of the Shoah, the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia by both German and Soviet occupiers, and the ramifications of these events are of key importance for understanding problems with identity, one’s own origins, and genealogy in Poland today. Besides the war and the Shoah, Leder’s “over-dreamed”

revolution also consisted of Stalinist terror, agrarian reform, and the country's industrialization. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Leder diagnoses mechanisms of repression, transference, and denial, suggesting that it is necessary to take a critical look at the events that occurred in the years 1939–1956. In the chapter devoted to Jews, Leder, like many other contemporary Polish historians, literary scholars, and anthropologists of culture,¹³ points the reader towards Polish complicity in the extermination of Jews, using specific examples to show Poles as collaborators and informants, and wondering what the repression of this fact by the majority of society meant for the Polish body politic. The focus on Polish complicity is, in our view, the end result of the postcatastrophic situation in which Polish culture currently finds itself. It must be deemed symptomatic that this subject constantly recurs in so many works of recent years, inviting us, among other things, to revisit classical Polish texts on the Shoah. It confirms the thesis that in postcatastrophic situations, the catastrophe itself returns—this time as a manifestation not merely of bare facts, but also of their consequences and of the way it affects subsequent generations. For example, in a collective study on the Shoah in works by Zofia Nałkowska (Żukowski 2016), the authors show that Nałkowska's canonical work has never really been properly read and discussed since Polish culture only ever saw these texts as stories of war and Polish suffering, ignoring Jewish themes as well as those dealing with Polish complicity. This is especially true for short stories from the collection *Medaliony* (1946) [*Medallions*, 2000] such as *Dwojra Zielona*, *Kobieta cmentarna* [*Cemetery Woman*], and *Przy torze kolejowym* [*By the Railtracks*], which talk not only about damaged ethics and the banality of evil, but also of Poles not as victims but as bystanders and perpetrators. As Jacek Leociak put it in his most recent work: “Studies on the Holocaust are not only about describing the help that Poles offered to Jews during the Holocaust. What is more, the Holocaust did not occur just so that Poles could inform the world about it and save the Jews” (Leociak 2018, 5). The need to usher “inconvenient truths” into the public awareness can also be identified in other cultures. Czech¹⁴ or post-Yugoslavian discourses¹⁵ also address the need to address local and homegrown forms of antisemitism and abstain from putting all the blame on the Nazis.

The need to correct one's own local, regional and national images of the past contributes to the collision and competition of various practices of remembering and forgetting. Thus, one feature of the postcatastrophic situation is the tendency for “multidirectional” remembering and inscribing one's own stories into a broader context, but also, paradoxically, the tendency to clam up in one's own discourses. On the one hand, this leads to the necessary and desired corrections and revisions (as is the case of antisemitism), but on the other hand, it brings the danger of creating a competitive arrangement between the victims. Anna Janko's

novel *Mała Zagłada* (2015) [*A Minor Holocaust*] tells the story of the massacre in the village of Sochy near Zamość on 1 June 1943, when Nazis murdered around 180 Polish people, including children. In her work, the author accuses Europe of having suppressed the memory of this event. In calling for a proper commemoration of the catastrophe in Sochy, Janko criticizes not only what she believes to be an excessively intense memory of the tragedy of European Jews, but also what to her mind is the attention paid to the massacre in the Czech village of Lidice on 10 June 1942, in an act of retribution for the assassination of *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich. Thus, *Mała Zagłada* illustrates the conflicts arising from a postcatastrophic situation evident in contemporary Polish culture and at the same time points out that transnational memory must always face up to national memory. The parallel memory of the tragedy of European Jews, of the Poles murdered in Sochy, and of the Czechs exterminated in Lidice becomes, in the case of Janko, a postulate of the future. “Local history, transnational memory” (Glajar and Teodorescu 2011) awaits its materialization. As demonstrated by the aforementioned works by Topol and Draesner, transnational memory is indispensable and much needed, because it is within its frameworks that remembering the local becomes possible without the risk of competition and hierarchization. Global memory of the 20th-century catastrophes is a postcatastrophic memory: it manifests the contemporary problems with time, space, and the congruency of catastrophic experiences. At the same time, as the Israeli historians Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan point out, a critical revision of the concept of global memory as limited mainly to the Western world and America is necessary in the 21st century. Only its expansion to include the experiences of other regions could contribute to a better understanding of the universal meaning of this memory. In their introduction to the volume on global Holocaust memory, Goldberg and Haim discuss Levy and Sznajder’s notion of a globalized Holocaust memory. They ask:

Is it so prevalent? What does it actually mean? How does it function on various social, cultural, and political grounds? How is it related to other memories? What does its vocabulary consist of? To what extent is it truly global, and how does it encounter local traditions? How is it globally reproduced, and how is it formulated, compromised, negotiated, or subverted? And what are its moral, political, and cultural roots and ramifications? (Goldberg and Hazan 2015, xii)

The concept of postcatastrophe presented in this book, though developed in relation to the European historical experience, is open to new

contexts. It is applicable wherever the retroactive power of catastrophe and its impact on the present can be observed.

* * *

The collected essays reconstruct instances of postcatastrophic writing, art, and media. They explore contemporary artefacts from Poland, Hungary, the Soviet Union and Russia, the Czech Republic, Yugoslavia, and the former GDR, which prove to be prime examples of art reflecting past events with regard to their present and future implications and connotations. We thank Katarzyna Adamczak for joining us in Hamburg to organize and conceptualize the conference “The Afterlife of the Holocaust in Central Eastern European Cultures: Concepts, Problems, and the Aesthetic of Postcatastrophic Narration.” We are also grateful to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for its financial support of the 2017 Hamburg conference. We extend our thanks to our copy editor Bradley Alan Schmidt for his work and to our research assistants Franziska Günther, Luisa Dittrich, and Shahla Shahriari. The present volume presents the results of research conducted for the project “Nach dem Holocaust. Postkatastrophische Narrative in der polnischen Literatur,” funded by the German–Polish Science Foundation.

Notes

- 1 Igor Ostachowicz’s book is set in the Warsaw district of Muranów, where the Jewish ghetto was located during the Second World War (the Northern part of Warsaw was inhabited mainly by Jews until 1939), and which was turned into a socialist residential settlement in the 1950s. In this novel, which maintains the convention of a horror, the past returns in a very literal sense: one day, Jewish men and women begin to come out of the basements of the buildings, convinced that the war is still ongoing. The novel’s protagonist is confronted with the memory of the place where he lives; the plot, set in the Warsaw of the 21st century, is moved into the past. Ostachowicz grapples with this traumatic fragment of Polish history by way of grotesque, sci-fi, horror, and references to mass culture (cf. Ostachowicz 2012).
- 2 In this respect, it relates more to the idea of “postwar” or the aftermath that lies at the center of Frank Biess’ and Robert G. Moeller’s exploration of the legacies of the Second World War in Europe (cf. Biess and Moeller 2010).
- 3 This paragraph and a few additional deliberations on the subject of postcatastrophe is based on the introduction to a special issue of *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne* (see Artwińska 2015, 9–18) and on the text “Postkatastrophische Vergegenwärtigung—eine Positionsbestimmung” (Artwińska and Tippner 2018, 15–35).
- 4 Although Gumbrecht’s reflections apply to the situation in German culture, “configurations of latency” can also be observed in other parts of Europe.
- 5 For a comparative view on the immediate aftermath in a European perspective, see Lowe (2012).
- 6 Traverso points out that “[c]omparing genocides not only means drawing

parallels between societies, but especially between their crises” (Traverso 2011, 153). In order to understand the Holocaust, one must ask, among other things, how the Holocaust and Soviet communism were interrelated, what the common nodes are between genocides perpetrated in the name of European imperialism and colonialism, and whether (and to what extent) they can be compared to the genocide in, for example, Armenia (ibid., 156). The Polish literary historian Arkadiusz Morawiec, in his book *Literatura polska wobec ludobójstwa* (2018) [*Polish Literature vis-a-vis Genocide*], muses on the degree to which various historical genocides can be juxtaposed and whether it is justified to use the plural form of the term “Zagłada” [Extermination], often used in Polish literature as a synonym for the Holocaust. Aware of the dangers of relativizing the Holocaust, Morawiec observes how Polish literature speaks of other crimes against humanity, from the extermination of Armenians and that of European Romani to the massacre of Srebrenica (Morawiec 2018).

- 7 W. G. Sebald is an author, who—in texts such as *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*—iconically searches for new aesthetic forms via which to visualize the Holocaust. In his essay *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he also points out that the crux of German commemorative literature is still to be found in its selectivity. In contrast to the postwar period, this, he asserts, now leads to suppressing recollections of the destruction of Germany’s cities—which he considers equally disastrous (Sebald 2002, 77).
- 8 Cf. *inter alia* the (now complete) Ph.D. project entitled *Ambivalent Presence. The Material Jewish Remnants in Poland, 1945–1989* (2018) by Yechiel Weizman from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- 9 See the essay by Grudzińska-Gross in this volume.
- 10 The situation of second-generation Eastern European Jews, such as Irena Grudzińska-Gross is especially relevant. This has been demonstrated by David Kowalski. He shows that for the generation of Polish-Jewish intellectuals born shortly after the war, their Jewish background long remained a non-topic. Of course, they were aware of their families’ histories, but they did not problematize them. Awareness of their own complex biographical situation came much later, specifically in 1968. In the interview given to Kowalski, Grudzińska-Gross admitted that it was not until her return from abroad in 1990 that she realized that most of her friends from the same generation were of Jewish origin (Kowalski 2018, 11–24).
- 11 *Sonnenschein* was published in 2005 and was internationally celebrated as an important novel about the Holocaust. The author was compared to W. G. Sebald, among others.
- 12 For a further exploration of the entanglement of the Holocaust and the expulsion of ethnic Germans in contemporary Czech fiction and the strife for new memorial forms, see Tippner (2021).
- 13 The chapter is mainly about the books written after the publication of the study *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* by Jan Tomasz Gross (2001).
- 14 Cf. *inter alia* (Firlej 2016, 13–14).
- 15 Especially concerning the antisemitism of the Ustaša movement.

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2 Grasping for the Past: Postcatastrophic Writing of Catastrophic Biographies

Irena Grudzińska-Gross

Introduction

There are two intertwined topics in my article, the first one biographical, the other autobiographical. The first one is centered on the difficulties in writing catastrophic biographies, and I will use as an example, the life of a person you may not have heard about, Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski. The second thread will refer to my reasons for examining his life. I will try to discover how my biography fits into a larger biography of my generation, and how my urge to look at Weissberg's life is linked with and conditioned by the biographies of the generations of my parents and grandparents, people who lived in the "dark times," that is in the dire historical circumstances of the first half of the 20th century. My generation grew up in the long shadow of those times.

As Henri Russo wrote, we count our historical time from the ends of the wars that happened in our territory.

[I]nterest in the near past [...] seems ineluctably connected to a sudden eruption of violence and even more to its aftereffects, to a time following the explosive event, a time necessary for understanding it, becoming cognizant of it, but a time marked as well by trauma and by strong tensions between the need to remember and the temptation to forget. (Rousso 2016, 9)

So, although born after the Second World War, my generation lives in its shadow. That shadow makes examining the biographies of people who lived through the war very complex and emotional. Therefore, I have to say right at the beginning that even though I may sound critical or desperate there is no blame in anything I am saying. I am striving for a distance necessary for a vision both clear and unsentimental, the distance which, I hope, may be granted by living outside of the country I grew up in and my working in languages I did not learn in my childhood. Both of these geographic and linguistic displacements should make me hesitate before I start to judge.

Far from rejecting individual responsibility, I understand that we act within the times given to us. I think Hannah Arendt expressed it best, and, using the term “dark times,” I already quoted her words, or rather Berthold Brecht’s words that served as a title for her volume of essays (Arendt 1968). She said in *The Human Condition* that the story of an individual’s life can be *produced* only because of the “already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions [...]” (Arendt 1989 [1968, 184]). But that web of human relationships prevents one from having full authorship over the results of one’s words and actions. “Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story” (Arendt 1989 [1968, 184]). Such a story, she clarified, revealed an acting subject, an agent that is “an actor and sufferer” in the story, but not its author. This, I would add, is acutely true in the case of biographies affected by catastrophe, of lives lived under the pressures of dictatorships, in the dark times.

There are two parts to my contribution. The first one is called *Silence*, the second *Searching*.

Part One: Silence. A Biography of a Generation

The life of Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski is a great point of entry into the history of his generation born around the beginning of the 20th century in East Central Europe. The life trajectories of this generation were battered by two dictatorships and two wars, and Weissberg, just like his numberless friends and contemporaries, knew prisons, labor camps, ghettos, hiding, escapes, and humiliation. Born in 1901 in Cracow—then a part of Austro-Hungary, now Poland—to a Jewish family, he grew up in Vienna, worked in Berlin, went to the Soviet Union with a plan to contribute to the building of the most modern experimental physics laboratory of its time. On 1 March 1937, well into the Great Purges, he was arrested and held for three years in Kharkov and Moscow’s prisons. Today he is known mostly by his 1951 book called *The Accused* in which he described his imprisonment in Stalinist Russia.

On 1 January 1940, he was handed over to the Nazis by the Soviets. It was one of the minor effects of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. He was 39 years old and was sent to the occupied Poland with approximately 350 prisoners with German citizenship. Only Jewish prisoners were kept in Poland, the rest was sent to Germany proper. Weissberg miraculously managed to survive in Poland through all five years of the German occupation. The story of these five years is at the heart of my research about him. After the war, he left Poland, first for Sweden, then London, then Paris, where he died in 1964 at the age of 63.

I should add that in his twenties Weissberg was a gifted physicist, member of an international brotherhood of physicists at the peak of that science.

Albert Einstein came twice to his rescue, once writing a letter to the Soviets, another time, during the war, procuring for him a job in the Philippines, which he was not able to take as he did not receive permission to travel. During the war, Weissberg lost his father, brother, and most of his family and friends. But he also resisted, loved, married, and later wrote two very important books; became a successful businessman; and spent significant amounts of time and money gambling. He loved Monte Carlo.

I came to work on his biography by accident—which actually was not so accidental: his book about his Soviet prison experience made a great and lasting impression on me when I read its illegal edition while in college in Warsaw, hiding it even from my parents. Years later, in New York, I met and was befriended by Weissberg's first wife, the marvelous pottery designer Eve Zeisel. Recently the daughter of Eve Zeisel, Jean Richards, gave me access to the Zeisel papers containing unique materials about Weissberg's war experiences, for example, his postcards and letters from occupied Kraków. These documents proved to be hard to put down.

My fascination with the life of Alexander Weissberg surprised me—at the time I was planning to complete a partially written book about my usual topic, so I thought. That is the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. But now I see that even that book (which I will not abandon) has much in common with the Weissberg project: it is also about the Second World War. In the Miłosz book, I am studying his ways of reacting to violence, resisting the suicidal impulses of the wartime solidarity of the oppressed. Miłosz refused to participate in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944; that is, he refused to die in what he believed was only a “symbolic” gesture of defiance. Weissberg, too, was in Warsaw at that time and survived the Uprising. He was a marked person—a Jew, a former communist, bad speaker of Polish—during the war, he hid and schemed, made money, and connected to the underground. He described in detail his three years of sparring with the NKVD (Soviet political police) interrogators while imprisoned in the USSR, but he wrote only one long letter (unpublished, I will call it Letter) about the five years of surviving the Nazis. In the second part of this article, I will look at some of the reasons that made writing about this period of his life so difficult, for him and for myself.

It is the Second World War, I realized, that is the thread of my work in the last many years. I belong to a generation born after that war but, as I already stated, in its shadow. I did work on the war in two of my previous books—*War through Children's Eyes* and *The Golden Harvest*—both of them have been written in collaboration with Jan Gross. The first one is about the deportation of Polish population into the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war, the second went into the very heart of the violence against Jews, their despoliation, and extermination (see Grudzińska-Gross and Gross, 1985 and 2011). These topics are very hard to work on, and all my instincts warned me against

doing so. And for quite a long time I managed to keep away altogether from the Second World War.

I think that the way I finally came to the realization about the centrality of the catastrophe of the Second World War to our present lives could speak not only of myself but also of at least a certain part of my generation. I say “a certain part” because I was admonished once not to apply to my more intelligent colleagues the slowness of my coming to that subject. I strongly believed in my youth that I belonged to the postwar world that defeated violence. At my Warsaw high school in the 1960s, I immersed myself in French culture—existentialism, *Gitanes*, Juliette Greco, Claude Lévi-Strauss—France was everything that seemed chic and desirable.

It also meant student rebellion, which sent me a few years later into what was then called exile and now is downgraded to emigration (I am not sure, though, that I can really blame it on France). I first went to Italy, where I tried to study medicine but failed (at chemistry), then, in the United States, I returned to French literature and got my doctorate at Columbia University in the 19th-century French political writings. My first book was about two 19th-century writers Alexis de Tocqueville and Astolphe de Custine, and their writings about the political systems of the United States and Russia. At the time, I was concerned, as many of us were, and I am speaking now of the 1970s, with the twin concepts of civil society and human rights, that is of social self-organization and of individual action and responsibility. These were the subjects that took me away from French literature, which became for me too sedated, into the then fermenting, inventive, surprising Eastern Europe. The Eastern Europe wanted to call itself Central Europe because nothing, not even maps, were being left as they were.

That turn from the sophisticated French culture to the less exotic realities of Eastern Europe happened gradually. My life was split into two parts: one was my academic work and the other my non-professional but almost full-time occupation of following what was happening in Eastern Europe, supporting the dissident movement, writing and translating what needed to be disseminated, keeping watch. That split, that duality lasted for many years, and made me even go out of academia and work for the Ford Foundation. By then, I was totally immersed in East European matters; there was a sort of revolution happening, and what was very important, it seemed that at least some of the ideas of my generation were being implemented. We wondered then if we had been unusually lucky, able to help a great process of democratization and realize our political and social dreams without the use of violence. Today, our balance sheet does not look so good.

With today's changes, there is at least one continuity: The Second World War is even more present than in the Poland of my youth. I believe Europe, that is the European Union, functions as a daily, constant,

explicit, or implied rebuttal of that war. The catastrophe that concluded more than 70 years ago is a foundation of today's European world. The very existence of the European Union, the freedom of movement within its borders, and every trip through many countries without using a passport are statements against that war. And, besides in Germany, it is in Eastern Europe where the post-presence of the war is most intensely felt.

I have to return, therefore, to that shadow of war that I remember from my childhood. I grew up in Warsaw, then a city in a feverish state of reconstruction. From the windows of my room, I could see a plain of ruins. That scene seemed quite normal to me, and to all the children who grew up at that time. In some way, the adults around us were also "ruined." Yes, they were actively involved in the building of the new reality, yet they were somehow unreachable. They belonged to what is sometimes called "the silent generation." The common wisdom was that they went through too much and chose not to talk about it. "[The silence] was the result of suppression," one of them said years later. "We are paralyzed by history. We are afraid our scars will burst open and bad memories will spill out and with them pain, anger and regret that will interfere with regular life" (Bristiger, 2010, 22).

André Schiffrin gave yet another reason for the muteness of his parents who did not talk about their humiliating, scary, harrowing experience of escaping Nazi-occupied France. "The refugees were deprived even of the originality of their suffering. Everyone had the same experience and, as a result, no one spoke about it once in America. After all, we were lucky to have escaped," he wrote (Schiffrin 2007, 35–36). I am quoting these sentences because of such a different context than that of Weissberg. Being a part of a mass catastrophe deprives one of the uniqueness of one's experience and therefore of the self-propelling conviction that one has something to share. It is not that the experience of Schiffrin's parents was known to everybody and obvious; it was they who knew its mass character that was turning them into a number. And that silenced them. Paradoxically, then, though the mass character of persecution should have made their suffering clearly visible, their silence obscured it. The expression "dark times" is very adequate here.

So, the parents in Poland, France, and the United States were silent and, we, their children, were taught not to pose questions about the past. We were brought up with the etiquette of discretion. It was not a comfortable part of our childhood: that muteness could hide something shameful and did hide humiliation. That silence was especially contrasted by the empty loquacity of various veterans, who regularly visited our schools to talk about patriotism, heroism, and sacrifice. To use Hannah Arendt's terms, it was not even "persuasion" but "indoctrination," and indoctrination is another form of silencing. I think that it was the choice between the silence of my home life and the slogans of my schools that made me choose France.

Our “ruined” parents were not the first “silent generation.” In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin wrote about the soldiers of the Great War who “returned from battlefield grown silent, not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (Benjamin, 1968, 83–109). On the individual level, war, perhaps especially the contemporary war, is an experience impossible to overcome. In contrast, my generation was very optimistic, as all the postwar youth was in Europe and the United States. Our optimism was based on a radical rejection of what we understood as our parents’ fear. Yes, they were paralyzed by their tragic, unarticulated past. But didn’t they see that their war was over? That Stalinism was over?

Optimistic as we were, we also felt that the surrounding reality was out of kilter. It was that silent past that haunted it. The communist authorities tried to obtain their legitimacy from projects directed into the future; the non-communist majority of society insisted on their legitimacy coming from the past. Since the future too needs a concept of time, of continuity or interruption, the postwar communist regime had to create a pedigree for itself. That pedigree was continuously contested. In every political crisis, and in the postwar Poland there were many, a past would reemerge. When I was at the university, in the sixties, a group of us would descend on open Communist Party meetings (it was called the Workers Party), settle innocently among the public and, when it came to questions, ask subversive ones: about the unmentionable Katyń massacre, the willful inactivity of the Red Army watching Germans subdue Warsaw during the 1944 Uprising, the crimes of communism, the promises of 1956. The questions were always about the past. Our battles were fought in the language of history.

The authorities had many reasons for not wanting to look at the past. The silence about war was needed, it was said, for the building of “a regular” life. “Were it not for the long period of forgetting,” Tony Judt wrote, “many countries in Europe—East and West—would have had trouble putting themselves back together as politically stable units. Living a lie can be useful that way—it allowed time for divisions to heal [and] should not simply provoke scorn or irony: There was a reason” (Gross, “Teaching Difficult History,” paper delivered). Today this diagnosis does not seem convincing: the “forgotten” history is biting us again. Perhaps dealing with it right at that time would have made the reappearance of old forms of fascism and nationalism less likely or fascism itself less virulent. As Hannah Arendt said: “The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what was, and to endure this knowledge. And then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring” (Arendt 1989 [1968, 30]).

The postwar socialist or communist system, and I am speaking not only of Poland, was new and forward-looking; it discouraged and even punished *retrospection*. The silent generation rejected *introspection*. That last silence did not work well on the level of family. The

interruption of the intergenerational transfer of experience was perhaps too heavy a price for “a regular life.” We did not use the term “trauma”; in general we were not taught much psychology, but we knew that probing the past was impolite and hurtful. In order not to traumatize us children, our traumatized parents tried to make us grow without our history. They defended access to it by evasion, avoidance, deflection. Silence about war leads to the silence about the prewar family past. It was especially radical for those of us from Jewish families, who more often than not had no grandparents, no aunts or uncles. Our own parents were sometimes called “adult orphans.”

They were also exiles, refugees, migrants: even in their own countries they did not go back to the places of their childhood as these places often found themselves outside of country borders or their families did not live there anymore, even if they were alive at all. Those who returned could say, after Claude Lanzmann, “we may be alive, but we no longer recognize the places of our lives” (Lanzmann 2012, 156). They became immigrants in the postwar cities. Moreover, they did not go back to the languages of their families. We were growing up out of all contexts—historical, familial, linguistic, and geographic.

Imagine living among people who bore names that were not their original ones; these names were usually assumed during the war. Keeping these names, in times of peace, often meant distancing oneself from one’s previous life. Some new names were accompanied by new biographies, partially or totally invented. I have in mind such well-described cases as the lives of writer and translator Henryk Krzeczkowski (Karpiński 2016) or poet Irena Conti (Grela 2014). Of course, the silences were not total and, in the seventies and eighties, they became full of holes. But some people’s lives continued to be split in two, their prewar parts sealed off.

We knew that the silences were meant to block the transmission onto our generation of the horrible burdens and the stigma of victimhood, Jewishness, and humiliation. Perhaps we did not understand it all, but we felt that echo of war, aftershocks of war, history acting in our generation’s life. Or, rather, “so-called history” as Hannah Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher used to say to avoid pathos (Kohler 2000). It was obvious to us that the past was dangerous, so we accepted the requirement of discretion with a kind of unconscious relief. There was, to paraphrase Shoshana Felman, “a kind of emphatic and benevolent alliance” between the generation of our parents and us, their children, alliance “through which we worked together for the mutual comfort of an avoidance of the truth” (Felman and Laub 1992, 219).

These private silences, though well-meant and intended to supersede past divisions, proved damaging in both the public and private realms. The intergenerational tradition, Benjamin wrote in *The Storyteller*, is the basis on which a community is created; it is the foundation of its future. The stories consolidate a group, as they create common knowledge and

bonds. Community cannot be forged and kept in silence. Forgetting the horror and humiliation of the Second World War became an obstacle to the existence of that postwar community.

One can say, though, that community could not have been forged anew anyway. There was no Jewish community in postwar Poland, neither religious, secular, nor assimilated. There were individual Jews, but not Jewish society. And that therefore the silence was a proper response to the situation of absence. For us, the postwar generation born to Jewish-leftist parents, two ways of being were offered: access to Polish patriotism or to leftist internationalism. Postwar Polish patriotism was not too friendly to non-ethnic Poles. And internationalism as a viable ideology lost its luster long before we grew up, certainly by 1956. We were boisterous and optimistic, but permanently dependent on signs dribbling from the past, and therefore infantilized and illegitimate. To quote Hannah Arendt, quoting René Char, “our inheritance was left to us by no testament” (Arendt, 1993, 3).

Searching

All this is to explain why I became a sort of archeologist. From a literary scholar and political activist, I turned historian, and now, I am doing what I am calling for myself in Polish *wykopki*—excavations, or rather diggings. I am working in the history of the 20th century, in the history of that early 20th-century generation, and in the history of the Second World War. I hope that through the biography of Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski, I will steal a look behind the curtain of silence that separated the postwar times I am familiar with from the previous times. Weissberg’s existential situation was analogous to the situation of many people from the generations of my parents or grandparents, which makes him inherently interesting. And, since, as far as I know, he is not a relative of mine, I feel freer to probe into his life. I will now try to enumerate the problems and difficulties that his catastrophic biography opens.

The first question is about identity shifts. I have in mind assimilation, social mobility attained through learning; attraction to emancipatory leftist ideologies. Upheavals, wars, revolutions, migrations required a certain plasticity. All these phenomena often led to a breaking of family continuity, renouncing of cultural heritage, a kind of disloyalty to the preceding generations—certainly a preamble to the postwar intergenerational silence.

Members of these generations would not fit into a one-word description. Born in Cracow, Weissberg did not receive an American immigration visa during the war because the Polish quota was full. Yet he was not Polish: he is usually described as Austrian, or Jewish-Austrian, Polish-Austrian or Polish-Jewish, or simply Jewish, though this is clearly insufficient. At various times he held legitimate citizenships of Austria,

Germany, Poland, and France. During the war, he had a series of other identity cards and documents, most, if not all, of them false. He was brought up in a religious Jewish family, became an atheist, socialist, then communist, active anti-communist, democrat. Besides being a physicist, he was an engineer, businessman, writer, political activist (and gambler). None of these nouns would he consider sufficient to describe himself.

Perhaps his identity would be better defined by territorial description, by geography? The map of his peregrinations covered the area in which the two generations I am interested in lived and moved. It is the Atlantic world, a larger Europe including Turkey, a territory without fixed borders that puts in question the concept of “space” or territory that my generation grew up with. Our space was national, defined by the state and political history of an ethnic nation. The Jewish and leftist spaces that Weissberg moved through were governed not by a principle of boundary but of mobility. He lived in Cracow, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Kharkov, Stockholm, London, Paris, not to mention smaller towns. His space was un-centered and un-unbound.

And this map was not only his own: he shared it with Arthur Koestler, the Polanyi family, physicists Landau, Jaffe, Weisselberg, Houtermans, and Weisskopf, the list goes on. I believe that these movements, travels, visits, displacements were as important to these people’s identities as their origin was. They were part of a culture created by routes—movement, not only roots—origin. “Routes not roots” is a quote from James Clifford who said that displacement is as constitutive to human identity as are roots. Where you go makes you who you are, not only where you were born. Dwelling is the basis of national life, and ethno-nationalism cares only about roots. Movement uproots you, makes one sub or trans-national (Clifford 1997, 3).¹

And that movement, although it looked chaotic, was not random. Governed of course by political and economic pressures, it was also shaped by friendships and solidarity. Weissberg, as I mentioned, was a member of an international brotherhood of physicists who were, like medieval artisans, traveling from master to master, from lab to lab. Between the two wars Gottingen, Leyden, Copenhagen, and New York were the places where these physicists met. Those who found themselves or remained in the West tried to help their colleagues in danger. That performance of friendship saved many a life but also lured people into dangerous places. Weissberg invited his physicist-friends to 1930s Russia. He barely survived his own stay there, but some of his friends did not.

After that catastrophe, friends turned into family. Among Weissberg’s friends were gifted physicists, artists, sociologists, writers, and politicians. But he was obviously worthy of interest himself. A brilliant man, with great knowledge of Marxism and passion for relentless dialectical discussions, he had a prodigious memory, a talent for energetic, non-flowery prose, for business, for the enjoyment of life. He loved chocolate,

big American cars, speedy driving, gambling, and showing off, especially to young women. In danger, he always acted: escaped from a prison, a camp, and a ghetto. One little story could indicate his bravery. In post-Uprising Warsaw, attempting to escape from a surrounded building, he approached a German officer and asked, in his Viennese accent, “And where am I to go?” The officer pointed to another street where other soldiers were and let him go. He turned that way (with his future wife) and hid in another building, thus saving both of them. He admired an active approach to reality, what he called “fitness for life.” Arthur Koestler named him “jack-in-the-box,” a person who always gets up after having been knocked down. He never gave up.

The story that made me remember his book for so many years was an example of his tenacity. In the Soviet prison he was interrogated with a method of conveyor: seated without sleep till he confessed. He withstood such interrogation for three weeks before he broke down and signed a false confession. He was sent to his cell to recuperate, and after a few days of rest, he revoked his confession. Next time he withstood two weeks of the same torture. He recuperated and revoked his confession. On the tenth day of his third interrogation, his officers gave up. He was not fit, they must have concluded, to be a witness at a public trial.

His life could serve as an illustration for a manual on the 20th-century European history. Yet we do not find him in any manual. He is a secondary character in the theater of history, rarely present in war diaries or documentation. I think, though, that there is a great deal of knowledge one can gather from the second-tier lives. But their distance from the limelight promotes their invisibility. We have here double obscurity—in the outside sources and in the obfuscation by the actor himself. He has been hiding, though hiding in plain sight—he was everywhere, mobile, and active. As I already mentioned, he wrote only one letter (Letter) about his war experiences, and here too, he obscured many issues. He did what many war survivors did: he said some things that were true, some that were not, and passed over the rest.

So far, I did not find any credible challenge to his Russian book, but the stories he told about his wartimes and he wrote in his postwar Letter are liable to be challenged. He wrote that he fought in both Warsaw uprisings; he supplied money and arms for them, and in general, supported the underground. His fighting in the uprisings is unlikely (he was not in the Warsaw Ghetto, and, according to one reliable interview—Ewa Skrzypczak—he spent the Warsaw Uprising inside an apartment on Smolna street number 8). His contact with the underground is much more likely, especially through his future wife, Zofia Cybulska whose name he took after the war, but seemed to have been a very superficial one. The identity of his wartime love—whom he calls in his Letter “the love of his life”—was hard to identify, for he changed details of her situation.

This kind of obfuscation was rather common: people led new lives with new spouses; the past had to be accessed with utmost care. Weissberg liked to talk about wartimes and to tell exciting stories about himself, and that too, was not rare. His Viennese friend, Ella Lingens, wrote: "He told one person one and another person another thing [...] Gaping holes remain in his biography" (Lingens 1993, 348). At least four witnesses (Skrzypczak, both Zagórkis, Viki) said he told them he escaped from the death camp Majdanek (while he did escape from a labor camp in Kawęcin, this is a great difference). His anecdotes about himself were probably offered in an adventure-like style of narration, judging by what a very eminent physicist Victor Weisskopf remembered.

[W]eissberg was an indestructible man. The Nazis shipped him off to one of their extermination camps in Poland, but on the way, the truck in which he was being transported broke down. He jumped off and disappeared into the woods, dodging the guards' bullets. After wandering among the trees for some time, he stumbled into a camp of Polish partisans. A certain Countess Cybulski, whose husband disappeared in the West, was a member. Alex married the countess and soon became the leader of the group. His exploits in the underground had an almost miraculous quality, and his life took on the characteristics of a movie or a popular novel. He traveled several times to Switzerland in order to get weapons for the underground. He was in the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising. The Nazis never succeeded in recapturing him. (Weisskopf 1991, 103–104)

The funny, affectionate but ironic tone of these fantastical stories is probably due to the fact that Weisskopf was a school classmate of our hero, but he claimed to have heard them from Weissberg himself while visiting him in Paris. For Weisskopf, Alex's biography could take the form of a sword-and-cape story: travels, prisons, escapes, verbal duels with persecutors, and conspiracy. Or of a thriller, turned later into a film noir, or a picaresque novel.

But how to frame, in what genre to tell the story of exploiting Germans' corruption? Ella Lingens reported what she heard from Alex about the way he made money in Kraków ghetto. He said he founded with a Viennese friend and her husband a brush workshop that was to provide Jewish workers with good papers and supply the Germans with cleaning tools.² A corrupt German *Unteroffizier* concocted a plan in which gigantic orders of brushes and other objects were commissioned for the *Wehrmacht*. They were paid but never delivered because of the fictional attacks by partisans on the trains transporting them. In that way, Weissberg "was able to amass a considerable fortune within a few months that he invested in diamonds and jewelry. Collaboration?" she

asks. Her answer is negative, but “he knew how easily outsiders could misconstrue his behavior, and hence did not tell everybody about it” (Lingens 1993, 349–350). She also mentions that the *Gestapo* made an offer to Weissberg to infiltrate communist underground. This, she writes, was one of the reasons he wanted to escape from Cracow. But she did not know his life in Cracow; she reported what she was told by him.

Weissberg’s wartime role or roles cannot be understood until some more information will be unearthed. Yet I am worried I will find some aspects of his life that would humiliate him. He did write in his Letter that he made a lot of money in the ghetto of Cracow—we know from many sources that throughout the war he had money, and the story he told Ella Lingens sounds convincing. In the same letter, he stated that he “founded factories, organized cover-up companies, broke all laws of the Germans, bribed them and cheated them.” Ella Lingens wrote that he was not proud of his exploits as a businessman—that liked to think about himself as a political man; this would be one of the reasons he did not like to talk about his financial success(es) during the war. “Bribing and cheating” did not measure up to quarreling about Marxism in his Soviet prison cell.

In the USSR, he was arrested with many other people: he was not singled out as a Jew. In the occupied Poland, he was a hunted man, and that involved multiple humiliations. Fear is humiliating and difficult to put in an autobiographical account. Having to hide one’s origin was often the source of shame, the shame of being Jewish. While he had to hide, he was not one to deny his Jewishness. His second book, a 1958 first-person narration dictated to him, he said, by Joel Brand, is a story of the Hungarian Jewish self-defense committee that unsuccessfully negotiated with Adolf Eichmann the exchange of war equipment for the lives of Hungarian Jews. In this book, Weissberg comments that, for the Jews, fighting with arms or going to their death were worse options than negotiating with Nazis. It is probably the allusion to his own stance during the war, his activist, problem-solving attitude to enslavement and persecution.

Another problem was his chosen political affiliations. In his book, *The Accused* Weissberg frequently refers to the Holodomor, the man-made famine he lived through in the Ukraine, but there is no sign he opposed it while he was there. He wrote about raising his hand during party meetings to condemn an innocent colleague, and about humiliating himself in front of a coworker who heard his careless doubts if Trotskyites could be terrorists. After the war he not only wrote *The Accused*, but he also acted within the Congress for Cultural Freedom and was an important witness in the anti-Stalinist trial of David Rousset vs. Les Lettres Littéraires.

But while he did face his communist past, his wartime was left unwritten about. And this is another problem with writing catastrophic biographies: the fragmentary nature and unreliability of autobiographical

accounts. To hide, to impersonate, means living in several realities, assuming several personae. When the conditions change, the slate cannot be totally cleared. There were heroic people who kept silent about their past; there were heroic people who invented for themselves even more heroic deeds; and there were those who told a lot of heroic stories though they were all fiction. There were people who ritualistically repeated the same narration, and those who changed things every time they spoke. And this is not a general statement on my part: I am talking about very concrete people, whose names and stories you may know. There were things that were hidden, there were things that were distorted, there were topics constantly deflected. The past deeds are what I am grasping for.

So why am I thinking about Weissberg? What do I hope to see behind the curtain? Am I acting to fulfill a certain kind of duty toward the dead who are haunting our present, a duty of Antigone? Or am I worried about those who come after us, about our own intergenerational transmission? Is it perhaps an effort to reconnect the broken thread of history? But do we suffer from not enough knowledge of history or too much of it?

Perhaps it is an obsession that needs to be put aside. After all, these were not our lives. And in a dictatorship lives are always hidden. Peter Esterhazy once said that dictatorships force one to assume the existence of parallel worlds, and therefore to live in a poetic manner.³ So, to finish I have to use the words of Czesław Miłosz, who, as usual, formulated it in the best possible way. In his poem *Ars Poetica* he says something that is parallel to the “living in a poetic manner” of Esterhazy’s quote.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

(Miłosz 2001, 240)

Notes

- 1 “Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes. But what would happen ... if travel were untethered and seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension [...] Cultural centers, discrete regions, and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things.” (Clifford 1997, 3)
- 2 They were Ella Meder Rosdolsky and her husband, Roman Rosdolsky, legal residents of Cracow and therefore able to found a firm, which the Jewish Weissberg could not do in his name.
- 3 Peter Esterhazy, interview with Kellan Cummings (Esterhazy 2020).

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Part I

The Afterlife of Holocaust Objects and Spaces



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3 Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer

Several years ago we were scheduled to speak at the Wiener Library in London about Czernowitz—a sizeable Eastern European city that had been the capital of a province of the Austrian Habsburg Empire and that had once contained a large German-speaking and highly assimilated Jewish population. We had recently co-authored a book, *Ghost of Home*, about the afterlife of this city in Jewish memory (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010). Some weeks before the talk, we had received a package from a Dr. Harry Jarvis from Bournemouth, England, who was planning to attend. It contained a small sampling of articles he had written about Czernowitz for a Jewish genealogical magazine. Then in his late eighties, Dr. Jarvis was quite eager to speak with us: he was reading our book, he wrote us, and wanted to show us a few things that were important to him.

When we subsequently met Dr. Jarvis and heard his account of the frustrations he had experienced when he tried to convey his family's wartime story to various individuals and institutions, we began to understand his eagerness to find willing listeners. Dr. Jarvis (whose original name had been Jaslowitz) was born and grew up in Cernăuți (as Czernowitz was renamed when it came under Romanian rule) but left in the 1930s during a high point of Romanian antisemitic activity, and went to study medicine in England. His parents and ten-year-old sister Sonja stayed behind (see Figure 3.1). In the course of massive campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” of Jews carried out by fascist Romanian authorities, his father, mother, and sister Sonja were deported eastward in 1942 to a region that came to be known as Transnistria. Fortunately, however, the three did manage to survive Transnistria's brutal ghettos and concentration camps, and, after being liberated by the Soviet army in 1944, they were repatriated to the Romanian capital, Bucharest. There, not long afterward, Harry's father died from tuberculosis he had contracted in a Transnistrian concentration camp, and Sonja was killed—ironically, a “collateral damage” victim of shrapnel from Allied bombs intended for a German-controlled oil installation near the Romanian capital. She had just turned 17.



Figure 3.1 Sonja Jaslowitz with her parents in Cernăuți, ca. 1938 (Courtesy Dr. Harry Jarvis).

After the war ended, Jarvis's distressed mother joined her son in London. She brought along a number of family documents she had managed to safeguard, including a folder of poems written by her young daughter while in Transnistria. Some were illustrated with drawings that Sonja had made shortly before her death.

Perceiving the testimonial and historical importance of these writings, as well as their potential literary and artistic interest, Harry Jarvis traveled to Israel in the early 1950s to donate them to the newly established Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem. He hoped that this museum might make these materials public so that Sonja Jaslowitz would be acknowledged and memorialized, her legacy ensured. More generally, he had also wanted his donation to help broaden and factually enhance the then scant knowledge about Transnistria and the Romanian genocide of Jews.

Neither of these things happened. Although his bequest was accepted, Sonja Jaslowitz's Transnistria writings received no noticeable attention by Yad Vashem officials and, even today, cannot be found among holdings the museum lists on its website index. Frustrated by this inattention, Harry Jarvis nonetheless did not give up and, until his recent death, continued to donate documents, articles, and books related to Czernowitz and Transnistria and the experience of Jews there that he had collected over the years to other institutional archives, many equally uninformed about this distinctive history of genocide and survival.

It was in this spirit that Jarvis approached us, anxious about what would happen to the weighty legacy that had been transmitted to him—a legacy, he worried, he would only be able to sustain for a brief time longer. Raised in Britain, far removed from this family history, his children had little interest in this past, and he thus felt the need to reach us as representatives of a postgeneration who might be interested in receiving, understanding, and transmitting a history that, he feared, might die with him. He especially wanted someone with a background in literature to have Sonja's poems—to “do with them as you wish.” Even if they were never published, he hoped they would at least be properly read.

Harry Jarvis's gift of Sonja Jaslowitz's poems to us, and his directive to do with them “as you wish”—a charge which, of course, also indicated that he wanted us to do something—left us both excited but also with some amount of unease. Those of us in the postgenerations who are descendants of traumatic genocidal histories often inherit such testimonial objects—small or large, ordinary or remarkable—and we have to decide how to respond to their demands (Hirsch and Spitzer 2012).

The thin folder Harry Jarvis gave us contained only a small corpus of works produced by a very young girl. But they are quite remarkable. Written in German, Romanian, and French, and composed in the ghettos and camps of Transnistria (and then, no doubt, typed and illustrated in Bucharest after her liberation), they evoke the daily life of Jewish deportees and slave laborers in graphic detail. But some are also marked by humor and irony, and they reflect a deep longing for home, all without losing a persistent sense of hope in the future.

Admittedly, the poetic form in which this testimony came to us generated a fantasy on our part, both of “discovering” a talented unknown poet and her small oeuvre, and of being able to call attention to improbable acts of creative resistance by someone whose life was so violently cut short. Sonja Jaslowitz, we thought, might be another Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger—the remarkable young poet, a distant cousin of Paul Celan, who died of typhus at the age of 18 in Mikhailovka, the German forced labor camp near the east bank of the Bug River to which she had been moved from Transnistria.

A volume of 57 poems, written by Meerbaum-Eisinger before her deportation from Cernăuți, has now been published both in German, their original language of composition, and in English translation, and her poetic creations, broadly anthologized in recent years, have received praise as works of a “second Anne Frank” (Meerbaum-Eisinger 2005 and 2008). Indeed, after decades in obscurity, Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger has become an international icon: a plaque was installed in 2004 on her former house; her poems have been set to music and recorded by The World Quintet; her life has been the subject of three plays in Germany; a German youth literary prize has been named after her; many poems have been written to her by German schoolchildren as part of an ongoing

curricular “Project Selma;” and, of course, as a clear instance of the kind of processes that the next section of this book analyzes as transmedial dynamics, she has a Facebook page and numerous Facebook friends.¹

Is this what we might wish for Sonja Jaslowitz, we wondered? The hyperbolic attention that Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger and her poetry now receive is not unusual in postmemorial generations, but would such attention be an appropriate response to Sonja Jaslowitz’s poems in the context of the tragic curtailment of her life story, and to the anonymity to which she had been relegated for so long? What postmemorial response might do justice to the vulnerable lives and imaginative production of young artists like Sonja and Selma—or, indeed, of anyone who, like them, experienced circumstances of such traumatic extremity? The affects, anxieties, and needs that Harry Jarvis transmitted to us, along with the folder of his sister’s poems, were undoubtedly compounded by the vast geopolitical changes that have taken place in the many years since the end of World War Two. National borders have shifted, political orientations have realigned, and particular histories, like Transnistaria’s, have been contested, erased, and forgotten. How can postgenerations even begin to think about calibrating the search for acknowledgment and memorialization of people like Jarvis, who incurred an immeasurable loss of loved ones in the killing fields and wakes of the Holocaust, against the very limited possibilities of redress and reparation that exist after decades of neglect and oblivion?

Reparative Approaches

In its most common usage, *reparation* is an ethico-political and legal concept—a public acknowledgment of injury by a state or state-connected institution, and a compensatory settlement that often, but not always, involves a monetary award (Torpey 2003; Torpey 2006). But reparation (or repair) is also a key concept in psychoanalysis, particularly in object relations theory inspired by Melanie Klein’s revisions of Freud and her pioneering practical and theoretical work in infant and child psychology. In Klein’s early writings in the 1920s, she brought both these dimensions of reparation to light, referring to the massive damage done, and the economic needs created, by the First World War. By the mid-1930s, however, on the basis of her extensive psychological analysis of infants, she employed the term *reparation* primarily to describe an intrapsychic process of restoration enabling both a healthy infant (and, by extension, adult) intellectual and psychological development and a secure grasp of reality.² (Klein 1975, 306–343) It specifically derives from the infant’s ambivalent relationship to the mother: from her sense of the mother as nurturing love object *and* as the not-always-present or available hostile object, tormenting the infant with hunger and privation, thus eliciting bouts of mistrust, indignant rage, and fantasies of aggression and injury.

Reparation, in the aftermath of these destructive and hateful fantasized impulses, enables the infant to restore the mother to a loved, wholesome, and nourishing state. It reflects, in Klein's words, "a profound urge to make sacrifices, in order to help and to put right loved people who in fantasy have been harmed or destroyed" (Klein 1975, 311). This reparative script, Klein further argued, is fundamentally connected to a second intrapsychic process—mourning—one enabling the infant "to work over in its mind a sense of loss entailed in the mother's actual imperfections" (Likierman 2001, 107). Indeed, mourning is in itself reparative—a means of attempting to recover or restore the object (*wiederherstellen*) and to make it good again (*wiedergutmachen*). It is a process that *must* be undertaken, Klein argues, even though it can never be adequate to the injury or the loss. The fantasy of repairing a lost or damaged object is thus complicated by messy, complex, uncontrollable, and contradictory feelings: by guilt, inadequacy, and frustration; by anger, aggression, and projection; and, most troublingly, by ambivalence and the inability to tolerate it. In psychoanalytic terms, mourning and repair are thus not only processes of working through: they inevitably also involve some amount of acting out (Klein 1975, 344–369).

Clearly, Klein's suggestive formulations about injury and the psychological need for repair and mourning have significantly inflected political and legal claims for reparation. Since Second World War, for example, as historian Lynn Hunt has argued, human rights discourses have presented such claims on the basis of "emotional appeal(s)" stemming from psychic reparative needs at least as often as those buttressed by "reason"—her abbreviated characterization of more conventionally employed evidentiary formulations (Hunt 2007, 26).

But Kleinian developmental psychology also allows us to appreciate the psychic complexities of what it means to survive or to inherit, however indirectly, traumatic events that fail to be recognized and worked through in a *longue durée* of many decades—what it means, in other words, to live with the dead. What if there is no official body—neither a state nor other national or transnational institution—to recognize or be accountable for political and legal claims? What if denial and obliviousness continue? How can postgenerations mourn? And without the possibility of mourning, how can they even begin to seek repair?

The legal scholar Martha Minow provides one suggestive response. In her book *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, she argues that direct victims and survivors of mass violence and historical trauma may be able to begin to address their personal reparative needs by being provided with, first, a venue to "tell [their] story and be heard without interruption of skepticism," and, second, a "commitment to produce a coherent, if complex, narrative about the entire nation's trauma, and the multiple sources and expressions of its violence" (Minow 1999, 58). In combination, these two reinforce one another: each individual story helps to

shape a larger history by providing it with detail, depth, and nuance, and, in turn, each story is enhanced and given broader meaning through its contextualization within a larger historical matrix. Postgenerations haunted by stories that have not been worked through still find that they owe the victims this act of attentive listening, as well as this work of historical repair.

In the spirit of such a modest act of historical and, in this case also literary, redress, the fragmentary story of Sonja Jaslowitz and the little-known history of Transnistria's camps and ghettos need to be told together—along with a reading, translation, and publication of Sonja's poems, as well as a reflection on what permitted them to be created. Certainly, a fuller historical account of the conditions in which they were created might influence and, perhaps, enhance how we read them: their testimonial value trumping their literary shortcomings. But it is important to keep in mind that Sonja Jaslowitz's poems are the output of a very young girl whose formal schooling ended at age 12 or 13. It is part of a genre of adolescent writing produced, like the writings and drawings of other children and adolescents in ghettos and camps, under extreme duress. Had Sonja lived and gone on to write more poetry, she might have been embarrassed to be identified with what would then have been her juvenilia.

The psychic complexities of the work of reparation, suggested by Melanie Klein, should enjoin those of us in the postgeneration to examine our own motives and stakes, our own needs and desires as we attempt to tell this history and claim an unclaimed legacy. They should warn about the temptation to project our fears and fantasies of vulnerability and our needs for testimonial sincerity and authenticity on children's expressions.³ They should warn, especially, about the pitfalls that confront any attempted act of historical and literary repair where political and legal acknowledgment and reckoning are largely absent.

And yet such an approach to repair—through small acts attuned to small claims—offers a different set of openings in memory studies: it can respond to the vulnerability of personal and familial archives that come to light in chance encounters such as our brief meeting with Harry Jarvis. And it can mobilize these archives to enliven and personalize forgotten histories of places like Transnistria. It might thus take us out of the national and even the transnational frames in which cultural memory has been studied, focusing on local histories and their movement and import, their connections to other small stories, across space and time.

The Forgotten Cemetery

The belatedness of the “discovery” of Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, and Harry Jarvis's repeated efforts to gain recognition for his sister Sonja's poetry—each fueled by powerful emotional needs—can, in part, be

accounted for circumstantially, by the peculiarities associated with the Romanian displacement and genocide of the Jews (Carp 1946).⁴ It can be explained by the fact that this history remains largely unincorporated within the paradigm of deportation, ghettoization, and extermination that has shaped Holocaust studies.

Some of the reasons for Romania's virtual omission from this transnational master narrative have to do with the predominant conceptualizations of the Holocaust—impressions that for the most part have been shaped by a focus on crimes associated with German Nazism and on Nazi-German established ghettos and concentration/extermination camps in central Europe and in occupied Poland. Auschwitz, Treblinka, and the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos were—and still largely remain—the principal defining shadows of genocidal evil. This broad understanding influenced even officials of major Holocaust memorials and research institutions. An example: before the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum belatedly, in 1998, agreed to recognize Transnistria as one of the killing fields on the wall of its Hall of Remembrance, the Museum's Director, Walter Reich, rationalized previous Museum refusals to do this by saying: "We cannot put up the name of every little *shtetl*" (Gold 2011). His erroneous categorization of Transnistria as a *shtetl* (a small town or village) reflects the widespread public and academic ignorance about this large Romanian-administered region where, over a period of three years, nearly 300,000 Jews and Roma perished.⁵

But events within Romania during the final months of the Second World War and in the ensuing Cold War era under communism also explain its absence from larger Holocaust histories. Fascist Romania had been Nazi Germany's staunchest ally at the outbreak of the Second World War and during the first three years of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of Romanian soldiers fought alongside German troops—more men than all other German allies combined. Romanians, however, also suffered extensive military and economic casualties in this alliance: some 370,000 Romanian soldiers were killed in battle or were missing in action; tens of thousands were wounded. Many in the country became increasingly angry and disillusioned with their leaders, and opponents of the ruling fascists became more daring. In late August 1944, eight months before the end of the Second World War in Europe, a coup headed by Romania's King Michael and supported by communists and disaffected military officers overthrew the regime headed by Marshal Ion Antonescu and switched Romania's support from the Axis to the Allied-Soviet side (Axworthy et al. 1995; Brucan 1993).

When the war ended, Romanian rule swung increasingly to the Left. Two Romanian People's Tribunals (in Bucharest and Cluj) were established to try suspected war criminals and perpetrators of atrocities. During the Bucharest Tribunals, prosecutorial documents were presented on the deportation of Jews to Transnistria, and transcripts of oral

testimonies from the accused—though not from surviving victims—were also collected. But, unlike the postwar International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg or the SS trials that were held subsequent to the Nazi defeat, these testimonial materials were not widely disseminated and were largely withdrawn from access.⁶ Indeed, as was argued in the 2005 *Final Report* of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, the People's Tribunals reflected a bitter end-of-war power struggle within Romania “between the so-called nationalist camp and [a] communist camp supported by the Soviet army” (Final Report 2005, 312–313).⁷ Many in Romania “saw the trials as an anti-national act, an attempt by foreigners and their local aides to take their revenge against Romanians.” By highlighting “outsiders” and “retribution” as elements influencing their procedures, Romanian nationalists thus delegitimized the Tribunals, and the nature, extent, and intensity of fascist-era crimes committed by Romanians were not incorporated into Romania's collective self-awareness (Final Report 2005, 314–315, 319).

A majority of sentences pronounced by the Tribunals were commuted to lesser punishments within a short time, and almost all convicted perpetrators were released under amnesty offerings in the 1950s and early 1960s. Most importantly, after the war, Transnistria itself ceased to exist as a discrete Romanian-ruled political entity with defined boundaries, and the region was, once again, submerged into the Ukrainian part of the Soviet Union. Since it was no longer part of Romania, the issue of responsibility for what had happened there in the early 1940s faded from the consciousness of non-victimized Romanians. Nonetheless, for many of the Jewish and non-Jewish survivors of Romanian displacement and horrific violence, as well as for their relatives and descendants, the sufferings of the war years remained open wounds. The combined unwillingness of Romanians to bring the fuller story of Transnistria to light and the minimizing of punishment for convicted perpetrators were bitter signals to them that neither historical accounting nor justice had in any sense been served.

In 2003, responding to an international outcry about his government's claim that “within the borders of Romania between 1940 and 1945 there was no Holocaust,” Romanian President Ion Iliescu agreed to convene an international commission chaired by Elie Wiesel to examine the country's wartime history. That International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania released a report in November 2004 (the Final Report was published in 2005) indisputably evidencing Romanian culpability. President Iliescu, eager to enhance his country's admission to the European Union, then reversed his earlier negationism and praised the commission's findings. But, while declaring that “the young generations need to know and understand the entire truth” about this “dark chapter in our country's history,” he did little to initiate the necessary changes in the

educational curriculum to acknowledge Romania's involvement in Holocaust crimes (Iliescu 2004). Indeed, before leaving office at the end of 2004, Iliescu conferred a Romanian State Prize for Faithful Service on Gheorghe Buzatu, a Holocaust-denier, and he awarded the Order of Romania, the state's highest decoration, to Corneliu Vadim Tudor, leader of the ultra-Right Romania Mare Party, and a virulent antisemite. More recently, however, under presidents Traian Basescu and Klaus Iohannis, a Holocaust memorial was built in the nation's capital, Bucharest, and a state-sponsored Institute for Holocaust Studies was established there as well. In several Romanian universities, moreover, new Jewish history and Holocaust courses do now include consideration of Romania's wartime involvement in the persecution, deportation, and mass murder of Jews, Roma, and others. But, public education at grammar and high school level still lags far behind the universities in this regard, and throughout the country, Holocaust denial and lack of acknowledgment of Romania's perpetration remains widespread (Weinbaum 2006).

What is more, the sites of the camps and ghettos in the area of the former Transnistria itself have remained largely unacknowledged and unmarked. Apart from larger towns like Moghilev and Bershad, Jewish cemeteries were and continue to be neglected, mass graves remain unidentified, and commemorative signs are few. As a result, present-day local inhabitants are remarkably ignorant of the region's violent and murderous history, and returnee survivors and their descendants rarely find the sites of camps and ghettos or the mass graves they come there to seek. All of these omissions magnify affect and need, even as they minimize the possibilities of political and legal reparation at such a vast temporal removal.

To be sure, some information about the Romanian Holocaust did emerge briefly in the aftermath of the war from unofficial accounts by witnesses and survivors. In 1963, for example, informed by some of these testimonies, Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, singled out the Romanian Holocaust for its "sheer butchery" (Arendt 1992, 191–192). But the bulk of archived documentary information about the Holocaust in Romania only became publicly accessible after December 1989 and the subsequent opening of East European archives, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The possibility of accessing these archival resources has enabled a corrective broadening of the long-existing perception of the German-Polish-centered core boundaries and reach of the Holocaust. A new multi-volume encyclopedia being published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is incorporating materials from previously closed Soviet and East German archives that vastly expand the number of Nazi and Fascist camps and ghettos during the war to 42,500 (including hundreds in Greater Romania)—an immense enlargement of the map of perpetration that will certainly bring about an

important shift in public consciousness.⁸ But even within this expanded Holocaust history, Transnistria's role is still very much in development.⁹

Transnistria: The Dumping Ground

In late August of 1941, as a reward for Romania's material support and military alliance with Nazi Germany in the war against the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler signed an agreement with his counterpart *Führer*, the *Conducător* Marshal Ion Antonescu, that gave Romania control of a territory of nearly 65,000 square kilometers between the Dniester and the Bug River west-to-east, and the Black Sea and Lyadova River, south-to-north. Being "across the Dniester [trans Nistru]" lent the territory its name: Transnistria (Ancel 2003, vol. I, 17–20; see Figure 3.2).¹⁰ The Tighina Agreement permitted the German military to set up naval and air bases in this territory, and to continue to be allowed to enter it "to perform special jobs"—this, in the aftermath of the wave of genocidal "cleansing" operations in which nearly one-third of the area's native Jewish population of approximately 300,000 were murdered by the Einsatzgruppe D, an SS mobile death squad, and by members of the German Eleventh and Romanian Third and Fourth Armies during the initial weeks following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union (Final Report 2005, 11–13; Ancel 2003, vol. I, 19–20).

The agreement left unstated that some of the "special jobs" performed by the German military would eventually be undertaken in conjunction with the privately-owned Todt and August Dohrman strategic road and bridge construction companies: periodic raids across the Bug River from German-occupied Ukraine to "recruit" surviving Jews for forced labor. But Romanian officials were clearly unfazed by these German intrusions into Transnistria—indeed, they welcomed them—because they fit well into Marshal Antonescu's vision for the future of this territory: to keep it for the long term and incorporate it as a new province of a Greater Romanian Empire into which ethnic Romanians would be introduced as permanent settlers after the Axis powers defeated the Soviet Union and removed all Jewish and Roma inhabitants from the region. In practice, however, these German military raids, while certainly effective in their deadly intent, were not frequent or large enough to eliminate *all* Jews from the province, especially after the decision on the part of Romanian authorities to send hundreds of thousands of *new* Jewish deportees to Transnistria from the country's newly re-acquired provinces, Bessarabia and the Northern Bukowina (Ancel 2003, vol. I, 17–19; Ancel 1988, 187–232).

Initially, underlying these large-scale deportations was the assumption that Jews surviving their brutal displacements would eventually be transferred out of Romanian territory altogether, across the Bug River into German-controlled Ukraine, where they would be subjected to "special treatment," the Nazi euphemism for annihilation.¹¹ Transnistria, in this

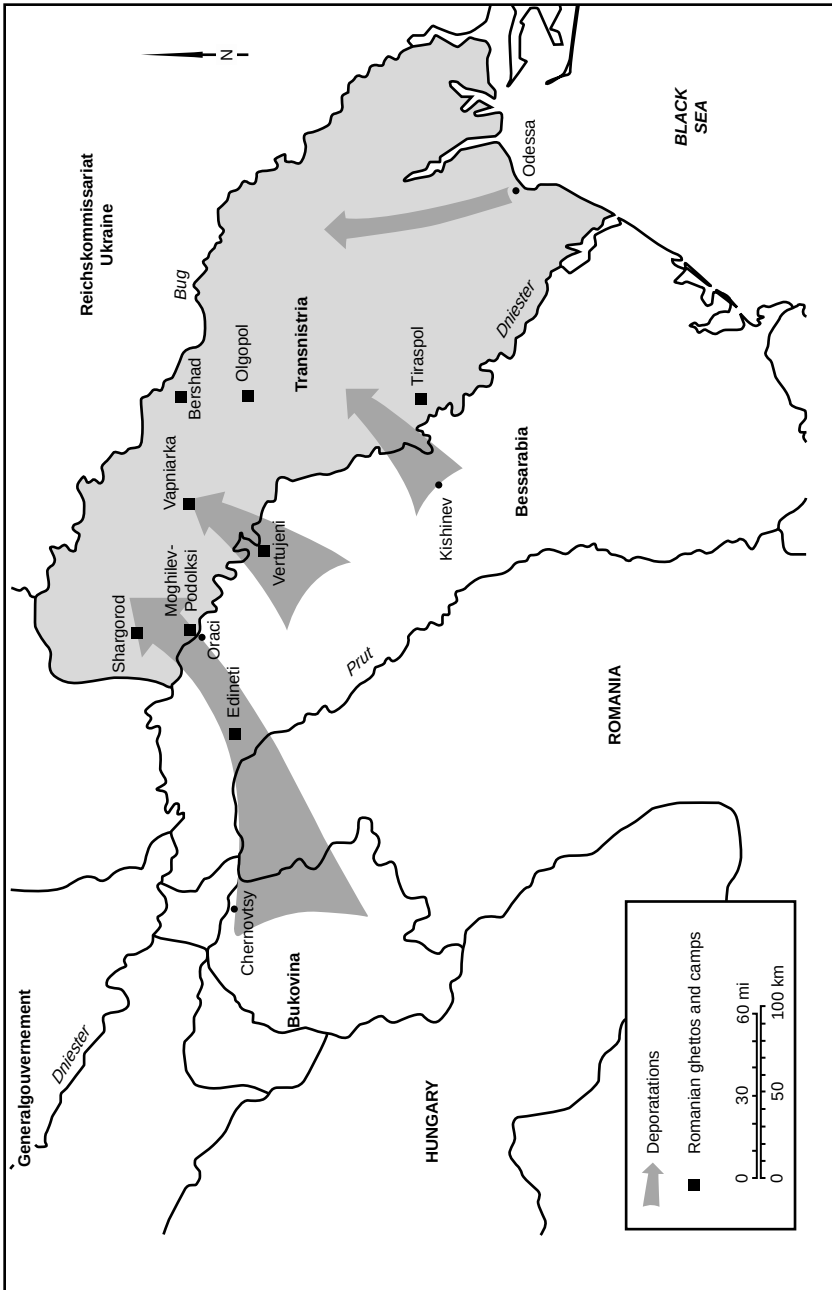


Figure 3.2 Romania with Transnistria, 1941-1942 (Based on maps from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

plan, was to be nothing more than a large-scale temporary “holding” or “containment” place for deported Jews—a “dumping ground.”

To await the mass transfer of Jews across the Bug River—an event that, according to the Tighina Agreement, could take place only “following the completion of military operations”¹²—Romanian authorities established dozens of makeshift ghettos and scores of small concentration camps throughout Transnistria. Guarded by Romanian gendarmes and Ukrainian auxiliaries, and generally fenced-in with barbed wire, the camps were set up in abandoned and derelict buildings, barns, stables, and pig-sties on the outskirts of villages and kolkhozes (collective farms), while the ghettos were marked off in designated town streets and neighborhoods. All suffered from overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and the immense deprivation of food and potable water. They were exposed to bitterly cold temperatures—the winter of 1941–1942 being one of the coldest on record in Eastern Europe—and to illnesses and epidemics that resulted in mass fatalities.¹³

Unlike the Nazi camps in Germany, Austria, Latvia, Lithuania, occupied Poland, or near the eastern bank of the Bug in occupied Ukraine, which were organized and were generally operated as part of a centralized network and planned system, the Romanian camps were, for the most part, set up in a very improvisatory manner. Although identified with terms similar to those used in the Nazi network—“detention,” “internment,” “political,” “labor,” and even “death” camps—the camps were launched and administered haphazardly, without a strategic blueprint, so that the distinctions between the camps themselves were often greater than differences between them and some of the more restrictive Transnistrian ghettos like Shpikov and Tulchin (Golbert 2004, 218–221).

Killing methods also differed greatly from Nazi practices of extermination in Poland. Even the worst Transnistrian camps had no gas vans, gas chambers, or ovens. But their decentralized ways, for all their informality, were remarkably brutal. They included mass starvation, deprivation of water, forced marches and relocations, poisoning with food known to be toxic to humans, lack of shelter, exposure to freezing temperatures, and epidemic diseases—as well as mass shootings and incinerations (Carmelly, 1997; Shachan 1996; USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive).

Cariera de Piatră, the small concentration/labor camp in which Sonja Jaslowitz and her parents were imprisoned before their transfer to the Tiraspol ghetto and end-of-war repatriation to Bucharest, was located some 15 kilometers north of the Ladijin ghetto, on an elevated plateau a short ascent from the banks of the Bug. It had once been an active granite rock quarry that the Soviets, before the war, had turned into a punitive camp for criminals. After the Romanians acquired Cariera de Piatră, they initially used the ruins of that camp to literally dump hundreds of Jewish inmates who had been deported from Cernăuți’s

asylum for the mentally ill in the summer of 1942. Those among these unfortunate inmates who managed to remain alive did so by finding shelter in wrecked old guard and storage sheds that had partially been built into the rock, and by scrounging for whatever edibles they could find. They were joined on the upper plateau level of the Cariera by some 4,000 Jewish deportees from Bessarabia and Bukowina, including the Jaslowitzes, the mother and father of the poet Paul Celan, Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger with her parents, and the future psychoanalyst and co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Dori Laub, together with his mother. The inmates were told that this camp was a transit camp from which they would be transferred to work destinations elsewhere (“Klara and Dori L. Holocaust Testimony” 1986; Schultz and Timms 2009, 188, 194; Weissglas 1995, 31–39).

Although many of the Jews sent to Cariera de Piatră died there or in its vicinity—the remaining physically impaired and mentally disturbed inmates from the Cernăuți asylum were shot in late August 1942 by Ukrainian guards working for the Romanians—the camp did indeed serve as a transit point from which deportees were dispersed, for the most part to places like Mikhailovka, on the eastern side of the Bug River, that were run as slave labor supply camps by Nazi authorities for the strategic road companies that built roads and bridges for the German military. We only have sparse information about Sonja and her parents from this period of internment. We have no account of their everyday lives—of how they managed to shelter and feed themselves and survive. We do know that most of the prisoners were regularly marched down for forced agricultural work from the Cariera de Piatră plateau. Unlike many Cariera inmates, Sonja and her parents managed to avoid being selected for forced labor in German-controlled territory. Sonja’s poem *Heimweh* [Longing] conveys the intensity of her yearning for home and the darkness of her outlook at the time—a pessimism that she tried to dispel in her concluding lines.¹⁴

Longing

In this rocky landscape
My heart turns to stone
I am the banished one
Condemned to hurt and pain

In my heart a canyon
So deep and wide
An endless longing
For my distant home

When I think of home
Hot tears begin to flow
Longing rages within me
Draining my heart's blood

Chased from our homestead
From all we knew and loved
Heavy chains of exile
Drag me down
And yoke my courage to live

When my eyes gaze to the distance
I see it all
So heavy and gray
And oh—how fear does grip me
My heart expires—empty and dead

But far away in this gray distance—
A flickering redemption waves
A flame of hope lights up
Compelling us to strength

And with a powerful
Voice, it calls
Endure your cruel lot,
The darkest hour
Always precedes the dawn.¹⁵

Certainly, the fact that in spite of the horrors suffered, a sizeable minority of Jews, including the Jaslowitzes, managed to survive the Transnistrian ghettos and camps highlights the interstices that existed in the Romanian treatment of Jews during these years. The very qualities that defined the Romanians as disorganized, unsystematic, improvisatory, haphazard, and venal in contrast to the Germans also provided Jewish deportees and camp inmates some small possibilities to barter for food, to bribe for a favor, to communicate, and even to organize in order to resist and continue to live. This was especially true in the aftermath of the German defeat in Stalingrad in February 1943, the massive Romanian military casualties on the Eastern front, and the growing Romanian loss of confidence in Germany's invincibility. Some Romanian officials began to hedge their bets on the outcome of the war, and, not wanting to be punished as war criminals if the Allies won,

began to ease up somewhat in their treatment of Jews. By the Spring of 1943, it became easier for Jews in Transnistria to barter for food, to bribe for a favor, to communicate, and to organize. It even became possible for some to note events and feelings in journals, to write poetry, to compose camp songs, and to produce drawings and engravings—an art of witness that, though of greatly varying quality, survived to testify to their experience (Gall 1999). These remarkable works provide an expanded context in which to think about Sonja Jaslowitz and her poetic production.

The best-known visual artist working in Transnistria was Arnold Daghani, who later produced an important body of work in England. Daghani survived two years of internment in the deadly Mikhailovka camp by working as an artist for Nazi officers, but, secretly, he was also able to create a number of testimonial drawings and watercolors in Mikhailovka and in the Bershadt ghetto to which he and his wife eventually managed to escape not long before the Germans killed off all Jewish slave labor workers on their side of the Bug River. These images bear witness to conditions in the camp and ghetto and to individual prisoners.

In Vapniarka, a concentration camp the Romanians set up for alleged political “undesirables” (the majority of them Jewish), prisoners participated in multiple cultural activities, among them a rich set of drawings and watercolors testifying to the disease that killed a great number of the camp’s inmate population. Romanian authorities in Vapniarka fed the prisoners a daily meal of soup containing toxic chickling peas, *lathyrus sativus*, that attacked the central nervous system, leading to paralysis, kidney failure, and an eventual agonizing death (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010, 198–231). Vapniarka’s artists have left an invaluable visual record of the progress of this disease, the toll it took, and the longing for survival that motivated the prisoners. Like Sonja Jaslowitz, they often calibrated horror with small gestures of hope.

Small Acts

The artistic works that were produced in Transnistria—most of them still absent from the canon of Holocaust art and literature—invite us to think about how historical narratives inflected by artistic accounts can become modes of repair. The visual art works, the surviving fragments of memoirs jotted down on site, the poems composed by Sonja Jaslowitz and other writers in camps and ghettos—all these call for particular practices of reading, looking, and listening. Readings that resist heroization or redemption: small readings, practiced in a minor key and in a spirit of solidarity. These forms of attunement constitute an expanded notion of responsibility—not as accountability but, simply, as the ability to respond (Minow 1992–1993, 1442–1445; Minow 1999, 118–147).

How, at a generational remove and such geographic distance, can we bring this spirit to Sonja Jaslowitz's poems? We can, of course, show and read them as we are doing here, in our effort to connect small, individual stories to a larger group and national history. We can try to enliven the stories of young artists like Sonja Jaslowitz against the backdrop of a history composed of shocking numbers and inassimilable details. We can try to preserve some of the texture of her life, the timber of her voice, the sharpness of her humor, on the basis of what remains—some photos and drawings, a few lines of her verse. But what more can we do? Should we try to fill in the blanks, imagine what we cannot know, or shall we call attention to the gaps, underscoring the incommensurability of the desire for redress and the impossibility of achieving it? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading" might be helpful in an attempt to "claim" legacies such as Sonja Jaslowitz's. As opposed to paranoid reading, which anticipates an ending that is already predetermined, reparative reading is open to surprises, contingencies, alternative views. Through this perspective, one might, in Sedgwick's terms, "entertain ... the possibility ... that the past ... could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 146). How would a reparative reading of Sonja Jaslowitz's poems permit us such a possibility?

All of Sonja Jaslowitz's surviving poems were composed during her internment in Transnistria, first in Cariera de Piatră and later in the Tiraspol ghetto. Sonja may have written poems before she was deported, but none of them have been found. The multiple linguistic registers she used (albeit with unequal mastery)—German, Romanian, and French (or "Franco-Romanian")—tell us a great deal about the rich multicultural landscape of her upbringing and incarceration among Czernowitz Jews. They reflect one of the ways she attempted to perpetuate that landscape, even as it and its inhabitants were being destroyed. But their multicultural and multilinguistic makeup, and their failure to fit a continuous national literary tradition, also make it more difficult for poems like hers to be published and recognized. It is significant that, so far, we have succeeded in placing some of her poems in French translation in a special issue of the *Revue de l'histoire de la Shoah* devoted to Transnistria ("L' Horreur oubliée," 2011). Several of her German poems and a German translation of several Romanian ones have just appeared in an Austrian publication tellingly named *Zwischenwelt* (Ausleitner and Windsperger 2013, 13–17). Given Romania's continuing reluctance to take responsibility for the murders committed in Transnistria, her Romanian-language poems, particularly, are not likely to find a ready readership and ready publication opportunities in that country today, although we are beginning to develop some leads there as well.

Jaslowitz's poems are mostly rhymed, reflecting the forms typical of the poetry popular and produced in interwar Cernăuți, poetry she would have heard at home and learned in school.¹⁶ But the linguistic differences



Figure 3.3 The Little Vapniarka Artists Book (1943), made in honor of Dr. Arthur Kessler, an inmate who exposed the toxic *Lathyrus sativus* in the soup fed to the prisoners. (Courtesy David Kessler. Photo by Leo Spitzer.)

in them are significant. A few of them, nostalgic ones that reveal her strong longing for home, as well as her more allusive, less explicitly referential creations, are in German, as we saw in her poem *Heimweh* [Longing]. But most of Jaslowitz's testimonial poems documenting camp and ghetto existence are written in Romanian. Romanian was the official language of Transnistria's camp and ghetto system, and, for Sonja Jaslowitz, it seems to have been the more unambiguous language of witness and communication with fellow prisoners. While the German poems describe a natural landscape suffused with the affects of oppression and dehumanization, the Romanian ones draw portraits of inmates and guards, complain about punishments, and finely observe and enact small moments of optimism and of despair. A reading that preserves these multilingual resonances would also preclude publication in any one language.

Song of Departure

Stop your dreaming, yeah yeah yeah
Get leaving out of your head

You hoped, you suffered, you agonized
You packed everything up—in vain

Take some warm clothes, yeah yeah yeah
Stitch the torn ones
Fix them up
It will rain it will be bleak

And you should pray that at Christmastime
The guard will be well-inclined
And will free you
For two days or so

In other ways don't even think
That you'll ever leave Tiraspol
Because departure is no more
Than a tale
For children

Given the circumstances of their composition, Jaslowitz's poems can be viewed as improbable acts of resistance, defiance, and witness in poetic form. With each line of verse, with each rhyme, she seems to face down oppression and thus perhaps to help others do so as well. But is it not too large a burden on her and on the poems to read them in this way?

Transnistria March

Sing Transnistria
And your song
Will resound
Through mountains and valleys
Sing Transnistria
A song of fire
Whoever hears you
Will move along

With a light heart
We will be joyous
Even though we are
Severely tormented
Our password is

Be optimistic
Always gay
And never sad

Our song
Will pierce the clouds
Until it reaches
Our distant brothers
The great suffering
That we had to endure
It will make us
Prouder and tougher

With hope in our souls
We will win
The sun of justice
Beloved liberty
Will smile on us anew
It's thus that we will cross
The borders of Transnistria

Some of the poems, like *Song of Departure*, are marked by biting sarcasm and irony. Remarkably, however, some also describe small pleasures that endure even in circumstances of dire suffering. And, like many expressions by children and adolescents, most end in overarching messages of hopefulness and gesture toward a future freedom, toward life. Amid the disappointments occasioned by repeated false rumors of impending liberation that Sonja describes in cruel detail, it must have been hard to continue to hope. We are, of course, tempted to admire and to celebrate that hopefulness, but, doing so, are we not repeating well-worn clichés about children's and adolescent testimonies and their unmediated sincerity and optimism? Should we not also wonder about the costs of hope in Transnistria?

Was Sonja the dutiful daughter who wanted to cheer her parents? Or are her repetitive assertions of hope gestures imposed on the prisoners, to be read with suspicion? Are they symptoms of ironic resignation, or are we to read them as a young girl's refusal to succumb to despair—a refusal perhaps shared and supported by fellow inmates? Was she temperamentally optimistic, forward-looking, and would that make her absurd and meaningless death even more poignant?

For New Year's in 1943, Sonja wrote *Cântecul Revelionului* [*The Song of New Year's Eve*]:

We celebrate the New Year
And together we are glad
We lived
We managed
We defeated difficulty

Let's be happy, since from now
The year will bring us something better
Encouragement, freedom
And a way home

We raise our glass
And wish each other
Friendship, health,
And freedom, always.

Revelion in Romanian means awakening, a new dawn. Given Sonja Jaslowitz's absurd death, it is difficult for us, now, to return to the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944 and to imagine the future she was trying to anticipate with her song. But perhaps this is the best we could do for her: to attempt to imagine the spirit in which she wrote her poems, rather than reading them under the shadow of finality.

In the absence of a public national or transnational reckoning with the murderous crimes which Sonja endured, the most we can do is to perform a reading of her poems that is neither critical, nor analytic, nor apologetic, nor redemptive, but that is, indeed, reparative. We might thus see Sonja's very belief in a future as a modest gesture that stitches together remnants of confidence and expectation for herself and for others. For our postgeneration, to claim her legacy would then be our way to recognize and call attention to her creative effort: not to great literature and not to heroism, but to her intimation of a future in a potential, or virtual, or, one might say, subjunctive mode. From her perspective, what might yet be, and, from ours, what might have been. The past's future, brought into the present, widens that present enlarges it with a hopefulness that pierces through layers of darkness. In this spirit, the poems place Sonja Jaslowitz not on the threshold of the catastrophe that was awaiting her, but on the threshold of possibility she herself managed to conjure with her words. And, in attempting this manner of reparative reading, perhaps we could leave her there, in the poems and their own anachronistic temporality, rather than in the catastrophic teleology that was to be hers.

Notes

- 1 See the Facebook page devoted to Meerbaum-Eisinger, <https://www.facebook.com/selma.meerbaumeisinger?fref=ts> and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Selma-Meerbaum-Eisinger/103150629725186><https://www.facebook.com/pages/Selma-Meerbaum-Eisinger/103150629725186> [last accessed 26, April 2020].
- 2 *Love Guilt, and Reparation* was first presented as a public lecture in London in March 1936 under the auspices of the Institute of Psycho-Analysis and subsequently published in 1937. But Klein had begun to develop her ideas about reparation in the 1920s. See Likierman 2001, 80.
- 3 On children's writing during the Holocaust, see especially Borwicz (1996), and Coquio and Kalinsky (2007).
- 4 Republished in 2009 in a critical edition in French with an excellent introduction and annotations by Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine. See Carp 2009.
- 5 Ironically, ten years later in 2008, Transnistria only merited a brief two-column entry in the then new three-volume *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.
- 6 For his pioneering book on the Romanian Holocaust, *Cartea Neagră*, Matatias Carp managed to acquire documents and photos (through purchase, friendship, and discreet collaboration) from the Filderman Archives of the Bucharest Jewish Community Federation, the Romanian Ministry of the Interior, and a Wehrmacht officer with access to materials.
- 7 Some 1,400 cases were prosecuted, but only 668 were delivered, many in absentia.
- 8 U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2012). Seven volumes are planned. Vol. 1 and 2 are available. See <http://www.ushmm.org/research/publications/encyclopedia-camps-ghettos>.
- 9 Subsequent to Carp's *Cartea Neagră* and the opening of the Soviet and other East European archives, the scholarly contributions of the late Jean Ancel have been outstanding (see Ancel 2005).
- 10 For a summary of the terms of what became known as the Tighina Agreement between Hitler and Antonescu, see Ancel (2003, vol. I, 547); for the full Romanian version of the document, see Ancel (2003, vol. II, 41–42).
- 11 In his pre-trial interrogation by Israeli Police, Adolf Eichmann admitted that "*Sonderbehandlung*" ["Special Treatment"] always meant killing. See *Final Report* 2006, 15 and 15n60.
- 12 Tighina Agreement, Romanian version see Ancel, 1986. For the German version, see Ancel, *Documents*, vol. 5, no. 62, 59–63.
- 13 Both historical and survivor accounts from many of the Transnistrian camps and ghettos can be found in Carmelly (1997) and Shachan (1996). Also see Gold (1996). The most extensive testimony collection about Transnistria's camps and ghettos (over 400 accounts in several languages) can be found in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, <https://sfi.usc.edu/>.
- 14 In another version this poem is named "Transnistria am Steinbruch: Kariera de piatra." It is dated 25 July 1942 (shortly after the family's arrival there).
- 15 All translations of Jaslowitz's poetry are our own.
- 16 Borwicz, among others, points out that the extraordinary experiences of the ghettos and camp rarely led to innovative literary form in children's verse, rather that they would tend to fall back on verse forms learned in school. See Coquio and Kalinsky 2007, LLX.

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4 The *Post-Jewish* Today. Tracing Material Culture in the Postcatastrophic Polish Poetry

Anna Artwińska

Introduction

“There are no more Jewish towns in Poland, no more / In Hrubieszów, Karczew, Brody, Falenica / You’d look in vain for little candles or try to catch / The sounds of singing from a wooden temple”—wrote Antoni Słonimski, a Polish author of Jewish origins, in 1947 in *Elegia miasteczek żydowskich* [*Elegy for Jewish Towns*] (Słonimski 1996, 363–364). This song of mourning, which combines an awareness of the irreversible consequences of the extermination of the Jews with a contemplative commemoration of the world before the catastrophe, is often invoked in texts devoted to the Shoah and its memory, Polish-Jewish relations, or Polish antisemitism. Its incipit, in particular, has gained the status of a dictum that functions in Polish culture, including beyond the confines and contexts of the poem. The poet’s elegy of remembrance, however, is rarely interpreted in the context of material culture, even though the destruction of the Jewish world included physical things too. Along with Jews, their possessions and other objects also disappeared from the landscape of Polish cities and towns; what was not destroyed was taken over by Poles, usually unlawfully. In Słonimski’s work, the materiality of the Jewish world is signaled primarily by objects connected with the religious sphere (lit candles, a synagogue); indirectly, the names of professions (shoemaker, watchmaker, barber) also refer to the material world on a *totum pro parte* basis. The most dramatic term, and simultaneously one endowed with the greatest poetic power, is the term “Jewish rags,” which lays bare the process of the degradation of Jews and their possessions during the Shoah. The Polish word *łachman* (rag) denotes old and worn-out clothes or fabrics: “Jewish rags” in Słonimski’s elegy, while a metaphor of the catastrophic fate, also denotes specific objects: the tattered garments worn by Jews in ghettos and concentration camps, “the last remains.” Thus, *Elegy for Jewish Towns* can be regarded as paradigmatically indicating the three most important aspects of Jewish material culture that were lost in the Shoah: sacred objects and sites, things and objects related to everyday culture, and things and personal objects that shared the tragic fate of their

owners. However, while Słonimski felt predominantly overcome by the sensation of irreversible destruction and absolute emptiness in 1947 (he wrote the poem exiled in London, mourning those who stayed behind and did not survive the Shoah), later a feeling of shame seems to come to the fore. It is elicited by the knowledge of what happened to Jewish belongings and objects after the war (and partly also during it) at the hands of Poles. I am referring both to the illegal seizure of Jewish property, theft, and robbery—well described in the literature on the subject, not only in recent years¹—and to living in their shadow, living with the awareness of their silent, often phantom presence. “[...] the different layers of meaning attached to Jewish cultural property [...] resonate to this day, provoking continued public debates and legal uncertainties” (Gallas et al. 2020, 10).

Although the subject of the Shoah very quickly became a central theme in Polish poetry (the first anthology of poems devoted to it appeared in 1944, the second in 1947), and the poetics and strategies of writing about the Shoah in the Polish culture have been thoroughly discussed and described,² there seems to be a lack of scholarly works on how poetry confronts the materiality of the erased Jewish world. I mean not only an analysis of the motif of “Jewish/Post-Jewish objects” in poetic works, as such studies obviously exist (especially in relation to the works of Władysław Szlengel and Jerzy Ficowski), but rather a reflection on how materiality can be expressed in poetic languages and what function Jewish objects, possessions, and sites play in Polish culture from the perspective of the 21st-century poetry.

Departing from the premise that the perspective of the Polish poetry is defined by the postcatastrophic condition of contemporary culture,³ this article argues that the remains of the Jewish world evoked or found in the poems—remnants of matzevot and cemeteries, destroyed synagogues, and illegally taken everyday objects—are traces not of the past, but of the present. Functioning in the postcatastrophic space, poets who come across material traces of the Jewish past treat them as materialized remorse, as physical signals of Polish guilt about complicity in the Shoah; as objects or sites in which the Polish history of antisemitism, neglect, and oblivion are reflected. This problem, which also raises the question of the possibility of expressing materiality by means of the poetic word, is explored in the second part of this chapter. In the first part, I address the material existence of a specific work, a well-known poem by Zuzanna Ginczanka with the incipit *Non omnis moriar*. I treat the discussions surrounding this poem and its manuscript as another manifestation of the Polish postcatastrophic condition, testifying to the fact that the struggle with the Shoah is no longer about recognizing the event itself, but rather about its long-term effects and impact on the present.

**“A Non-existent Object”? On *Non Omnis Moriar* by
Zuzanna Ginczanka**

A poem that cannot be overlooked when considering material culture and the Shoah is the work with the incipit *Non omnis moriar* by Zuzanna Ginczanka, an author of Jewish descent who wrote in Polish, and was murdered in Cracow in 1944. Literary scholars have repeatedly pointed out the poem's connections with Horace's *Exegi monumentum* and Juliusz Słowacki's *Testament mój* [My Testament], emphasizing that it is a perverse reference to the motifs and tropes they contained. The world presented in the poem is the poet's apartment in Lviv, where she was hidden during the war and where a drama of betrayal and loss unfolds. It plays out between Ginczanka and the housekeeper Zofia Chomin, who informs the Germans about Jews hiding in her tenement house. Having to leave her apartment immediately, the poet decides to give what she owns into Polish hands, symbolized by the housekeeper-denouncer and her family. This testimonial gesture is a kind of revolt: aware that her belongings will soon be stolen and appropriated, and that she herself will most likely be murdered, the poet decides to pre-empt fate and give away her possessions in order to retain at least a semblance of power over the possessions she has collected through the years—"meadows of tablecloths," "fortresses of indomitable wardrobes," "spacious sheets" and "precious bedding" (Ginczanka 2011, 37).⁴ Irony is evident in this gesture, which operates on a similar principle as the irony of the rhetorical figure known as *accismus*: while the poet does not refuse to accept something she cares about, she does suggest a willingness to give away things she does not really want to.

While enumerating her belongings—the "rhetoric of the list" plays an important role in the poem (Bischoff 2018, 75)—Ginczanka is aware that she will not take any of them with her, so she does not look at them in terms of their functionality, she does not consider their potential usefulness in a new place: on the contrary, she knows that she is saying goodbye to them forever. In the text, there is no relief connected with freeing oneself from things, a relief often visible in the case of authors about to emigrate;⁵ its place is taken by a bitter irony: in an extreme situation, objects become more valuable than people. "It is things that define human existence, not the other way around. They have value and meaning, they gain power over individuals and determine their fate" (Kiec 1994, 157). The things and objects mentioned in the text belong to the profane sphere and are connected with everyday life: they are clothes, furniture, kitchen utensils, bedding, and valuables. However, the author does not treat them as ordinary and everyday things. Her poem is dominated by metaphorical thinking, which allows her to turn tablecloths into meadows, and down from the pillows⁶ into clouds, thus "sacralizing the ordinary" (Piotrowiak 2013, 42). Despite these devices, a very concrete picture of robbery and

theft emerges before the reader, reinforced by the order directed toward Zofia Chomin: “So let your hand ferret out the J things” (Ginczanka 2011, 38). In a way, the informer is obliged here to take over Ginczanka’s things—this way, the poet can retain the remnants of her power over matter, have the illusion that she remains the one who decides about the fate of her possessions. However, this power is illusory; the author knows that as soon as she leaves the apartment, her neighbors will begin “to search for precious stones and gold / In couches, mattresses, comforters and carpets” (Ginczanka 2011, 38).

From a postcatastrophic perspective, not only the brutal meaning of Ginczanka’s poem is interesting, but also the way it functions in 21st-century Polish culture. Interestingly, the researchers’ focus is no longer only on the content of the poem and its meanings;⁷ it now extends to its status, both legal and material. In her 2008 article published in *Zagłada Żydów* magazine, Agnieszka Haska used archival materials to reconstruct the course of the court trial of Zofia and Marian Chomin, the aforementioned housekeeper of the tenement house on Jabłonowskich Street in Lviv, and her son. They were arrested in 1946 and kept prisoner in the Warsaw district of Praga (Zofia Chomin pleaded not guilty to the charge of denouncing Zuzanna Ginczanka to the gendarmerie). Ginczanka’s poem was used as evidence of the denunciation. More precisely, it was a handwritten copy of the work beginning with *Non omnis moriar*, which was submitted to the court by Ginczanka’s friend Ludwika Karwowska (later Stauber). Karwowska could not remember how it came into her possession (see Haska 2008, 393; Kiec 2020).

Following the publication of source materials by Haska, Ginczanka’s poem gained new contexts 60 years after her death. Its function as a testimonial poem became even more pronounced in a scholarly context, as this is a poem that not only speaks of robbery and theft of Jewish possessions by Polish neighbors. The poem itself is an object too, a material proof of guilt, a testimony to Polish complicity in the Shoah. “It passed from the land of literature (the domain of ‘beautiful words’) into the world of criminal investigation and rules of court procedure (the domain of the law). In this sense, it is an accusation. It gained the status of evidence adduced by the prosecutor in a criminal case,”—wrote the well-known Polish literary scholar Jacek Leociak (Leociak 2019, 38). The aspect of the testimony was accentuated by Bożena Shallcross. In her musings on the material aspects of the Shoah, this American literary scholar also emphasized the amazing fact that the manuscript survived, despite the fact that keeping this sort of text was penalized severely under the German occupation.

The manuscript of her poem survived, although we do not know how. Currently it is kept in an archive, invisible, but secure. [...] It is a poetic trace-document which used to be completely defined by the

precarium, because one must remember that there were serious consequences for making any written testimony about the activities of the occupier, in this case about the persecution of Jews. It was a material object of special significance, one burdened with ambiguity, as the desire to keep it may have competed with the desire to destroy it immediately. The fact that this poem, full of accusatory passion, survived and continues to exist as a relic/trace and archived poetical text confirms the mechanism of erasure and of survival, characteristic of the *precarium*. (Shallcross 2010, 52–53)⁸

But can we really speak of the existence of a manuscript, a material “trace-document”? In her 2020 biography *Ginczanka. Nie upilnuje mnie nikt*, [*Ginczanka. I Will Not be Controlled*], Izolda Kiec, an outstanding expert on the poet’s work, strongly stresses that the manuscript of this poem probably did not survive: we only know it from copies likely made by Ludwika Stauber (although this is not proven beyond a shadow of a doubt either), which served as evidence against the Chomins in 1946, related by Haska. The “crumpled and torn sheet of paper,” on which Julian Przyboś based his reconstructed version of the poem published in 1946 in *Odrodzenie*, and which from this moment on began to function as the canonical version despite Przyboś’ numerous corrections, has not survived either.⁹ According to Kiec, who writes not only from the position of a literary scholar but also as a documentalist and source researcher, the fact that the original does not exist makes it impossible to treat Ginczanka’s poem as testimony. She also doubts whether a copy can be treated as a source: “[...] A copy made by an anonymous person cannot be evidence in a case” (Kiec 2020, 391). In effect, criticizing the current tendency of the state of research to emphasize the almost haptic status of Ginczanka’s poem and to give it the rank of testimony, Kiec calls it a “non-existent object:”

[...] The manuscript of Zuzanna Ginczanka’s last poem is a *casus* of a non-existent object, the very pleasure of communing with an idea. The search ceases to be an expedition, an arduous wandering through the maze of archives. It takes place solely in the sphere of words, thus it allows one to say “I” more often than “she,” to expose one’s own intention, imagination, and experience. Non-existent objects occupy a place of special distinction—precisely because they do not exist. (Kiec 2020, 391)

The passage quoted above shows not only Kiec’s disappointment with the ways in which Ginczanka has been received, but also seems to suggest that such reception is academically unreliable and primarily motivated by the particular interests of scholars (apart from Bożena Shallcross, Kiec also cites studies by the scholars Aleksander Nawarecki

and Jacek Leociak). The fact that this problem arouses so much controversy, I believe, confirms the key thesis of this volume about post-catastrophe as the condition of European culture after 1945. The dispute over the “non-existent object” symptomatically demonstrates the extent to which the Shoah engages subsequent generations, making them re-define the limits of what can and may be said about it. Does the fact that the original of the poem about the looted possessions did not survive really change its status, since we know (assume) that its author was Ginczanka? And was it inappropriate in such a case to use the copy as evidence in the 1946 trial? How should we understand the position of Izolda Kiec, who added a footnote to Marcel Stauber’s testimony that he had heard Chominowa’s denunciation of Ginczanka from the opposite side of the street, arguing that this seems strange because “[...] Jabłonowskich Street is quite wide and it is unlikely that one could hear anything said in a normal volume by a person standing on the opposite sidewalk” (Kiec 2020, 377). Is this really just about scholarly integrity, about trying to reconstruct events as reliably as possible? Or is the dispute about the manuscript a dispute about the ways in which court sentences were handed down in the People’s Republic of Poland? A dispute over what the poetic word can be used for? And why does the material side of poetry suddenly turn out to be so important? The manuscript, undoubtedly important for philological reasons, is not necessary to understand the scale of the problem that Ginczanka’s poem addresses. The fact that Zofia Chomin denounced her Jewish tenants is also known thanks to many other Polish and Jewish testimonies, including those by Władysław Bieńkowski and Karol Kuryluk.¹⁰ Kiec’s argument implies that the trial against the Chomins was not supported by strong arguments, and the use of the poem as evidence in the case qualifies as misuse:

The trial, which was originally aimed at Marian Chomin, resulted in the imprisonment of his mother. There was no strong evidence in the case. It was word against word. Only that one of the words had a poetic dimension, of which it was stripped in the courtroom anyway, read literally, manipulated at the level of facts. If Ginczanka’s poem [...] was to be the key evidence in the case, as a result of which the main defendant was changed, then why was Chominowa’s husband, called “a snitch” in the poem, not even called in for questioning? Why were the “yours” of “you and yours,” or the new owners of “Jewish things” not asked about? It seems that both the trial and the poem served a different purpose. To settle other scores. Between those who survived. (Kiec 2020, 379)

The controversy over the use of a copy of a poem in a trial confirms that the status of testimony is never entirely clear. Trust and goodwill are

needed for witnesses' statements in court to be treated as reliable, for even if the testimonies appear strong, the fallibility of the human mind cannot be ruled out and we can rely on our memory to a very limited extent (cf. Krämer 2011, 122–125). For this reason, the act of bearing witness is always a practice in which “epistemes and ethics intersect as in the case of chiasm” (Krämer 2011, 138). In relation to the problem that interests me, this means that we can (but are not required to) take the testimony of Ginczanka's friend Ludwika Stauber at face value, on the assumption that even if the testifier was wrong regarding the details, the meaning of her testimony is nevertheless unambiguous. This kind of trust can (but is not required to) be extended to Ginczanka's poem, regardless of whose handwriting was used for the copy of the poem, which is kept in court records today. A separate problem, however, is the evaluation of the trial itself, whether it took place in accordance with the rules, whether it was lawful, whether the judges did everything in their power to reach a just verdict.

The “settling of scores between the survivors” (Kiec 2020, 379) is also a contemporary contextualization of the life and work of the poet, who was born in Równe. Referred to as a “testament,” Ginczanka's poem regularly appears in works analyzing Polish antisemitism (most often alongside Władysław Szlengel's *Rzeczy* [*Things*] and Jerzy Ficowski's poem *Pożydowskie* [*Post-Jewish*]), and is sometimes updated in literature. In 2019, the poet Dariusz Pado published a lyrical text entitled *Lemberg*. It is a poetic account of a trip to Lviv, specifically a visit to the tenement house on Jabłonowskich Street where Zuzanna Ginczanka hid during the war. Pado follows the catastrophic biography of Ginczanka, denounced by her own housekeeper: “and yet a moment ago we fell in love / in Zuzanna Ginczanka's closed house / [...] where a Polish woman who reported to the garbage can still haunts” (Pado 2019, 60). Through this intertextual reference, another element is added to the consideration of Ginczanka's belongings—the “closed house” as an unofficial site of memory, attesting to what the poet described in her testament. Pado connects different planes of time: the past is still present in Jabłonowskich Street, manifesting itself in the form of a phantom housekeeper who “still haunts.” In contrast to the looted belongings and the unpreserved manuscript, the “closed house” can be touched and seen. However, it is also an imperfect testimony: in order to understand what happened in 1942, we need further testimonies. Ginczanka's poem elaborates on what happened at the time; it is the key that opens the “closed house,” which, from the perspective of a contemporary Polish poet, is the place that should be seen as first in Lviv. The cult of Ginczanka's house or even its fetishization can also be observed in the essays of Jarosław Mikołajewski—poet, literary critic, translator, and a great fan of Ginczanka's life and work. The essay *Lwów* [*Lviv*] (Mikołajewski 2019, 96–100) is devoted to visiting the house of the poet and, like Pado's, is about the perpetuation of traces and the memory-forming function of topography.

However, while *Lemberg* evokes the dark aura surrounding the tenement house, Mikołajewski exposes the physical possibility of contact with the place where the poet lived: “I literally tremble. I am in the place where the murdered poet lived [...]” (Mikołajewski 2019, 97–98). What both works have in common is the notion that contact with matter can manifest itself in psychosomatic ways, “[...] that close relations to the human body [...] gives material culture its particular meaning—and memory-bearing capacities” (Auslander 2017, 832).

Jewish and *Post-Jewish*: Postcatastrophic Semantics

My reflections about material culture in the poetry are inspired by the methodology developed with regard to material culture in Jewish Studies in recent years. Of particular importance here is the work of Leora Auslander, who was not only one of the first to draw attention to the need to address Jewish culture from its material side but also signaled from the outset the terminological problems inherent in this research approach. “A first encounter with the concept of ‘Jewish material culture’ may provoke puzzlement. What, the reader may ask, is ‘material culture’? And what would make it ‘Jewish’?” (Auslander 2017, 831) The term “Jewish” in relation to the material culture found on Polish territory is not entirely self-evident either: it does not have an exclusively denotative function, it does not mean exclusively something “belonging to Jews” or “produced by Jews,” but it is also, as perfectly demonstrated in Polish literature, synonymous with words such as foreign, unknown, problematic. The latter meaning is particularly evident when we speak of things, objects, or properties that, resulting from the turbulence of history, no longer belonged to Jews but did not definitively become Polish things, objects, or properties. Jewish material culture is simultaneously visible and invisible in Polish space because very often it functions in isolation from its original context. Their ambivalent status is referred to in Polish, by the term *pożydowskie* (Post-Jewish). “As Polish words that begin with the prefix *po* denote something that no longer exists in the same place, *pożydowskie* refers to ‘a kind of legacy involving something that is no longer present in a certain place’. In this sense, the term served as a linguistic signifier of a wide-scale appropriation of Jewish property [...]” (Weizman 2017, 37). *Pożydowskie* can also mean material culture which was abandoned, appropriated, and taken over on both individual and collective levels (Buryła 2013, 116). As Monika Krawczyk has demonstrated, the adjective *pożydowski* had a substituting function immediately after the war. It was used in place of the owner’s name in lists of abandoned properties (Krawczyk 2010, 687). The term was never an official one.

The neologism *pożydowskie* is not a neutral term, as it suggests an apparent continuity between the Jewish world before and after the catastrophe;

it always also points to shameful practices of illegal takeover and appropriation.¹¹ And although these practices took place during or immediately after the war, their effects are still palpable today. Polish culture is shaped amid the Post-Jewish (and, it should be added, Post-German¹²) matter, which includes everyday things and objects as well as topography, architecture, and sacred sites. At the Post-Jewish antipodes are objects that can be called “souvenirs from the Jewish world” (Kaniecki 2016, 7), that is, everything that was saved from the Shoah and is kept in family and public archives. Many of these can be designated as “testimonial objects,” a term proposed by Marianna Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2006), not only because they have a testimonial function, but also because this function is passed on from generation to generation, contributing to the formation of transgenerational memory. What distinguishes souvenirs and testimonial objects from Post-Jewish belongings is that they did not become objects of appropriation and manipulation, despite often sharing the tragic fate of their owners. “Souvenirs” play an important role in literary texts: they are vehicles of memory, signatures of the past, traces of concrete existence. This category is broad: it includes works of art, synagogues, letters, documents, and everyday objects.

It is difficult to determine unequivocally how the Post-Jewish appears in 21st-century Polish poetry. It certainly does not refer only to material objects, as the term is also used to describe landscape, language, identity, and memory problems. However, this does not mean that the original meaning has been lost. Contemporary Polish poetry attempts to deal with the material traces of the Jewish world, often discovered by accident, as well as with the effects of Poles taking over and plundering Jewish property. These include poems inspired by specific events, such as the unexpected discovery of Jewish tombstones or the reconstruction of a Jewish temple. Others are an accusation of Polish oblivion in the context of buildings and objects that came into the possession of Poles after the war. Polish poetry tells the story of the “second life” of abandoned, looted, or appropriated matter. It is a fragmented and disjointed story; it does not so much offer a thorough reconstruction of the history of individual things, objects, and properties, as much as it attempts to capture the emotions accompanying their new owners, who used things contrary to their original, and therefore usually religious, significance (see Auslander 2017, 854). The poet Jerzy Ficowski diagnosed the Polish postcatastrophic condition as early as 1979, writing poems about having to live with the awareness of one’s own complicity in the Shoah, on its rubble and ruins. I am referring to the poetry volume *Odczytywanie popiołów* [*A Reading of Ashes*], in which, as Natan Gross aptly stated, “the Polish poet tries to decipher the mystery of their [ashes’—AA] signs: from crooked Jewish letters collected at Jewish cemeteries, from the shards of broken tombstones...” (Gross 1993, 105) This life among ashes is a life among foreign yet familiar matter—among things and objects that previously belonged to Jews.

The complicated relations between subject and matter mean that the poems analyzed cannot be treated as a version or variant of the “thing poem” (*Dinggedicht*; a term coined in 1926 by Kurt Oppert) or an example of non-anthropocentric lyricism that emphasizes non-human dimensions of cognition. For this to happen, synagogues and matzevot would have to replace the subject and his perspective in the poem: of speaking, viewing, and describing; they would have to replace the human with the non-human. It is worth recalling at this point that the creator of the poems described as *Dinggedicht*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, treated a things as something through which one can understand the world, which opens new horizons and broadens the perspective. In a 1903 letter to his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé, he wrote:

Only things speak to me. The works of Rodin, Gothic cathedrals, the art of Antiquity, all the objects that have attained perfection. They have shown me true models; they have opened my eyes to the living world, full of movement, seen ordinarily and simply, because only it can become a model for creation. I begin to see everything anew. (Rilke 1929, 116)

The Post-Jewish is too burdened by history and memory in Polish culture to evoke awe similar to that evoked in Rilke by objects.¹³ In a post-catastrophic situation, it is also impossible to see the world “ordinarily and simply.” Hence, material does not become a gateway to cognition of reality, things do not so much fascinate and invite phenomenological considerations, as rather trigger a sense of shame and a flight reflex. Affirmative poetry about the Post-Jewish could only be kitsch. “[...] *Post-Jewish* can only be *la façon de parler*, but not any property, of which the residents of Polish town are well aware [...],” wrote Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross in their famous essay (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross 2011, 146). At the same time, the subjectivization of things in the paradigm of non-anthropocentric humanities could become a chance to, as Piotr Dobrosielski has written, “[...] tell anew of the role of the ‘Post-Jewish’ things in the imaginarium of Polish culture, leaving aside psychoanalysis, commemoration in the perspective of collective memory, or superficial neutralization of the stereotype” (Dobrosielski 2017, 362). How can such poetry be written?h

Reading *Pożydowskie*: Postcatastrophic Constellation in Polish Poetry

One of the earliest examples of postcatastrophic poetry tracing Post-Jewish is Ryszard Krynicki’s poem *Miasto* [City], written in 1979, like Ficowski’s *A Reading of Ashes*. It provokes readers to consider the collective identity of Poznań, a city that on the one hand takes pride in its

Prussian order, but on the other hand has not faced up to its own anti-semitism. Krynicki writes: “Above all it values thriftiness, order and cleanliness: / it repurposed the synagogue as a swimming pool / there are no traces of the Jewish cemetery / in the parking lots of the marketplace” (Krynicki 2011, 23). The motif of the Poznań synagogue turned into a swimming pool was also taken up by Agnieszka Kuciak in her poem *Wroniecka*; Dariusz Pado’s poems, in turn, contain allusions to other sites: the former tzaddik’s hut in Kock, inhabited by a Polish family—“mother and daughter drowning in hollyhocks” (Pado 2014, 103), or a synagogue turned into a public library (Pado 2011, 25). In the remainder of my article, I would like to focus on poems that can be treated as a poetic response to what is happening with the Post-Jewish in contemporary Poland by analyzing three paradigmatic works: Piotr Mitzner’s *Jeziro Dobre* [Lake Dobre], published in the 2020 volume *Przygody chłopca* [A Boy’s Adventures] as well as the poem *Nieruchomość* [A Property] from the collection *Ulica tablic* [A Street of Plaques] (2017), and Dariusz Pado’s *Chmielnik*, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2015. The choice of these authors is not coincidental. In the poetry of Piotr Mitzner (b. 1955), one of Poland’s most important contemporary poets, an essayist, literary critic, and theater scholar, issues of memory and forgetting are a clearly dominant theme. In my opinion, the poetry of the younger and not that particularly well-known author Dariusz Pado (b. 1974) occupies an exceptional position in context of Jewish material culture. Beginning with the volume *Peryferie raju* (2005) [Peripheries of Paradise], Pado consistently draws attention to the presence of Jewish cemeteries, matzevot, and genizahs in the Polish landscape, devoting a great deal of attention to the Polish attitude to Post-Jewish objects. Materiality consistently recurs in all his later volumes.¹⁴

The title of Mitzner’s poem *Jeziro Dobre*¹⁵ suggests that it was inspired by the discovery of 12 tombstones at the bottom of Lake Dobre in 2001, probably from the cemetery in Pobiedziska (the author himself does not comment on the genesis of the poem). It is a short and poetically condensed work. The nameless lyrical subject first coolly informs us that someone had “knocked over” the matzevot, “torn them out with the roots” and “thrown” them into the water in order for the lake to “stabilize.” Then we read that a “boy takes a header” into this very lake paved with Jewish tombstones (Mitzner 2020, 44). This header may be understood literally, as a reference to a specific technique of diving. Yet, it can also be read as a metaphor, in which case the dive becomes a painful fall; it evokes the image of a child hurting his head on the hard bottom of the lake. Since *Jeziro Dobre* is part of the *Przygody chłopca* series, preceded by the dedication “to the one who was or will be a boy someday,” one can assume that the boy here is a universal figure; “being a boy” is about discovering the world in the form of fun and games. But is “taking a header” really one of the eponymous adventures? If so, then the lesson of this adventure is a bitter

one: diving into the water, the (Polish) boy hits the Jewish matzevot, violently stripped off their context, and thrown into the lake. If we choose to read this metaphorically, we can assume that this dive does not end well, neither for the boy nor for Polish culture. The desecrated matzevot, although accessible only indirectly through the poetic word, are present in Mitzner's poem in an almost physical way: the reader feels their weight, their "stabilizing" function in the water, and can imagine the pain that contact between the body and the stone must cause. By comparing the matzevot to plants with roots, growing into the ground and then violently pulled out of it, the poem also conveys the atmosphere of violence well. The plant metaphor used by Mitzner brings to mind Dominick LaCapra's concept of traumatropism. The American historian used the botanical term "traumatropism" to describe the nature of the Holocaust witness who, according to LaCapra, is like growth on a sick plant: at the same time near and far from the Shoah, at the same time inside and outside the wound. The damaged plant regenerates and comes back to life, while scar tissue forms, indicating the illness that it has passed through: this is what marks the position of the witness (LaCapra 2018). If the "knocked over," "torn out" gravestones of Mitzner's poem are a sick, wounded plant—a metonymy for the Holocaust—then the boy who touches them in the water is a witness. Following this train of thought, Mitzner's poem can be seen as an example of traumatropism, in which the catastrophe, symbolized in the poem by the matzevot resembling "torn out" plants, is told in a mediated way and from a temporal distance. "Their wisdom comes"—Joanna Tokarska-Bakir writes on the generation of post-witnesses—"in not beginning by asking what we can do with a matzeva. They ask what a matzeva can do to us" (Tokarska-Bakir 2012, 29).

The relationship between the subject and the matzevot—signatures of the material world—is established in the poem by way of a shortcut, with just a few words/images. The Jewish tombstones buried in the waters of the lake overpower the jumping boy, and contact with their matter can be seen as the symbolic end of childhood. Mitzner's poem should be read together with *Stup ze słów* [*A Pillar of Words*] by Jacek Podsiadło, which is a poetic reaction to the pogrom in Kielce in 1946. On the surface, Mitzner's and Podsiadło's poems are very different: the former is short, frugal with words and images, while the latter is almost epic. It tells the story of Bajla (Bela) Gertner, a Jewish girl imprisoned in Auschwitz and murdered in Kielce, in the style of a children's rhyme, juxtaposing "private memories and allusions with catalogs of titles or names, exuberant literariness with extreme asceticism, rage and tenderness, disgust and compassion" (Tokarska-Bakir and Kurkiewicz 2020). Writing about Polish antisemitism and the tragic story of Gertner, Podsiadło simultaneously reconstructs his own "adventures of a boy." "And so, the lean years/ lean and foul, passed. / Over thirty of them. / And in Bela Gertner's hometown / after the circus /of school slavery / we often went

to the Jewish cemetery / where we could ‘fuck it all’[...] / And we pissed / among the crooked matzevot” (Podsiadło 2020). What links the two texts is not only the motif of desecrated gravestones and the fact that their authors translate concrete events into poetic language but above all a certain sameness of the “boys’ biographies.” Mitzner’s “taking a header” is a metaphorical abbreviation of the same borderline experience that Podsiadło talks about at length.

In Pado’s poem *Chmielnik*, the lyrical subject reports on his trip to a “renovated white synagogue” in a “Polish town”—the town in question is the toponym from the title. The renovation of the Chmielnik synagogue and the related controversy, like the case of the matzevot found in Lake Dobry, received widespread media coverage. Photographs of the Chmielnik synagogue, before and after the renovation, became a part of an artistic series by Wojciech Wilczyk, published in the album *Niewinne oko nie istnieje* [*There is No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye*] and displayed in the exhibition “(nie)widzialne/(in)visible” at the Polin Museum in Warsaw. The protagonist of Pado’s poem is a person looking at the renovated synagogue in the eponymous town of Chmielnik and taking a photo of it. Because of his appearance, he is taken for a stranger; most likely a Jew, perhaps a Gypsy: “a group of punks comments on (my) southern looks: / look at this fucking circumcised Rumcajs¹⁶ taking pics of what’s his” and then: “the young shopkeeper does not respond to my goodbye” (Pado 2015). The words “fucking circumcised Rumcajs” refer to the person looking at the synagogue; one can assume that it is only in this context, in close proximity to the building, that he is recognized as an outsider. “The renovated white synagogue in the Polish town” functions in the poem as something alien, as an unintegrated element that provokes extreme emotions in the locals, the roots of which go back to the past. In Pado’s poem, this site, which is connected with Jewish culture, is foremost a designator of the foreign. It is easier to define what it is not than what it is; its distinguishing feature is that it stands apart from other buildings in the city. The whiteness of the renovated walls draws one’s attention; something that used to blend in with the surrounding space becomes something people stumble over (*Stolperstein*). The synagogue evokes aggression in the inhabitants of Chmielnik, perhaps reminding them of what has been repressed. What is interesting here is that this is a restored synagogue, which no longer has to serve a function that is incompatible with its purpose, unlike many other similar buildings. It can be supposed that it was only the renovation that made the synagogue in Chmielnik visible: as long as it functioned as a grain warehouse it did not exist, in the sense that it was a transparent building.

The protagonist of the poem situates himself in opposition to the majority, represented by “a group of punks” and “a young shopkeeper;” he is a visitor among them. He expresses his relationship to the synagogue and the world it represents through a material symbol—“a small

gold star with a green stone,” which he “wears under the skies and above the earth.” The phrase “under the skies and above the earth” appears twice in the poem and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the concrete here and now, marking spatial relations. At the same time, we do not know whether the “little gold star with the green stone” is a Star of David or some other emblem; we only know that wearing it is an identity gesture (perhaps even a slightly philosemitic one). An opposition is created in the poem between the star and the synagogue: the former is small and hidden; the latter large and visible. The former is in the private sphere (it is close to the body); the latter is an element of the public sphere. In Piotr Mitzner’s poem *Nieruchomość* [A Property] one can also observe a similar poetic device. Despite the unambiguous title, the poem is not a variation on the theme of the building, but a diagnosis of the emotional state of the subject who (most likely) looks at the building. As in Pado’s work, it is a torn and divided subject “afraid of the Jew / who is not there / and of you / who is not there / I am afraid of me” (Mitzner 2017, 25). The lyrical subject bemoans the disappearance of the Jewish world, which in the poem is symbolized, in addition to the eponymous property, by the figure of Bolesław Leśmian. In the postcatastrophic situation, different memories and layers of time overlap, nostalgia (Leśmian’s world) smoothly transform into a diagnosis of the present: “there is only fear / fundamental / Post-Jewish” (Mitzner 2017, 25). The sign of “Post-Jewish fear” is the property. This word, traditionally found in the vocabularies of real estate developers and economists rather than poets, causes the Shoah to be presented as something concrete and tangible that can be seen and touched. The history of the eponymous property is the history of the transposition of what is Jewish into what is Post-Jewish. The poet does not reveal whether the reverse movement is also possible.

Mitzner’s and Pado’s poems confirm that Post-Jewish matter carries a powerful affective load in Polish culture. It is a carrier of memory, a symbol of the past, and a troublesome heritage all at once. Moreover, it is something that offers real resistance to the (Polish) object. The analyzed works confirm the thesis of a dialectic relationship between the subject and the object in literature. Studies produced within the framework of the so-called material draw attention to the fact that objects can have—not only in literary texts—a life of their own, a biography, causative power, and a field of action;¹⁷ but their role can also come down to influencing the subject and his/her identity. In the second variant, things and objects even begin to fulfill a subject-forming function (Scholz and Vedder 2018, 10). This kind of relationship between subject and object is evident in the poems of Mitzner and Pado. Their works are not variants of ekphrasis, for their aim is not to describe an artifact in detail, but to create a relationship between the material sphere and the lyrical I, representing the Polish community. Objects and sites are merely named

in them, defined by a single word (matzevot and synagogues, respectively). The main point of these works is not the history of the objects, but the biography and history of the subject: he who looks at these objects, who reflects on them, and who tries to record them with a photograph or image. “The meaning and order of things is not owed solely to their material presence, but emerges in relation to those narratives and systems into which the intervening subject integrates them” (Vedder 2018, 32). It should be added that the “intervening subject” in Mitzner and Pado’s works represents a Polish perspective and a Polish point of view; what is Jewish becomes inscribed in a Polish context. Natan Gross’ commentary about the poetry of Jerzy Ficowski: “Full of Jewish content and Jewish symbols, signs, and props, these poems are nevertheless very Polish, both in terms of language and treatment of the subject,” applies to the works analyzed here, too (Gross 1993, 105). But whereas in Jerzy Ficowski’s poetry (especially in the poem *Pożydowskie*) the agents were “closets,” “armchairs,” “platters,” and “pots,” that is private things belonging to Jews that passed into the hands of Poles, in Mitzner’s and Pado’s poems the focus is rather on objects related to the sacred sphere—or, strictly speaking, their remnants and remains.

Despite their dependence on the subject, the matzevot and the synagogue are the undisputed center of the analyzed poems, focusing all of the reader’s attention on them. They function as a *punctum* (Barthes 1981, 43–60), introducing tension into the poem. As a synonym of Jewishness, they are also characterized by ambivalence (because the very word “Jew” carries an ambivalent charge in Polish culture). Although evoked by signs, they are available in an almost sensual way, because in both cases signs refer to specific designata, visible in the spaces of Polish cities or recorded by means of other artistic languages such as photography or film. Thus, although the matzevot and synagogue described in the poems are “one-dimensional” (Scholz and Vedder 2018, 9), they simultaneously become concrete and tangible through their reference to the extra-textual world. Mitzner and Pado’s poems do not describe imaginary things; they take as their starting point real things, which become their *punctum*: a sting, a wound, a crack.

Conclusion

“Things” easily blended into the landscape of Polish villages and towns. [...] Everyday life absorbed beds, plates, closets and tables, took them with it, so that one quickly forgot whom they had served before. Their fates rather make us think of the new owners. [...] We do not have an in-depth account “from the inside.” We do not know the reactions of the new owners. We do not know what emotions they felt. [...] Once again we enter an area almost ignored by memoirs and very rarely explored in Polish literature. (Buryła 2013, 201–202)

One has to agree with Buryła's judgment: the fate of the things taken from the Jews by the Poles does not have many literary representations, although the motif of "Jewish gold" itself has appeared regularly in literary texts since the 1940s.¹⁸ Our ignorance concerns the problem of *Nachleben* (Aby Warburg), that is what happened to the things taken from the Jews, what function they fulfill in a contemporary Polish environment, whether they are identified as foreign things and objects or, on the contrary, nobody wonders about their origin.¹⁹ This also applies to Ginczanka's things: they are not presented directly; we experience them only through mediation. "Things in texts are not directly accessible to any of the human senses, they are neither felt nor tangible, they can neither be heard nor smelled, they can only be imagined" (Kimmich 2018, 21). The "kilims and tapestries, serving dishes and candlesticks" evoked in the poem exist only through imagination, although it cannot be ruled out that someone still uses these objects today. Perhaps because of this mediated presence, the problem of the manuscript becomes so important, as its material existence could, following the principle of synecdoche, become a substitute and representation of the material world of objects taken from the poet. The fact that the manuscript has not been found further complicates the problem of materiality because it points to a vacuum, not only in terms of the poem's subject matter but also of its carrier: the unpreserved (or perhaps: not yet found)²⁰ "non-existent object" that is the manuscript of Ginczanka's poem.

In addition, the problem of using Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and religious buildings for other purposes in Poland after 1945 appears rather marginally in the literature. In this situation, it is all the more important how poetry deals with this problem: although Pado's and Mitzner's poems are not classic "inside accounts," they show how subsequent generations deal with what remains of the murdered Jews. They should be regarded as postcatastrophic voices, "Post-Jewish words/post-human words"²¹ (Ficowski 2002b, 192), that take advantage of temporal distance to talk about what life is like in the post-disaster world, among things and objects whose meaning is constantly updated.

Notes

- 1 I refer to studies that take up the issue of the so-called "Jewish gold," as well as cultural studies works that reconstruct the Polish awareness of the appropriation of Jewish property based on literary texts, drama plays or films (see Buryła 2013; Gross 2011; Reszka 2019).
- 2 More recent works, see Buryła et al. 2012; Kuczyńska-Koschany, 2013.
- 3 On the concept of postcatastrophe, see the introduction to this volume (Artwińska and Tippner 2021).
- 4 I use the translation by Shallcross, which is closer to the original than that by Guterman 1947 (see Shallcross 2011, 37–38. For the Polish original, see Ginczanka 2019, 447–448).

- 5 German literary scholar Doerte Bischoff discusses this phenomenon using the example of Hilde Domin's poem, in which the poet, in an apostrophe to things, accuses them of wanting to take over her life. Migration allows one to free oneself from the power of inanimate matter. "My fragile objects / You wanted to collect me / Objects! You see me leave" (Bischoff 2018, 78).
- 6 As an aside, it is worth mentioning that down and down quilts are among the basic things in the Polish Holocaust imaginarium (Dobrosielski 2017).
- 7 For interpretations of Ginczanka's poem, see Kamińska 1974; Kiec 1994; Piotrowiak 2013; Araszkiewicz 2018.
- 8 This is the author's translation based on the Polish language version of the book, which differs significantly from the American version: "The manuscript survived and is now preserved in a protective folder in one of Warsaw's archives, contained but secure. Consigned to this sadly collective and archival existence, it can only remotely hark back to its former proximity to the author's hand and, thus, to its former *precarium* status. Perceived as an object, the poem first reveals a tension between its ontological and epistemological nature. Its very existence, as both a textual Holocaust relic/trace and an archived poetic text capable of bearing witnesses, engages the dual status of survival and death characteristic of *precarium*." (Shallcross 2011, 39)
- 9 Przyboś wrote: "We read the poem from a crumpled and torn sheet of paper, written by the poet in pencil, from a sheet like a prison secret message coded in a dangerous place. From the letter J., we could guess the adjective: Jewish. The manuscript appears to be an unfinished rough copy, and this is made more likely by the presence of a second poem, clearly unedited." Przyboś 1946, quoted after Kiec 2020, 387.
- 10 Władysław Bieńkowski (1906–1991): Polish politician, publicist, and sociologist; undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Education from 1945 to 1946, director of the National Library from 1948 to 1956, and minister of education from 1956 to 1959. Bieńkowski lived in a tenement house on Jabłonowskich Street until September 1941. Karol Kuryluk (1910–1967) journalist and publisher, founder, and editor-in-chief of the Lviv-based *Sygnaty* (1933–1939) *Odrodzenie* (1944–1948); minister of culture and art (1956–1958) and ambassador of the Polish People's Republic to the Republic of Austria (1959–1964). Kuryluk lived in Lviv during the war. His testimony was not preserved in the case file.
- 11 Anita Jarzyna pointed out that Jews' animals, which they had to part with before being transported to a ghetto or camp, met a different fate. Unlike objects, they were not covered by their Polish neighbors (Jarzyna 2019, 201).
- 12 The term "Post-Jewish" (*pożydowskie*) was coined to resemble the term "Post-German" (*poniemieckie*) (Krawczyk 2010, 687). German property most usually ended up in the hands of Poles not as a result of robbery and theft, but as a consequence of their resettlement to areas previously inhabited by the German population. Nevertheless, the distinction between the appropriation of Jewish property and German property is not that clear. As Marcin Zaremba has shown, German property was also robbed and plundered in the "Szaber frenzy," and on the other hand, many Poles did not necessarily obtain Jewish houses via their own act of theft or plunder. Instead, they were allocated them by the authorities (Zaremba 2010). I kindly thank Yechiel Weizman for discussing about this issue.
- 13 In Polish poetry, there also exists a current which could be called the "poetry of things." It includes the works of, among others, Zbigniew Herbert and Miron Białoszewski, as well as selected poems of Wisława Szymborska, Tadeusz Różewicz or Piotr Sommer. In the context of post-Holocaust poetry, a

- special place is occupied by the poems of Erna Rosenstein, a Polish-Jewish surrealist artist. For more on objects in Rosenstein's work, see Tomczok 2019, 193–213.
- 14 He also pays attention to the problem of Polish antisemitism ("Noon in Mrs. Jasia's kitchen / brightness on the sacred tapestry / A Jew embroidered in cross stitch / counts coins for luck/ along with the pope over the fridge.") See (Pado 2014, 117).
 - 15 I kindly thank Anita Jarzyna of the University of Łódź for drawing my attention to this poem.
 - 16 Rumcajs is a fictional character from the book *Rumcajs* by Václav Čtvrtek and popularized by two children's animated television programs that aired in Czechoslovakia from 1967 to 1984. Pado makes a reference in his poem to the appearance of the protagonist, who has a shaggy hairstyle and a long beard.
 - 17 The suggestions of Walter Benjamin and Sergei Tretyakov in particular seem to be key here (see Vedder 2018, 33).
 - 18 A separate issue concerns the things left in Poland by Poles of Jewish origin in March 1968.
 - 19 This is the case with post-German objects. In Karolina Kuszyk's book, we read: "The bowl has always been in our family [...] It is perfect for kneading dough and mixing kutia. [...] But I *saw* the swastika nearly twenty years after I moved out of the family home, thanks to my German husband, who could not get over his amazement that the symbol of Hitlerism could have survived so many years in a Polish home. [...] post-Germanism became transparent to us" (Kuszyk 2019, 10).
 - 20 "According to my research and discoveries, the original manuscript of Ginczanka's poem is not located in the archives of *Odrodzenie* in Cracow, in the legacy of Julian Przyboś, in the collection of Marta Wyka left by her father, and not in the collection of Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, who received from Kazimierz Wyka at least some of the materials collected for the planned postwar selection of Zuzanna Ginczanka's works" (Kiec 2020, 388).
 - 21 This line comes from Ficowski's poem *Siedem słów*. The seven words of the title stand for the quotation that precedes the piece: "Mommy! But I was a good boy! It's Dark! Dark!" According to the information provided, these are "the words of a child locked in a gas chamber in Bełżec in 1942—based on the testimony of the only prisoner who survived" (Ficowski 2002b, 191). It seems that the title of Dariusz Pado's 2011 volume *Siedem + Siedem + Siedem* is an intertextual reference to Ficowski, whose work appears in many of the author's poems.

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5 Libeskind and History

Michael Meng

Perhaps only a few other buildings in contemporary Germany have received more commentary than Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin, so much so that it would be fair to wonder if anything new can still be said about it.¹ But there is one dimension of Libeskind's project that has not been fully identified and analyzed to date. Namely, the provocative challenge his art poses to some of the conventional ways in which history has been conceptualized in European culture and thought and the ethical-political implications of that challenge in the "postcatastrophe" era after the Holocaust.²

As a way to introduce Libeskind's challenge to history, I would like to very briefly address a basic question: What is history? History is the production of a narrative about human action. The German language has two words for history, *Geschichte*, from the verb *geschehen*, means an occurrence or action, while *Historie*, which derives from Latin, means the narrative produced about an occurrence or action. The former refers to the facts—the *factum*, the actions or deeds—of human life, while the latter refers to the narratives people tell about past actions usually but not exclusively in writing. *Historie* is the practice of telling a story about something that already happened irrespective of the specific medium deployed (song, book, museum exhibition). *Historie* is therefore inherently speech, a speech act that in European culture has long been oriented towards the purpose of saving human actions from the pure evanescence of time. Hence, put more precisely, history is the production of a narrative that strives to overcome the transience of human action by nourishing bonds of continuity and structure. History is salvific insofar as it gives a sense of permanency to human life.

Although Libeskind does not produce a historical narrative about the Holocaust, his architectural design and concept engages with history as so defined in a threefold sense as he makes explicit in his writings about the Jewish Museum Berlin: (1) he critiques the salvific purpose of the historical narrative (*Historie*); (2) his art advances through the promotion of remembrance, a specific narrative about German-Jewish history centered on the Holocaust; and (3) he contributes to what might be called a

“postcatastrophic” ethical-political affirmation of human suffering and fragility that makes a historical intervention after the Holocaust.

In the following, I wish to discuss these points in three sections. The first section, a prolegomena, discusses very generally and briefly the salvific purpose of the historical narrative (*Historie*) in European culture and thought; the second section outlines the basic elements of Libeskind’s challenge to *Historie* as a form of salvation as well as the historical narrative in which his project is nested; and the third section examines the ethical-political implications of his project as a way to contribute more broadly to this volume’s focus on the aesthetic, ethical, and ideological implications of the “postcatastrophe.” Shifting from the focus on *Historie* of the first two sections, the third section addresses the ethical-political implications of Libeskind’s art for *Geschichte*—human action, life in the *polis*—in the sense that his project perpetuates a memory of human suffering that has the effect of undermining one of the pillars of authoritarianism: the elevation of one individual over another in rejection of the commonality of human suffering. In contrast, Libeskind’s art contests the authoritarian exaltation of a particular individual above others. In doing so, it implicitly embraces a politics of egalitarianism on the basis of suffering and, thus, it ultimately seeks salvation in politics.

Suffering is indeed the central issue here. In the first section, I argue that the historical narrative has long been oriented towards salvation, that is, freedom from suffering and, above all, death. To stress the point: salvation is a response to death. It is the desire to be freed from the limitations and imperfections that condition each of us as suffering and mortal beings. In the second and third sections, I argue that Libeskind’s art does not avoid suffering and death but confronts it by making absence “the one element of continuity throughout the complex form of the building” (Libeskind 1995, 34). While his building recalls the violent death of a particular group of people (i.e. German Jewry), it nevertheless brings to light an issue of significance to all humans.³ In Libeskind’s words: “The museum is about more than Berliners and Jews. It is about more than things of the past. These issues are important for all human beings” (Libeskind 1995, 42; Libeskind 1997, 34).

Salvation and *Historie*

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricœur succinctly captures one of the basic purposes that has long shaped the narrative impulse to tell stories about the past, reaching back to the ancient world. The narrative impulse, he says, is a necessary reaction to suffering and death. He writes, “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history

of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative” (Ricoeur 1990, 75). Ricoeur makes two claims here that warrant commentary. The first is the claim that humans tell stories out of an ostensible need for vengeance and salvation. Against what are we seeking vengeance? And from what are we seeking to save ourselves? While one might read this passage narrowly as suggesting that we seek to avenge and save those who have been defeated by others, a more capacious reading would be that we seek to save ourselves from the suffering we endure as fragile and mortal beings. We tell stories about ourselves to avenge the pain of our temporal estate as beings whose lives will be defeated and lost by death. In the face of death, we all need and merit our lives being narrated, no matter where and when we might live. Put concisely, Ricoeur views humans as beings who respond to death and suffering in a universal and necessary manner.

The second claim is that human vengeance manifests itself in the narrative impulse to tell stories about the past. *Historie* is a response to suffering and death. As Ricoeur implies in the passage above (and develops at length in his multivolume work on time and narrative), narration aims to save us from our fleeting condition as temporal beings by giving a sense of permanency and continuity to our world: the telling of stories shelters us from the constant passing of our lives into the past. The telling of stories aims to stave off the passing of time—the “it was” in Friedrich Nietzsche’s phrasing. “This, yes this alone is *revenge* itself: the will’s unwillingness toward time and time’s ‘it was’” (Nietzsche 2006, 111). Nietzsche, to whom Ricoeur likely alludes in his use of the word vengeance, brings to the fore the central issue here: time. *Historie* rebels against time by offering a sense of permanency and continuity to human life.

Why the rebellion? Why do we desire permanency and continuity? Ricoeur and Nietzsche offer two different answers to this question. As I already mentioned, Ricoeur claims that the desire for the permanency offered by narration derives from a timeless or universal need among humans. It is “natural.” In contrast, Nietzsche argues that it is “historical.” The longing for permanency emerged from a particular set of historically contingent circumstances as he suggests in *The Genealogy of Morality* and other writings.⁴

Influenced by Nietzsche’s genealogical approach, Hannah Arendt argues that *Historie* has a history, though she avoids Nietzsche’s attempt to say precisely when it commences. Instead, she provides a definition of *Historie* through the example of Homer. In book eight of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus hears of his battle with Achilles being sung by a bard. Herein lies the impulse to preserve the past through narrative:

[H]istory as a category of human existence is of course older than the written word, older than Herodotus, older even than Homer.

Not historically but poetically speaking, its beginning lies rather in the moment when Ulysses, at the court of the king of the Phaeacians, listened to the story of his own deeds and sufferings, to the story of his life, now a thing outside himself, an 'object' for all to see and to hear. (Arendt 1993, 45)

By telling a story about a past action, the historical narrative turns a lost moment of vitality into an object of remembrance. The prefix "re" means again and back: remembrance recuperates a past moment of action. It makes present again the "it was." As a form of remembrance, the historical narrative, the tale sung by Demodocus, saves human actions from oblivion. It immortalizes human deeds through the permanency of the written word and the perpetual sustenance of remembrance.

The salvific purpose of *Historie*, as Arendt argues in the essay from which this passage is drawn, emerged within a specific historical context, one that elevated permanency as the standard against which human action was evaluated as "transient" and "temporal." The elevation of permanency and immortality as higher in ancient Greek culture imparted lesser value to what does not last and live forever—mortal action (*pragma* in Greek). As Arendt explains:

[I]n the beginning of Western history the distinction between the mortality of men and the immortality of nature, between man-made things and things which comes into being by themselves, was the tacit assumption of historiography.⁵ All things that owe their existence to men, such as works, deeds, and words, are perishable, infected, as it were, by the mortality of their authors. However, if mortals succeeded in endowing their works, deeds, and words with some permanence and in arresting their perishability, then these things would, to a degree at least, enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness, and the mortals themselves would find their place in the cosmos, where everything is immortal except men. The human capacity to achieve this was remembrance, Mnemosyne, who therefore was regarded as the mother of all the other muses. (Arendt 1993, 43)

It is striking that Arendt traces the origins of *Historie* back to the ancient Greek. I would like therefore to develop her argument by briefly turning to some of the central sources in the history of history (*historia*). Let me begin with Herodotus, the ostensible "founder" of history, who begins his narrative by stating that history aims to preserve for posterity the otherwise fleeting actions of man (*anthrōpos*) (Nagy 1990, 215–249; Nagy 1987, 175–184). In the following passage, Herodotus suggests that the purpose of history is to grant continuity and permanency to human

actions; that is, the purpose of history is to wrest the forgotten from oblivion, the silent from silence:

[T]his is the public presentation of the inquiry (*historia*) of Herodotus of Halikarnassos, with the purpose of bringing it about that whatever results from men may not, with the passage of time, become evanescent (*exitēlos*), and that great and wondrous deeds—some of them publicly performed by Hellenes, others by barbarians—may not become without fame (*aklea*). (Nagy 1990, 217–218)

The writing of history holds evanescence at bay; *exitēlos* refers to the fading of color, the loss of a seed's generative capacity, and the ending of a family line (Nagy 1990, 225). *Exitēlos* refers to death. Hence, history overcomes or, at least, palliates death by offering the immortality of remembrance also known as *kleos*.

Kleos occupies a central place in the Greek and Indo-European epics, most famously those written by Homer (Segal 2001, 85), where the striving to attain immortal fame, to be remembered by the poet or the historian, represents the mortal's best hope of attaining immortality, as Sarpedon tells Glaucus in the *Iliad*:

[M]an, supposing you and I, escaping this battle,
would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
nor would I urge you into fighting where men win glory.
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.
(Homer 2011, 286)

Kleos offers salvation from the finality of death. And yet the promise of eternal remembrance also comes into doubt in the *Iliad*. In his famous speech in book nine, Achilles questions Odysseus's argument that his returning to battle will earn him lavish riches, personal glory, and honors befitting a god. Achilles recognizes that all the greatest honors and material riches in the world will not change the fact that he will die early if he picks his scepter back up. Achilles senses the finality of his death and asks: Does *kleos* in fact redeem death? If every human dies, does the distinction between the great and the non-great hold? In Achilles's words:

Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard.
We are all held in a single honor, the brave with the weaklings.

A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much.
Nothing is won for me, now that my heart has gone through its afflictions
in forever setting my life on the hazard of battle.

(Homer 2011, 224–225)

With the immortality of *kleos* in doubt, how could the warrior life be more desirable than the life at home?

[I] carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,
if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
my return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting
but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
the excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life
left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly.

(Homer 2011, 227)

Achilles ceases fighting and thinks about the norms of the warrior culture that govern his actions, albeit not enough to prevent him from fighting in the end. No matter how much he may recognize the fragility of *kleos*, he cannot give up the tragic embrace of striving to be remembered. Returning to battle, Achilles says: “Now I must win excellent glory (*kleos*)” (Homer 2011, 399).

A similar ambivalence towards *kleos* can be found in Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War. Like Herodotus, Thucydides begins his account by noting its commemorative aspect: “Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians” (Thucydides 1998). By writing a narrative about the war, Thucydides aimed to salvage a particular past from oblivion. Having said that, though, the word *kleos* only appears in Thucydides’ account three times, with the most significant occurrence coming in Pericles’s funeral oration.⁶ Pericles’s speech, which precedes discussion of the Athenian plague, initially seems to affirm the Homeric cliché that immortality can be obtained through heroic remembrance (*kleos*). Pericles gives redemptive meaning to the deaths of the war victims, praising them for their heroic decision to embrace death for the community’s survival over a prosperous life at home. Pericles says: “For in giving their lives in common cause, they individually gained imperishable praise and the most distinctive tomb, not the one where they are buried but the one where on every occasion for word and deed their glory is left after them eternally” (Thucydides 1998, 96).

Thucydides questions, however, the salvific promise of *kleos* in his portrayal of Athenian society during the plague, which follows Pericles’s speech. In the face of suffering and death, Athenians became impervious to the values they once cherished: “People, seeing nothing

they could do as the disaster overwhelmed them, developed indifference toward sacred and profane alike. All the funeral customs they had previously observed were thrown into confusion” (Thucydides 1998, 100). By depicting this collapse, Thucydides reveals the fragility of conventions such as *kleos*. Thus, he ultimately questions and affirms the need for salvation, bringing him close to Homer. When viewed together, the message of both ancient writers seems to be that mortals cannot live without some hope for salvation, regardless how much they may question that hope. Another towering intellectual from the ancient Greek world, Plato, would agree. In the *Symposium*, Socrates says that the mortal being (*physis*) “seeks so far as possible to live forever and be deathless” (Plato 1998, 54).

Socrates’ claim raises the central issue of necessity that I introduced earlier through Ricoeur. To recall, Ricoeur assumes that the human has an ineluctable need for salvation. One might read Plato as making the same claim, especially if one translates *physis* as “nature.” The word nature, from *natura*, has a long intellectual history. In brief, it refers to the propensity to identify a specific being according to what it has already been presupposed to be necessarily and universally. To say that a thing, X, has a nature, Y, is to identify Y as what transcends X in time and space. Returning to Plato, one can interpret the above quote to mean that the human being (*anthrōpos*, in Plato’s language) necessarily and universally aims to overcome death by achieving immortal glory through *Historie*.

But is Plato correct? Are we humans “naturally” inclined to flee mortality into dreams of immortal glory? Is it so that we need the salvific promise of *Historie*? As we have already seen, Nietzsche and Arendt do not think so, since they provide a genealogical account of the historical conditions that make the notions of immortality, history, and salvation possible in the first place. The implication of their genealogical approach bears stressing. As genealogists, Nietzsche, Arendt, and others like them (most notably Michel Foucault) nourish the possibility of transformation—of salvation—by revealing how any particular thought, view, or practice that might seem “natural” turns out in fact to be historically contingent.⁷ A given something has an origin. And, if something has an origin, then it could have unfolded differently or not at all. It must therefore be changeable in principle.⁸ If so, then different possibilities of thinking, living, and practicing can be imagined: a new way of thinking about the relationship between history and salvation is possible. There can be a different, ostensibly non-salvific way of remembering that faces suffering and death. What might such a form of history look like? And can it be implemented in practice? These are the questions to which we now turn via Libeskind.

Representing Suffering

At the center of Libeskind's project lies an attempt to represent absence, to represent the lives of those who suffered and died during the Holocaust. Libeskind's museum takes up the task of mourning the dead and promoting reflection on the "erasure and void of Jewish life in Berlin" (Libeskind 2000, 23). As he explains:

[C]utting through the form of the Jewish Museum is a void, a straight line whose impenetrability forms the central focus around which the exhibitions are organized. In order to cross from one space of the museum to the other, the visitors traverse sixty bridges that open into the void space—the embodiment of absence. (Libeskind 2000, 28)

The embodiment of absence refers to the suffering and loss of the victims whose lives cannot be redeemed or recuperated through the conventional means of historical narration as described briefly above. As James Young writes, Libeskind's project represents "an aggressively anti-redemptory design, built literally around an absence of meaning in history, an absence of the people who would have given meaning to their history" (Young 2000, 179). Or in Libeskind's own words:

[I]n terms of this museum, what is not visible is the richness of the former Jewish contribution to Berlin. It cannot be found in artifacts because it has been turned to ash. It has physically disappeared. This is part of the exhibit: a museum where no museological functions can actually take place. (Libeskind 1995, 35)

The last sentence is of particular importance. What might we make of Libeskind's claim that his museum can have no museological function?

Three points can be distinguished. First, his insistence on absence undermines the salvific purpose of the historical narrative. Libeskind says as much when he writes: "Although the program originally called for a chronological display, I have introduced the idea of the void as a physical interference with chronology" (Libeskind 1995, 34). The void interferes with the chronological ordering of the past into a narrative by avoiding—or so is the aim—the impulse to narrate the past altogether. The void aims to be silent in the face of violence, thereby calling into question the impulse to recuperate the past by telling a story about it. Since the lives of the victims cannot be recovered or redeemed through narration, Libeskind's art undercuts the basic role *Historie* has long played in European history. The recuperative, immortalizing function of *Historie* collapses in the face of the suffering and death of the Holocaust. Second, Libeskind's project suggests that the suffering and death of the

victims cannot be used for any traditional pedagogical purpose because to do so would be to transform “it” into an object of educational study. Libeskind calls into question the conventional historical and pedagogical aim of salvaging some kind of meaning or value from history for the needs of the present.⁹ Viewed from this perspective, Libeskind’s art has no purpose, if it is divorced from practice or application in the Kantian sense of being divorced from interest. Finally, his project challenges the objectification of the past by the historical narrative. *Historie* assumes the past to be an object that can be recuperated and brought back into the present. In doing so, *Historie* does not reflect on the absence of the past. Rather, it turns away from absence by virtue of recuperating the past and making it present. In contradistinction, Libeskind’s art makes absence “the one element of continuity throughout the complex form of the building” (Libeskind 1995, 35).

By centering his design on absence, Libeskind commits himself to a commemorative project that, on its own terms, seeks nothing more than to mourn the suffering of the victims and the catastrophe of history.¹⁰ In this respect, his project bears an affinity with Theodor W. Adorno’s assertion that it would be callous to derive meaning from history. “After Auschwitz,” Adorno writes, “our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate” (Adorno 1973, 361). According to Adorno, the conventional attempt to give meaning to suffering through the historical narrative has collapsed after the Holocaust. While suffering should be mourned and such mourning can remind us of the vulnerability each of us faces as suffering beings and thereby strengthen a normative commitment to egalitarianism, one cannot impose any further determinate meaning on the past than that. Adorno bases this claim philosophically on the absence or impossibility of arriving at a final and holistic view of the past. If one’s view of the past can only be partial in the absence of knowing the whole, then one cannot declare any meaning to be determinate (i.e. final or certain).

Libeskind expresses this very point in the quote that begins this essay; he describes his building as “not a collage or a collision or a simple dialectic, but a new type of organization which is organized around a center which is not, around what is not visible” (Libeskind 1997, 34). The lack of a center renders impossible any attempt to derive any final meaning from the past. We are left with, then, recalling the past only to mourn those who have died. In this sense, Libeskind’s building can be seen as a monument of ruins that seeks only to remember the dead and liberate the silent from silence.

Nevertheless, his project faces several significant challenges in attempting to be such a monument. Libeskind’s effort to represent absence in a building otherwise devoted to providing a holistic historical

narrative about German Jewry reveals a significant tension between his project's content and form. Whereas the exhibition renders German Jewish history present again through the chronological narration of some 2,000 years of history, the building challenges the narrative recuperation of the past through its "embodiment of absence" (Libeskind 2000, 28). Moreover, Libeskind faces the challenge of representing absence in a fully constructed building. How does a building represent what is no longer present? How does art represent suffering and pain?

The basic thrust of these questions was articulated by Jacques Derrida in his short commentary on Libeskind's architecture in which he raised an "anxious question" with regards to Libeskind's void, "this determined void of yours, totally invested with history, meaningfulness, and experience" (Derrida 1992, 93). As Derrida explains, Libeskind's void turns out after all to be determinate and meaningful:

[T]his void which has to be made visible is not simply any void. It is a void that is historically determined or circumscribed; and it is not, for example, the indeterminate place in which everything takes place. It is a void that corresponds to an experience which somewhere else you have called the end of history—the Holocaust as the end of history. ... The void you are determining here is the void as determined by an event—the Holocaust—which is also the end of history. Everything is organized from this end of history and from this void—this is what makes it meaningful. (Derrida 1992, 93)

Derrida claims that Libeskind's project ends up affirming the very salvific role of *Historie* that it purports to challenge. Not only does Libeskind's project turn away from absence by representing it in architecture but it also locates the void within an explanatory framework of historical meaning based on a determinate end: the Holocaust. Situated within a particular narrative about German Jewish history focused on the Holocaust as the catastrophic *telos* of German Jewish history, Libeskind's art ultimately fails to transcend the conventions of *Historie*. It remains entrapped in the metaphysical tradition's orientation towards representation and narration.¹¹ Libeskind's void conceals the absence it seeks to represent by giving it a determinate form and meaning. The upshot of Derrida's point is clear: one cannot move beyond the limits set by the contexts of the metaphysical elixir of salvation.¹²

That Libeskind's art represents absence and suffering keeps it within the confines of the metaphysical tradition, to be sure. Nevertheless, Derrida perhaps underplays the boldness of Libeskind's artistic attempt to move out of the salvific tradition of *Historie*.¹³ Libeskind expresses this ambition most clearly in his attempt to create spaces in his building "where no museological functions can actually take place." Conventionally, an architect designs a building to be used. The structure aims to fulfill a specific

end or use. The same goes for a monument. Conventionally, an architect designs a monument to be used for the purpose of commemorating and immortalizing an individual or group that has perished.

It is precisely against the grain of purposiveness that Libeskind's art moves. Now, we might ask, following Derrida, how Libeskind can possibly move against purposiveness since he obviously designed a building and a monument to be used. His building does have a purpose, but its purpose consists in disrupting the urge to settle on a final purpose. The building seeks to unsettle the propensity to derive a final, certain, and stable meaning from the past. It seeks to disrupt the urge to fill in the void. In this respect, Libeskind's art can be characterized as anti-salvific to the extent that salvation is inherently oriented towards purpose and meaning (Löwith 1949). And, indeed, herein lies the crux of Libeskind's challenge to *Historie*. If the historical narrative by definition orders the past into a determinate framework of purpose and meaning (of which chronology is the most common framework), then Libeskind's art attempts to disrupt the intention of *Historie* by creating open spaces of continuous indeterminacy where no one single narrative can dominate. In Libeskind's words, the Jewish Museum Berlin is oriented towards "open narratives." As he writes:

[T]he point about the *open* narrative is that the various stories one can make about the museum are at odds with each other and also cannot be reconciled by any overall thematic because the narrative ... exists in a balanced field of contention. For example, the narrative of the absent space is not more dominant than the narrative of the space which continues across this absence. (Libeskind 1990, 17)

The Politics of Absence

Wherein lies Libeskind's interest in creating an anti-purposive, anti-salvific architecture of open and indeterminate narratives? His interest lies in creating a kind of poetic architecture as a metaphor of human suffering and catastrophe. Following Adorno, Libeskind does not wish to produce a singular and certain narrative about the Holocaust not only because such a move would instrumentalize the death of others for one's own contemporary needs but also because no person—for Adorno, as for Libeskind—can accede to the position of knowing the whole of history so as to privilege one narrative over another or to reconcile all the various narratives one might be able to tell about the past into one overarching final account. That there is always something absent precludes one from ever coming to a final conclusion. "Whatever absence there is it is not found in the world," Libeskind remarks, "In the world, we find only the impossibility of finding that absence" (Libeskind 1990, 17). Absence is ineffable and unknowable for Libeskind. It cannot be rendered transparent by reason as a border or limit to what can be known.

If this emphasis on the ineffable and unknowable sounds religious, it clearly is, as Libeskind himself notes, albeit in the Hegelian sense of that word.¹⁴ According to Hegel, a religious position expresses the sentiment of impossibility. It insists on the incapacity of attaining complete and final knowledge of the whole—precisely the knowledge that Hegel sets out to achieve in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹⁵ In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel aims to provide a final and universal narrative of the structure of thought as it responds to the world dialectically (or, at minimum, he advances the claim that rationality makes a wager on completion and finality without which rationality could not be possible). The *telos* of Hegel's thought is the emergence of the perfectly transparent rational society where the religious insistence on incapacity is overcome through the ascent to absolute knowledge.

Hegel is mentioned here because Libeskind's affirmation of absence as ineffable reflects a distinctly post-1945, postcatastrophic repudiation of Hegel's thought. This repudiation of Hegel flourished after the war, particularly in France where Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault viewed Hegel's insistence on completion and finality as tyrannical or destructive. Among others (except Marxists such as Alain Badiou and Ernst Bloch), Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault rejected Hegelian finality in favor of what they took to be a kind of liberating, salvific openness—an egalitarian notion of freedom from hegemonic narratives based on the impossibility of attributing final authority to any single narrative or view. If no view can become authoritative, then an egalitarian community can come together around the common recognition that all are equally limited. Since there is always something out there in the world that cannot be accessed by reason, since we are all equally creating and speaking in a void, none of us can claim to have ascended to the heights of absolute knowledge. And, if none of us can claim to hold the absolute and final truth, then none of us has the right to dominate and rule over others through such a truth.

The absence of final answers, of final solutions, undermines the basis of domination and authoritarianism according to this poststructural conception of egalitarianism. This is so because authoritarianism amounts to one person asserting his or her view over that of another with absolute certainty. Authoritarians do not doubt the righteousness of the positions they impose on others. If they did, then they would not be authoritarians. Rather, authoritarians assert themselves out of the certain conviction that they are absolutely correct. Poststructural thought undermines authoritarianism by demonstrating that no one can claim absolute certainty and correctness in the absence of indubitable or permanent foundations. In Michel Foucault's words: "All power only ever rests on the contingency and fragility of a history [*histoire*, a story or narrative]" (Foucault 2014, 77). If the basis of any assertion of power is fragile, then no power can command complete and total authority.

To this poststructural conception of egalitarianism, Libeskind adds the important aspect of human fragility and suffering. Suffering is central to his project not only in the sense that his building reflects on the catastrophe of the Holocaust but also in the sense that his art foregrounds suffering and death in its reflection on absence. This turn towards absence reflects a distinctly “postcatastrophic” sensibility to human suffering on the level of both aesthetics and politics. Aesthetically, Libeskind’s attempt to represent absence disrupts the impulse to make the past present again through narration. Politically, his art aims to remember the suffering of the victims so as to prompt reflection on human fragility, which authoritarianism violently seeks to deny and overcome.¹⁶ Libeskind’s art reflects a distinctly postcatastrophic, poststructural response to the violence unleashed by Hitler’s rejection of human vulnerability, a response that seeks salvation from the salvific need for *Historie*.

Notes

- 1 On the history of Libeskind’s project, see Paul B. Jaskot (2010), Kartin Pieper (2006); Caroline Wiedmer (1999, 145–155). For architectural discussions and appreciations of Libeskind’s project, see Andreas Huyssen (1997); James Young (2000, 152–183). For an excellent contextualization of Jewish architecture after the Holocaust, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld (2011).
- 2 The present essay develops in greater depth (and with greater precision, I think) an argument I first introduced in “Monuments of Ruination in Postwar Berlin and Warsaw: The Architectural Projects of Bohdan Lachert and Daniel Libeskind” (Meng 2017, 550–573).
- 3 In this respect, Libeskind’s project attempts to reconcile the particular and the universal by remembering the particular suffering of German Jews with the aim of provoking reflection on human vulnerability itself. For a broad discussion of the issues at stake here, see Michael Rothberg (2009); Max Pensky (2012, 254–266).
- 4 In *nuce*, Nietzsche claims that the standard of permanency, which devalues this world of time, was established by Plato and disseminated by Christianity, “Platonism for the people” (Nietzsche 1990, 32).
- 5 Historiography in Arendt’s sense of the word refers to the writing of history, that is, *Historie*.
- 6 They are: 1.10.2, 1.25.4, and 2.45.2.
- 7 A study on this aspect of genealogy is Colin Koopman (Koopman 2013).
- 8 While Arendt’s historical approach opens up this possibility in general, I would like to point out that in regard to the specific issues at stake in this essay Arendt affirms the salvific purpose of *Historie* in *The Human Condition*. See *The Human Condition*, intro. Margaret Canovan (1998).
- 9 More broadly, Libeskind undermines the impulse to turn everything in the world into something useful or what George Lukács calls reification. See his *History and Class Consciousness* (1971).
- 10 There is, however, ambiguity in Libeskind’s thinking on this matter. While he emphasizes perpetual mourning and remembrance, Libeskind also nourishes hopeful possibilities of transformation in a much more affirmative way than Adorno would. His project aims “to express how, through the acknowledgment

- of a particular form of absence, life can have meaning and an optimistic, hopeful direction" (1995, 33).
- 11 This failure affirms the differential interplay of presence and absence. At stake in this interplay for Derrida is ensuring that no meaning or narrative may become authoritative (including the elevation of absence as an authority). If a final meaning never comes, we have many attempts at meaning and representation, none of which can succeed.
 - 12 Derrida denies that one can get out of the metaphysical tradition in his commentary on Martin Heidegger who attempts to do so in his writings of the 1930s especially in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. See Derrida (1989).
 - 13 Derrida does not consider the possibility I describe below because, to emphasize, he denies the possibility of novelty itself (i.e. moving outside the dyads and frames of the metaphysical tradition). In addition to *Of Spirit*, he makes this point very clear in his critique of Foucault as well as in an essay on novelty. See Jacques Derrida (1978, 31–63); (2007, 1–47).
 - 14 See also *Libeskind Radix-Matrix* (1997, 34), where he writes: "I believe this scheme joins architecture to questions which are now relevant to all humanity ... But not bound by means of any obvious forms, rather through faith; through an absence of meaning and an absence of artefacts."
 - 15 As Hegel puts it in the preface, "Das Wahre ist das Ganze" [The True is the whole] (Hegel 1977, 11).
 - 16 In Libeskind's words, his project aims "to express how, through the acknowledgment of a particular form of absence, life can have meaning and an optimistic, hopeful direction" (Libeskind 1995, 33). See also Mairs (2015).

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6 Globalization, Universalization, and Forensic Turn: Postcatastrophic Memorial Museums[☆]

Ljiljana Radonić

Many recently inaugurated museums dealing with atrocities in the 20th century have a similar appearance. In the *Terror Háza* [*House of Terror*], a building in central Budapest where people were tortured, first by Hungarian Nazi collaborators and later by communist state police, the wall depicting victim portraits reaches from the ground to the top floor—a clear reference to the *Tower of Faces* at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Yet, in the Hungarian case, we do learn nothing about the individual victims, who are the focus of the private photographs collection in Washington; the whole House of Terror serves only one purpose: to stage Hungarian collective suffering, Hungary itself as the biggest victim of all. Ten years after the genocide in Rwanda, the Kigali Memorial Museum opened with a permanent exhibition in the capital approved by the president of Rwanda and curated by a UK-based NGO that specialized in Holocaust exhibitions (Brandstetter 2010). A black panel with private photographs of the victims highlights the individual victim, a focus that goes hand in hand with the “universalization of the Holocaust” (Eckel and Moisel 2008) as a “negative icon” (Diner 2007, 7) of our era. At first, following the big commemorative events in 2004, the atrocities were referred to as the “1994 Genocide” without naming the victim groups. Yet when the government of Rwanda took the decision to change all references to the 1994 Genocide to “Genocide against the Tutsis,” the Kigali Memorial Center had to follow suit—although mentioning only the Tutsis as victims does not mention the fact that there were Hutu who protected Tutsi during the genocide and that revenge violence against Hutu occurred until the 2000s (Buckley-Zistel 2006, 141). There is, therefore, an obvious tension between “the global rush to commemorate atrocities” (Williams 2007) at postcatastrophic sites in a globalized way, and the challenge of self-critical “negative memory” (Koselleck 2002) that not only identifies with

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the victim but allows for delicate questions of guilt and responsibility, of perpetrators and collaborators.

Much has been written about transnational/cosmopolitan/universalized/globalized memory (Stone 2004; Levy and Sznaider 2005; Alexander 2009; Assmann and Conrad 2010; Leggewie and Lang 2011). This paper argues that what is called “globalization” compromises in fact three parallel, partially contrary trends: (1) The US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem are role models for one concept of universal moral orientation that uses victim narratives in order to build identity. This includes the focus on the individual victim (instead of photographs of anonymous corpses or heroic narratives) and aesthetical musealization “standards”—even for postcatastrophic in-situ memorial sites. (2) The German concept of “negative memory”—self-critically confronting the crimes committed by one’s own community—has inspired museums to more or less successfully tackle the delicate question of collaboration in order to challenge collective self-victimization and externalization of responsibility. (3) The genocides of the 1990s have led to a globally unfolding “forensic turn:” bones, spaces, and material traces of atrocities, become subject to investigation, thus bringing about a profound change in the ways the memorial museums deal with material traces of the violence they come to commemorate. This shift has an impact on “old” memorial sites such as Sobibór and Treblinka, transforming them into sites of archaeological research after 70 years.

Do specific obligations arise in connection with postcatastrophic memorial museums in-situ? Can memorials at the sites of mass crimes do greater justice to complex historical events and victims than historical museums in capital cities—museums that are often criticized for embodying a political agenda? Are historical events, perpetrators, and victims presented differently at such sites? How are universalization and individualization, negative memory, and the forensic turn related to each other at the memorial museums? Can we say that the aesthetics and forms developed by Holocaust memorial museums “travel” (Erl 2011, 13) to museums in Rwanda and Srebrenica, while the forensic approach “travels” to Sobibór and Treblinka, influenced by the recent genocides? Connecting all three trends will show how the following categories are pertinent: flagship of national identity vs. motivation by external “standards;” focusing on the suffering of one’s “own” collective vs. that of others; externalization of responsibility vs. negative memory; representing collective vs. individual victim stories.

Memorial museums not only display history but also commemorate crimes and genocides since they deal with traumatic events of the recent past. Yet, while concepts of post-trauma and postmemory tend to focus on the individual aspect, or respectively the individual transmission within the family, the concept of postcatastrophe also looks at collective constellations, objects, remains, and ruins and the specifics of in-situ postcatastrophic sites (Artwińska and Tippner 2017, 15–39). Memorial museums constitute an inherent contradiction. While a memorial is usually devoted to history

seemingly set in stone, a history museum is presumed to be concerned with interpretation, contextualization, and critique. "The coalescing of the two suggests that there is an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts" (Williams 2007, 8). That many recent memorial museums find themselves instantly politicized itself reflects the uneasy conceptual coexistence of reverent remembrance and critical interpretation.

Museums are key producers of knowledge and history, of the dominant historical narrative that is always shaped by current identity-building purposes; they display how a society interprets its past, but they are definitely not neutral spaces of knowledge transfer showing how "it" was before. They are, rather, manifestations of cultural patterns, inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, as well as social, ethnic, and religious in- and outgroups—contested spaces (Sommer-Sieghart 2006, 159; Simon 2010). Memorial museums are sites where identity is represented, official memory is canonized, and the dominant historical narrative is made visible as the foundation of the present. On the other hand, museums can also challenge the hegemonic national narrative.

The discussion over the role of museums as propagators of national identity goes hand in hand with the diagnosis of a change in perspective. What was formulated as a desideratum 15 years ago (Crane 1997), is self-evident today: The focus on the victims' perspective has, for the most part, replaced hero, martyr, or resistance narratives (Rousso 2011, 32). Still, it is necessary to distinguish between the individual approach that aims at displaying "ordinary life before" (Köhr 2007) and empathy without identification on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the victim represented as part of a collective, as an emotionalizing symbol for national suffering. While the former does not need to conceal the perpetrator and the social context, since memory implies the question of quality and root causes of the atrocities, the latter goes hand in hand with the externalization of responsibility, leading to a "Europe of victims" (Hammerstein and Hofmann 2009, 203)—and beyond the European frame.

In both cases, decisions concerning which objects and images should be used, how to organize them, and how to choose a space to display them involve aesthetic, ethical, and political issues typically loaded with significance. Memorial museums stand for authenticity and evidence on the one hand, but also often desire to create an emotive, dramatic visitor experience, on the other.¹ Apor and Sarkisova argue that physical objects play a significant role in the relationship of the present to the recent past, which is why the

"touch of the real" makes historical exhibitions so attractive for many variants of the politics of history and memory. ... Many of the museums representing Communism are either the actual result of, or

closely connected to, resolutely articulated politics of commemoration. (Apor and Sarkisova 2008, 5)

One would expect the “authentic” postcatastrophic sites of atrocities to differ from memorial museums in the US, Israel, or the capitals of European countries not located on such sites. While the latter can be viewed through the prism of their urban and architectural contexts, the political debates and decisions leading to their establishment in strategic or peripheral urban settings, the former are assessed principally as more or less creative (and historically accurate) responses to the actual spatialities and materialities of violence (Schindel and Colombo 2014). In Rwanda and Srebrenica, forensic investigations and archaeological research preceded the construction of memorial museums, which incorporate the findings both in their exhibitions and architectural arrangements. The Kigali Genocide Memorial and Sobibór are obvious cases in point. Elsewhere, not least in some former National Socialist concentration camps, the demand for “authenticity” (Assmann 2005, 325–338) has often gone hand in hand with very selective preservation policies, beginning in the early postwar years in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek and the 1960s in Germany and Austria. To date, the mass graves in their immediate vicinity have not been taken into account at sites like Jasenovac. Why do the spatialities and materialities of atrocities serve as independent, impersonal agents (Latour 2005; Olsen 2010) in some memorials on postcatastrophic sites but not in others?

“Universalization” and “Globalization” of the Holocaust

The “memory-boom” in the West after the Cold War emphasized the Holocaust as the “negative icon” (Diner 2007, 7) of the 20th century. It has become a universal imperative for respect for human rights in general, and as a “container” for the memory of different victims and victim groups (Levy/Sznaider 2005). While Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider understood cosmopolitization of the Holocaust at first as a predominantly positive trend, in the preface to the second German edition of their renowned book they call it the “price” of this “de-contextualization” that “there are no Jews and no Germans allowed any more in this discourse. There are only humans and humanity, as follows from the term ‘crimes against humanity’ and the development of a moral and legal codex against ‘genocide’” (Levy and Sznaider 2005, 12). In the global context, “universalization of the Holocaust” furthermore means that different victim groups’ stress that they have suffered “just like the Jews” (Rothberg 2009, 239).

In Europe, this “universalization of the Holocaust” has another dimension: the memory of the Holocaust has become a negative European founding myth (Leggewie and Lang 2011, 15). Postwar Europe is understood as a collective with a common destiny that developed shared structures in order to

avoid a recurrence of the catastrophe of the Holocaust. In its search for an identity that goes beyond economic and monetary union, this founding myth provides a compelling common narrative that is otherwise lacking. This is one of the reasons why the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (today: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA)—founded in Sweden as a network of politicians and experts in 1998—aroused so much interest and today includes 31 countries, most of them European.

The international Holocaust conference that took place in Stockholm on 27 January 2000, the 55th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, for the first time brought heads of state together with renowned experts and survivors from 46 states (Kroh 2008, 111). Among the resulting declarations was a recommendation that countries introduce a Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, or another date connected to the murder of the Jews in their respective countries (Schmid 2008). By 2010, 34 of the 56 OSCE member states had followed the recommendation. The “suggestion” that countries join the Holocaust Task Force and implement a Holocaust Memorial Day was the first step toward some kind of “European standard.” While not officially applied during the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004, these standards were internalized by future member countries—as suggested by the fact that Hungary’s Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest opened a few weeks before the country joined the EU—despite no permanent exhibition having been installed at that point (Fritz 2010, 173).

Acknowledging the Holocaust became an entry ticket to the EU, as Tony Judt (2005) has put it. Running parallel to the “Europeanization of the Holocaust” has been a re-narration of history in Eastern European countries from 1989 onwards, in particular the invention of a “golden era” before communist rule (Cornelißen 2006, 48; Troebst 2013 and 2006). The narrative of a heroic antifascist struggle has been delegitimized along with the communist regimes—if Soviet history was a myth, then the antifascist narrative which was at its core must have been part of this instrumentalization. The trauma of communist crimes, often evoked using symbols familiar from Holocaust memory (railway tracks, carriages), is now placed at the core of memory. A “divided memory” between “East” and “West” has prompted representatives of post-communist states to demand that communist crimes be condemned “to the same extent” as those of the Holocaust. In reaction to these conflicting memories, the European Parliament recommended in 2009 that another memorial day to be introduced on 23 August, the date of the Hitler-Stalin respectively Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939, in which the victims of Nazism and Stalinism are commemorated together (the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism). While the memory of the victims of Stalinism is thereby finally added to the European canon, the explicit equation of victims of both regimes are raised new problems. The new memorial day is not, in fact, an addition

to 27 January, but its antithesis: while the Holocaust Memorial Day acknowledges the crimes of its own collective, the European Day of Remembrance externalizes responsibility for those crimes to the Nazis and the Soviets. One's "own people" are understood as innocent victims of oppression from outside, while participation in the communist regime is denied and externalized.

When Levy and Sznajder wrote about the "cosmopolitisation of the Holocaust," they concentrated on examples from the US, Israel, and Germany, three countries that have—each in its own way—a very specific relationship to the Shoah. They completely ignored the post-communist states, for example, which renders their claims about the "globalization," or "cosmopolitization" of the trends they describe rather questionable. I argue that what is called "globalization" are in fact three parallel, partially contrary trends.

Trend 1—Archetypical Holocaust Memorial Museums

The "universalization of the Holocaust" makes the approach of a "memorial museum" the dominant paradigm for institutions dealing with atrocities from the 20th century. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, for which the term "memorial museum" was first developed, serve as role models. The first "globalized" trend thus combines: A universal moral orientation, learning from the Holocaust to respect human rights and prevent new atrocities and "human suffering;" individual victim stories: testimonies, photographs from their "lives before," and auratic objects; and aesthetic musealization "standards" from the US and Israel: dark rooms, victims' belongings, names of the victims written mostly in white letters on dark ground.

This holds true even of in-situ museums at the sites of the Second World War atrocities in Germany, Austria, and Poland, and memorials in Rwanda, etc. There is a tendency for in-situ museums to tap into this "global" language of forms without much regard to the actual presence or suitability of relevant material traces on the ground. At the Jasenovac Memorial Museum in Croatia, for example, the fact that the museum is located at the site of a concentration camp—there were still mass graves on the site—does not play much of a role at the exhibition. Thus, it could have been installed anywhere else in the country, since it hardly touches upon the material aspects of the site, the daily routine in the camp, or the camp commanders and overseers. The exhibition focuses on the individual victim stories while referring to the perpetrators merely in generalizing terms as the *Ustaša* as the Croat fascists called themselves. Thus, while one critic called the exhibition "post-modern rubbish," another one rumbled it as a "dray-horse towards Europe" while Croatian EU accession talks were stagnating (Radonić 2010).

I have shown elsewhere (Radonić 2017) that post-communist memorial museums tend to fall into two categories. The first category stresses the allegiance to Europe, refers to international standards of musealization, and claims to focus on the individual victim: The Jasenovac Memorial Museum and the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest show stunning similarities when it comes to dark exhibition rooms, names of the victims written in white letters on a black backdrop, the focus on testimonies, and the personal belongings of individual victims exhibited in glass showcases. Both museums explicitly refer to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., as their role model. In order to determine whether this merely reflects an attempt to invoke Europe and pay lip service to “Western memory standards” or genuinely demonstrates the proliferation of new, transnational forms of “negative memory,” we need to examine how the aesthetic form connects to the content of the exhibitions discussed in the next chapter.

In another group of memorial museums, narratives of Nazi occupation are predominantly used to frame an anti-communist interpretation of history. “Threatening” aspects of the memory of Nazism are contained so that it cannot compete with stories of Soviet crimes. Thus, the Shoah here only serves in order to demonstrate that communist crimes were worse, not even to claim that Nazi and communist crimes were equal. Yet both kinds of museums refer to the archetypical aesthetics of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The House of Terror adopted the principle of the *Tower of Faces* in Washington by exhibiting portraits of the victims on a wall that ranges from the ground floor up to the roof. Yet, these aesthetics originating from the turn toward the individual victim in “western” museology are placed here in a narrative of collective (Hungarian) suffering from Hungarian Nazis and communists. Also, the *Könnnyek Terme* (Hall of Tears)” in the basement reminds one strongly of the Children’s Memorial at Yad Vashem. Yet its director, Mária Schmidt, had a clear position regarding the Holocaust: the Second World War was not about Jews or genocide. “We are sorry, but the Holocaust, the extermination or salvation of the Jews was a side, so to say, a marginal aspect, which was not the war objective of any of the opponents” (Schmidt 1999). The ostensible equation of Nazi and communist crimes turns into the struggle to contain Holocaust memory while at the same time demonstrating its predominance as the European negative founding myth, by adopting its symbolism and aesthetics.

Post-communist museums take the Holocaust as a reference point when musealization strategies coming from Holocaust museums are implemented: the memory of the Nazi crimes and its victims is contained and marginalized, while at the same time the individualization of the victim narrative is applied only to “our” victims, those who suffered from Communism. Even if the museums decide against trends stemming from international Holocaust museums, they still confirm them as a standard by taking a stand. According

to the director of the *Okupatsioonide muuseum* (Museum of Occupation) in Tallinn, inaugurated in 2003, the building was inspired by the Museum of Danish Resistance in Copenhagen (Ahonen 2008, 233). Its directors see it in clear opposition to Holocaust museums, which he describes as dark, plant-like, and creating uneasiness (Ahonen 2005, 108). As per Heiki Ahonen, Western Holocaust museums limited the museum experience through the use of dark and oppressive spaces combined with a hushed reverent tone that was

[a]lmost church-like. In Holocaust-museums, you are told not to speak loudly, have to behave, but the church atmosphere does not support learning. You are just made to act in a certain way. You are dragged into some kind of environment where there should be no doubts. It's all set. (Ahonen quoted in Mark 2008, 351)

Ahonen sees an impropriety in importing a “Western” style of history that was of much less significance to Estonia than it was to other parts of Europe. He addresses the need to show an international audience the validity of the specific and different nature of an Estonian story that did not need to foreground the Holocaust. When asked by the director of the USHMM what was exhibited at the museum regarding the Holocaust, he answered:

[E]stonia never had a Jewish question and we just simply don't have any physical items from these people who were killed. [...] We are never going to do what's done in some concentration camps, let's say they built the new crematorium and said that this is original. (Ahonen quoted in Mark 2008, 367)

There are meaningful exceptions from this rule grounded in the specific history of each country: Former Nazi satellites and recent deficient democracies in the 1990s, Slovakia and Croatia, are the most prominent examples of the “invocation of Europe,” while the *Terezín* memorial in the Czech Republic stands out completely. It prefers a bright aesthetic, including a shiny blue sky outside the symbolic ghetto windows, and does not refer to any kind of European standards. There are also voids in musealization, like in Bulgaria and Rumania, where dozens of memorial museums from the communist era were closed during the half-hearted transformation process in order to be redone, but never reopened.

No matter if post-communist museums import the aesthetics stemming from Holocaust memorial museums or they explicitly refuse their church-like atmosphere that makes you behave in a certain way as Ahonen put it in the quote above: they prove how universalized Holocaust memory is as the universal moral imperative one has to refer to in some way. Thus, even if the museums decide against trends stemming from international

Holocaust museums, they still confirm them as a standard. Yet, to what extent are aesthetics and content contradictory here?

Trend 2—"Negative Memory" and the German Norm of Confronting the Past

Theodor W. Adorno formulated a "new categorical imperative," to arrange our "thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself," (Adorno 1966, 358) and Dan Diner (1988) has called the Shoah a "rupture in civilization." German scholars developed the concept of "negative memory" (Koselleck 2002), something that takes the historically precisely contextualized guilt and responsibility of a "perpetrator country" as an opportunity for critical self-reflection and self-assurance, as the director of the Buchenwald Memorial at the site of the former concentration camp put it (Knigge 2008, 157).

References to this negative past are conceived to be comprehensive and concrete. It has to include victims, perpetrators, and social as well as individual preconditions for deeds, without blending out ambivalences and grey areas that contradict simple schemata of victims and perpetrators. "Negative memory" takes reverence toward victims seriously without pitting it against historical knowledge, striving to understand and reflect. According to Knigge self-critical historical memory is by no means the same as superficial moral rejection (Knigge 2005, 24 and 2008, 159).

Of course, the successor state of the Third Reich had no other choice in developing a new positive national identity other than to claim that it had worked through the Nazi crimes in an exemplary way—while Austria on the other side staged itself as the "first victim" of National Socialism. Yet what Timothy Garton Ash (2011) has called the "DIN [German industrial norm] standards for past-beating"—material on this German notion of memory fills a library by now—was exported to many European countries in the course of the "Europeanization of the Holocaust," and led to self-critically dealing with questions of complicity and collaboration. Only during such a phase was it possible for example for Jan Tomasz Gross' *Jedwabne* book to have such a heavy impact on the Polish debate. This development is part of the explanation why today the crimes of the Vichy regime, the Swiss "Nazi gold controversy," or Lithuanian execution missions are confronted critically.

Of course, it makes a difference where a museum is situated, for example in Germany, Austria or Japan, as the main perpetrator countries, or in Hungary or Lithuania, the US or Israel. Yet, in the course of the transformation processes in Eastern Europe, liberals from the post-communist countries considered Germany the role model for critically confronting the past. On the level of memorial museums, this trend can be observed at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, in which

Hungarian pre-Second World War antisemitism and Hungarian responsibility for the deportation of Jews in 1944 are pinpointed—even including three pictures showing members of the Hungarian population looting a ghetto, which is a very rare visual representation of collaboration and even shows female perpetrators.

At other post-communist museums, new exhibitions opened in the course of the EU accession process have the word Europe written all over them. Take the *Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania* (Museum of the Slovak National Uprising) in Banská Bystrica. An exhibition was created there in 2004 (in Slovak and English) that is called “Slovak National Uprising 1944—A part of the antifascist resistance in Europe.” Prominently featured panels are titled “Europe after 1918,” “Europe after 1938,” “Resistance movement in Europe,” and “International participation in the Slovak National Uprising,” the latter stressing that people from 32 nations took part. Up to a point, this Europeanization does indeed reflect an incorporation of the concept of negative memory. In the section on “The Tragedy of Slovak Jews,” it is made clear that “from March 25 till October 20, 1942 Slovak Government deported by its own legal-administrative means almost 58,000 Jews from Slovakia to Nazi extermination camps”² and that “Slovakia paid 500 Reich Marks to the Third Reich for each deported Jew as evacuation fee. The deportations were brutally organized particularly by the members of Hlinka’s Guard and the FS,” the Slovak collaborationist forces. Yet the section on the so-called “Slovak Republic” is called “Political life in Slovakia in 1938–1944,” rather than, say, “The authoritarian system of the Nazi satellite state.” The term “Slovak Republic” is used without adding “so-called” or putting it in inverted commas indicating that the Nazi client state had really been a Republic in the beginning and arguing that the Parliament’s powers were abolished only “gradually.” Repression is mentioned only once. The panel ends with the following sentence: “In spite of the authoritarian regime the Slovak Republic achieved many positive results in the areas of economy, science, schools and culture, owing to the war boom.” Negative memory only goes so far when it comes to depicting the state during the Second World War as a milestone on the way to Slovak independence.

Trend 3—The Forensic Turn

After 1989, the word genocide was primarily associated with Rwanda and Srebrenica. So to what extent, do those two events also have a universalizing effect? Both in Rwanda and in Srebrenica, human remains are the focus of the memorialization processes. The bones and skulls are the centerpiece of most Rwandan exhibitions and the Potočari graves and periodical burying ceremonies play a significant role in the struggle around the number of victims of Srebrenica. Obtained as evidence within

the framework of mass graves, exhumations, and forensic investigations conducted for the International Criminal Tribunals that aimed at prosecuting human rights violations in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia (Stover and Peress 1998), the bodily remains of their victims became essential to the spatial arrangement and the exhibitions of the in-situ memorials. This cannot but have an effect on the cultural and political functions of those institutions, which, additionally to their commemorative and educational purposes, came to serve as collections of evidence, cemeteries, and/or spaces of reconciliation through religious and political reburials (Dziuban 2017, 27). Importantly, the focus on material traces of atrocities, especially the search for, exhumation and identification of bodies, has become a standard approach to the human remains resulting from mass violence around the globe (Anstett and Dreyfus 2015; Weizman 2014, 22). This development, described by Anstett and Dreyfus in terms of *forensic turn*, was initiated by the research conducted in the 1980s by human rights forensic teams in Argentina in the aftermath of the junta regime and, later on, in other Latin American countries (Doretto and Fondebrider 2001). Today, forensic archaeology is mobilized not only by human rights organizations or civil society initiatives but also by state agencies and transnational political bodies (Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Lawryniewicz and Zelazko 2015), establishing a global platform for exchange of study results, practices, and ideas, and building new links between memorial museums.

The forensic approach to memorial sites developed after the recent atrocities has also impacted the “old” memorial sites at the former National Socialist concentration and extermination camps. In Germany, Austria, Poland, and other Central Eastern European countries, those sites have become objects of extensive archaeological research, which focuses on finding and marking mass graves, as well as the analysis of material and spatial structures of the camps (Sturdy Colls 2015). While it could be argued that, in the field of Holocaust research, this new development is, first and foremost, a response to the gradual passing away of the survivors of the Holocaust (IHRA 2015, 13), bringing “the era of the witness” to an end (Wieviorka 2006), this paper locates it rather within a horizon of a broader and globally unfolding *forensic turn*, which radically transforms both practical approaches towards sites of atrocities and cultural sensitivities toward human remains and material traces of violence (Dziuban 2017, 33; Keenan and Weizman 2012).

Both Universalization and the *Forensic Turn* “Travel”

The “universalization of the Holocaust” plays a decisive role in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. Before 2004, the Kigali Memorial Centre in the capital of Rwanda was a burial ground, with an empty building and a tentative plan for development. The mayor of Kigali organized the

construction of a building there in 2000 and which was used to display victims' remains, with the intention to expand the use of the site as a charnel house by creating "three big bays filled with shelves of skulls and bones [...] they wanted to run sounds of babies screaming and the killings going on" (Ibreck 2013, 157). After a visit to the *Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre* in Nottingham, the mayor met and formed a partnership with its directors, the founders of Aegis Trust. A group of political and civil society leaders in Rwanda had formed a committee to organize a new memorial in Kigali for the 2004 anniversary. They wanted a memorial "comparable to Holocaust memorials in Europe and the US" (Ibreck 2013, 157) so they entrusted the British NGO with the exhibition.

At the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide, a new memorial center opened across the road from the cemetery at the former Dutch UN peacekeeping mission to which the Bosnian Muslims had fled in 1995. Again, it was a team experienced in postcatastrophic memorialization from Westerbork, the Dutch memorial museum at the site of the former Nazi transit camp for Jews and Roma, which was in charge of the exhibition.

The memory of the Holocaust is also universalized in another way: victims of recent conflicts feel the need to obtain greater legitimacy for their victim status by referring to a new Holocaust. In the post-Yugoslav space, Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, when referring to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, often present themselves as the "new Jews" and their adversaries as the "new Fascists" or "new Nazis." In Sarajevo, for example, the memory of the annihilation of the huge Jewish community has been completely superseded by that of the "recent Holocaust" perpetrated against the Bosniaks (Miller 2010; MacDonald 2002). Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader argued during a visit to the Israeli Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in 2005 that, during the war of the 1990s, the Croats were victims of the "same kind of evil as Nazism and Fascism," and that no one knew better than the Croats what it meant to be a victim of aggression and crime (Radonić 2010, 335).

We can conclude that Rwanda and Srebrenica precipitated a new focus on materialities and forensics that has since also been applied to several "old" postcatastrophic sites, especially Treblinka and Sobibór. Over 6,500 victims have been buried at the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial and Cemetery since the memorial site was inaugurated by Bill Clinton in 2003. The huge effort to identify the human remains that had been reinterred in secondary or even tertiary mass graves in order to conceal the crime was undertaken, not for the International Crime Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, but out of respect for the wishes of the families. It also reflects the trend to individualize the victims.

So far, the memorial in Jasenovac has been exempt from this trend. Here, the desire to look Western and prove the qualifications for EU

membership apparently weighed rather more heavily than the determination to preserve or even mark those sites of the former Jasenovac camp complex that are not already part of the memorial. The Kula [Tower], the camp for women and children at Stara Gradiška, often referred to as Jasenovac V, has been an unmarked ruin since the war of the 1990s. And no one has ever bothered to examine the mass grave at the former Roma camp Uštica—close to the main Jasenovac III site where the museum has been since the 1960s—forensically.

We can draw three main conclusions. Firstly, the fact that a recently opened museum draws on the established Holocaust memorial museums as its role models does not mean that the concept of negative memory is applied in the permanent exhibition. On the contrary, archetypical aesthetics can quite easily go hand in hand with a narrative of collective victimhood. Secondly, the forensic turn has not impacted those post-catastrophic sites (yet) where the emulation of Holocaust memorial museum model primarily reflects the desire to appear European. Finally, as a result of the universalization of the Holocaust, every recent victim group now seeks to present itself as “the new Jews” and their adversaries as “the new Nazis.” This obscures the historic specificity of each of the crimes and clearly obstructs the quest for pragmatic models for peaceful coexistence.

Notes

- 1 This US trend is also dominant in post-communist museums—in contrast to the German musealization tradition which avoids the dramatic, emotional approach.
- 2 When there is no source given, it means I am quoting from the English exhibition text itself respectively from the photographs I took of all the exhibitions I am analyzing here.

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7 The *Smellscape* of Jewish Lublin—and its Afterlife

Stephanie Weismann

The smell of onion and herring, the distinct hubbub, the crowded streets, these all dominate the narratives about Jewish Lublin before the Second World War. Sensory impressions are an important aspect of urban experience. “We see the city, we hear the city, but, above all, we smell the city” (Henshaw 2014, 4), thus, sticking our nose into the urban is a most rewarding way to understand how odors in particular shape the atmosphere of certain spaces and our emotional attitude towards them.

Especially Lublin’s predominately Jewish neighborhood Podzamcze was repeatedly addressed for its sensory peculiarities—and nuisances. This article starts with the olfactory perception of Jewish Lublin in prewar sources and asks after the postcatastrophic discourse about Podzamcze’s (sensory) topography after the Shoah. In 1942/1943, under national socialist occupation, Lublin’s Jewish neighborhood Podzamcze—then part of the ghetto—was cleansed from its inhabitants and radically dismantled. In 1954, this devastated area was made the main stage of the new Socialist regime to celebrate “Lublin of the Future.” Podzamcze was to become a modern and spacious place, cleansed of the remnants of the old (Jewish) topography, symbol of backwardness, stench, and crowdedness. The article approaches Podzamcze as a postcatastrophic topography—postcatastrophe as a concept looking at the effects of the catastrophe of the Shoah (see Artwińska et al. 2015; Artwińska and Tippner 2017). Drawing largely on prewar and postwar local Polish newspapers¹ the article takes into special focus the official discourse evolving around the area in 1954 and follows the narrative about Podzamcze until the 1990s.

Case Study Lublin: “Jewish Smells” and Urban Order

Here Lublin serves as an exemplary case study, depicting the Polish pre and post Second World War situation, representing the troubled, yet in many ways ‘ordinary’ history of a medium-sized city in East Central Europe. Before the Second World War, Lublin had the typical ethnic structure of a city from that region, with over one-third of the city’s population declaring themselves Jewish.² After 1918, the city was on its

way to become a regional center of administration and higher education in the newly founded Second Polish Republic. Lublin emerged as an important university town, with the famous Catholic University founded in 1918 and the opening of Europe's largest Yeshiva in 1930—giving evidence of the city's long tradition and relevance as a center both of Catholicism as well as of Judaism (Zieliński 2003). The city hosted a vibrant multicultural urban life with theaters, cinemas, artistic societies, printing houses, and a variety of newspapers in Polish and Yiddish (Kopciowski 2015).³ However, despite its blossoming cultural and educational life, Lublin struggled with the typical issues of the time and region, like delayed sanitary reforms, the influx of uneducated people from the countryside, a lack of housing space, and a dilapidated medieval Old Town—a classical Polish *Rynek*—since 1862⁴ mainly inhabited by Jews. Until the Second World War, Lublin's Old Town mainly hosted small Jewish retailers, little shops, mobile vendors, also brothels. The neighboring Podzamcze area was a noticeably poor and nearly exclusively Jewish neighborhood. Connected with the Old Town through the *Grodzka Gate* Podzamcze was located in the marshy lowlands of the city, crouching around the hill of Lublin castle (which served as a prison until 1954). Despite its unfortunate topography and questionable hygienic conditions and a therefore intensive *smellscape* (Porteous 2006), the area and *Szeroka*, its vibrant main street, (Kuwałek 2003) was the busy living quarter of the majority of Lublin's Jews. However, most of the memoirs and journalistic texts since the 19th century emphasized the peculiarity and obscure exoticism of the Jewish quarter (Kubiszyn 2015). These texts are dominated by descriptions of miserable, dilapidated houses, squalor and poverty, and more or less openly address impressions of estrangement and repulsion.⁵ They mention “muddy, reeking and unpaved streets” (Krzesiński 1958, 238), describe it as a terra incognita “characterized by poisoning fumes,” a neighborhood “with a specific physiognomy” and its inhabitants “dirty and ragged, unfamiliar with soap and brush” (from an 1887 article, cited by Kuwałek 2003, 11–12).

Indeed, the neighborhood was known for its poverty and as a breeding ground of epidemics. Therefore, it came into focus of various Jewish welfare services (Kuwałek 1995) as well as in the critical eye of the local (Polish-Christian) press—which was stroking a more and more nationalistic tone with Polish independence after the First World War. Reports on prewar Lublin, in general, convey a multisensory picture of the city. Yet, among these urban sensory challenges it was especially the repugnant odors of the Jewish neighborhood Podzamcze that were frequently addressed by Lublin's newspapers of the time:

[W]hoever accidentally goes astray in the Krawiecka street and happens to get into this labyrinth of narrow, winding lanes, will be



Figure 7.1 Panorama of the Jewish quarter and Lublin Castle from the Podzamcze area, 1918.

above all exposed to relentlessly reeking stench, to someone emptying a bucket of dishwater or other inconveniences right before your feet. [...] Apart from the omnipresence of smelly gutters [...] there is also the stream Czechówka in whose stinking sediments the Jewish poor are washing their clothes. (*Ziemia Lubelska*, 24 [1929], 3)

The concept of *smellscapes* suggests that “like visual impressions, smells may be spatially ordered or place-related. Continents, countries, regions, neighborhoods (especially ‘ethnic’ ones) and houses have their particular *smellscapes*” (Porteous 2006, 91). The feeling of repulsion towards the Jewish neighborhood is emphasized by the impression of urban disorder (labyrinthine streets, chaotic housing conditions) and bad hygienic conditions (the stench of poverty, the “unsanitary attitudes” of Jewish women). These smelly perceptions of the Jewish neighborhood mostly evolve around the stench of backwardness and the odor of “the other.” And, in fact, “sensual relations are most of all social relations. No account of the senses in society can be complete without mention being made of sensory differentiation by gender, race, class, culture and environment” (Howes 2003). Odors often serve as identifying markers and



Figure 7.2 Construction of the People's Meeting Square (former Castle Square), 1954.

are useful symbolic vehicles for categorizing different groups according to cultural values (Classen 1992, 157–158).

European urban reform discourse since the 18th century was concerned with various “miasmas” and accordingly, how to improve urban infrastructure and sanitation (Corbin 1988). However, (sanitary) reforms, also contain disciplinary agendas regarding the potential threat for the public order posed by “bad” neighborhoods and the “underclass.” Orderliness, cleanliness, and functional clarity always have been bourgeois and national objectives—fighting the winding, badly lightened, and filthy terrain of “bad” city quarters (Wendland 2006, 227). In consequence, the traditional war against filth and stench from a hygiene perspective also implied the war against the disfigurement of the city, that is, against unwelcomed aspects of urban life, including poverty, dense living conditions prone to epidemics as well as “lax morals” and ethnic “others.” In Lublin, disadvantageous symptoms of urban life would soon be denounced as non-European and non-Polish. The impression of urban chaos regarding Lublin’s Jewish quarter was frequently referred to as of “Eastern” or “Asiatic”

character (Hollander 1915, 3 see also Wendland 2006, 295). And here it is especially “unusual smells” that unsettled the expanding city. Therefore, odors are often employed as a manifestation of ethnic antipathy (Classen 1992, 136). The National Democrat’s public organ *Głos Lubelski* [Voice of Lublin] complained that Jews would increasingly dominate “our city:” “Lately Jews are more and more flooding the city center, naturally polluting it with their filth and sloppiness” (*Głos Lubelski*, 28 August 1923, 3). Polish newspapers in Lublin repeatedly mentioned “smelly Jews” that would visit the city park, “our beautiful reservoir of fresh air” that was now “jammed with the ‘chosen people’” wherefore “a bad smell of sweat, garlic and onion hovers in the air” (ibid.). The production of stench had been considered a Jewish quality for centuries. And stench was equaled with filth, thus associated with infection and general threat.⁶ Lublin’s Jews were accused of disrupting the city’s (Christian) order with their smells. Not only the sanitary appearance, but eventually the “odor of the other” had a disintegrative (and threatening)⁷ power. Jewish Lublin and here especially Jewish bodies transgressing into Christian space were perceived as contaminating the city with bad odors. Olfactory constructions and social categories tend to overlap and result in social, political, and/or gender and ethnic “othering” (Simmel 1992 [1908]; Classen 1992; Beer 2000; Haldrup et al. 2006). The alleged “distinct Jewish smell” or *foetor Judaicus* has a long tradition. Jewish Lublin was identified as a major nuisance factor in times of political and national straightforwardness and upcoming ideas of ethnic purity. (Lublin’s) Jews causing disorder (ill-kept buildings), contamination (sanitary and “ethnic miasmas”), as well as moral pollution (complaints about Jewish beggars and prostitutes), were frequent aspects of the discourse on Jewish Lublin at that time. Referring to their “Jewish smell” and its intruding into (Polish-Christian) society and urban order, a whole discourse on racial impurity and pollution emerged. The tradition of sensory antisemitism (Antisemites claimed to recognize Jews by their smell and to be able to sniff out Jewish plots⁸) was later perfected by Nazi ideology. In the tradition of urban sanitation since the 19th century, including disinfection measures, eliminating vermin, and deodorization, the “cleanups” during national socialist occupation in Poland can also be read as part of an olfactory history of the region. The major ethnic cleansing acts in Eastern Europe *Operation Reinhard* and *Operation Erntefest* were established in Lublin and encompassed the extermination of the Jews of Lublin as well as European Jewry in general. They can be read as another act in the long tradition of clearing the city of unpleasant sights and repulsing smells of “the other” that endangered urban, sanitary, social, and national order.

“Lublin of the Future”—The Discourse of 1954

The cleaning up to establish a “new” Lublin was initiated by Nazi occupants but was continued by the Communist regime. After the liquidation and dissolution of the Podzamcze ghetto, which was dismantled and partly blown up in 1943—the area around the castle remained an abandoned landscape of ruins. It was right here that the new Communist regime started to stage their new order and visions. For the 10th anniversary of the liberation of Lublin in 1954, the city was profoundly restructured. The then-celebrated *Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*/PKWN [*Polish Committee of National Liberation*] was the provisional, Soviet-dominated government of Poland, which temporarily resided in Lublin in 1944—the first larger city in Poland to be liberated by the Red Army. This fact made Lublin the temporary capital of Communist Poland in the transitional period between 1944 and 1945.

For the festivities in 1954, the war-shaken city center (struck by the bombardment of the *Wehrmacht* in 1939 as well as by heavy artillery fire from the approaching Red Army in 1944) was rebuilt within a few months—with a focus on the renovation of the Old Town and the building over of the area of former Jewish Podzamcze. It was especially the voided terrain of Podzamcze that served as the perfect place to start from the beginning, to celebrate new *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* [*Polish People's Republic*]. Newspaper articles dedicated to the urban structural changes in Lublin around the festivities in 1954 persistently envision “Lublin—City of the Future” (*Sztandar Ludu* 40 (1954), 6). This “future” slogan has a haunting presence in the press reporting around 1954, always referring to “new” Lublin. The destruction of the Jewish district by Nazi occupants was literally paving way, as it were, for Socialist “Lublin of the future.”

The symbol of the new political and urban order was *Plac Zebrani Ludowych* [People's Gathering Square]—erected exactly in the heart of former Jewish Podzamcze, where not long ago *Szeroka* street was running.⁹ Not one material trace of the former Jewish neighborhood remained, not even the behavior of the original streets. The main party organ *Sztandar ludu* reported “The rubble of the houses of the destroyed ghetto are disappearing and the whole terrain will be covered by an even surface of *People's Gathering Square* (*Sztandar Ludu* 59 (1954), 4). This planation left an entirely empty space ready for a new and totally different beginning, the castle on the hill the only point of orientation.¹⁰

What is striking in the context of celebrating “new Lublin” in 1954 is the rhetoric of “cleaning up”: the frequent headlines of “Operation: establishing order” (*Życie Lubelskie* 169 (1954), 6) and “cleaning up the surroundings of the castle” (*Sztandar Ludu* 36 (1954), 3 and *Sztandar*



Figure 7.3 Construction of the People's Meeting Square (former Castle square).

Ludu 169 (1954), 4–5) awkwardly remind us of the preceding national socialist “cleansing activities.” The wording insinuates that Communist authorities as well were engaged with cleaning up with Lublin’s prewar past, both regarding its socio-ethnic structure, its urban face, and last but not least its *sensescape*.

The planation of Podzamcze area and the erection of *People's Gathering Square* in 1954 was praised as “rendering the ‘picturesque’ of the architectonic interplay between the castle and the historical Old Town” (*Kurier Lubelski* 104–106 (1957), 1). While Podzamcze previously has been perceived as a no-go-area and disfiguring the city, postwar press argues that “today it is beautiful. Completely restructured, it now is one of the most preferred visiting places of our city.” (*Kurier Lubelski* 104–106 (1957), 1), encouraging its readers “have you realized how Podzamcze now harmonizes with the rest of the Old Town?” (*Sztandar Ludu* 290 (1954), 6) This “cleansing” and “harmonizing” approach towards the terrain of Podzamcze is based on a long tradition. It dominates Lublin’s prewar discussion of Jewish Podzamcze, it was continued and executed during national socialist occupation but also reflects Polish postwar attitude towards its sore past.

While prewar newspapers provide a “thick description” of a multi-sensory, especially multiodorous picture of Lublin, full of complaints about noisome odors and bad air, the press reporting on postwar Lublin gives the impression of a completely sanitized city—right in the



Figure 7.4 People's Meeting Square in Lublin, 22 July 1954.

style of Socialist progress. Prewar Podzamcze with its “repulsive miasmas” where “the stink would hit one’s nostrils” now belonged to an era of petite bourgeois, capitalist society that was finally overcome, as a publication titled *10 lat Polski ludowej* [10 Years of People’s Poland (1954), 148] states. “New” Lublin in the postwar press is first and foremost characterized by references to light, spaciousness, and modernity: “The new shops and cafeterias of newly built Lublin do not remind us of its old filth.” “Today’s Lublin is clean” and Kowalska street [formerly inhabited mainly by Jews] is “an old street which comes in a new outfit,” it “turned from filthy to bright” (*Życie Lubelskie* 172 (1954), 4). The former housing situation of Podzamcze, dominated by “shacks and hovels,” is replaced by a workers’ residence with “separate kitchens, central heating and gas” (*Kurier Lubelski* 104–106 (1957), 1).

Unsurprisingly, the official narrative, reflected in the local party press around 1954, was mainly concerned with highlighting Socialist progress, praising the worker (*Życie Lubelskie* 59 (1954), 4), and envisioned a new city “of the future.” But interestingly, while after all making Podzamcze a main focus of the contemporary reports, sometimes

juxtaposing the pre and postwar condition of Podzamcze—no mention is made of its former Jewish inhabitants. While addressing the destruction of Lublin’s material surface, the reports stay silent about the very people, that is, the ramifications of the extermination of Lublin’s social and ethnic structure. For the next decades, not only in Lublin, the fate of Polish Jews remained unmentioned or suppressed in the official discourse in favor of both the Communist narrative of the triumph of Socialism and the Polish national narrative (see Steinlauf 1997; Tych 1999; Radziwiłł 1989). This collective amnesia regarding a crucial part of Poland’s socio-cultural and multiethnic history was partly grounded in traditionally problematic Polish-Jewish relations (Cała 2005; Opalski and Bartal 1992; Tokarska-Bakir 2004). “Lublin of the future” as presented in the postwar press was cleaned up, bright, de-odorized, and strictly Polish-Socialist, instead of chaotic, vibrantly sensory, and multicultural. Juxtaposing pre and postwar discourses in the official press—we can observe that the thick *smellscales* of Lublin debated in prewar newspapers are replaced by a new city and a “new man” that apparently do not smell.



Figure 7.5 Lublin Castle Viaduct.

Erased Traces, Recalled Odors—Postcatastrophic *Sensescap*es

In the context of rebuilding Lublin in 1954, focusing on the terrain of former Jewish Podzamcze, we can observe the following incisive changes: While prewar newspapers complained about the sheds of the Jewish poor and scandalous housing conditions, postwar media praises the erection of a formidable new workers' residence¹¹ in the very center of Podzamcze. Where once the vibrant Jewish business street *Szeroka* pulsed, a Communist square of representation was erected. Where not long ago a mixed crowd of vendors, artisans, and children was dominating the streets, now a collective body of workers erected "Lublin of the future." While previously, looking down from the castle, you would have a view on rural suburbs and the hovels and poverty of Jewish Podzamcze—in 1954 newspapers proudly praised the progressive vista of new industrial centers and brand new workers' residences as well as the picturesque of the newly renovated Old Town. An article resumes that "standing on the castle hill you can not only enjoy what already has been achieved, but you can also ... dream of the future" (Chabros 1954, 13).

What seemed to be a transitional "onward-ho" enthusiasm when rebuilding Lublin after the war turned out to have a great impact on the perception of the space of Podzamcze for the next decades. Taking into account the relevance of discourse in the process of the construction of reality, we are confronted with a postwar discourse that noticeably erases the human catastrophe of the complete demographic and cultural reconfiguration of Europe. Unsurprisingly, this official discourse¹² had a lasting effect on the construction of the postwar reality of the city of Lublin—and Poland in general.

The Polish People's Lublin was established by "cleaning up" with its multicultural past. Looking into local city guides of the next decades,¹³ researching the sight of Lublin's "People's Gathering Square" (that is, formerly Jewish Podzamcze), we repeatedly come across the familiar wording of "after bringing order to the area around the castle" (*Przewodnik po Lublinie* 1959, 72) as well as *Lublin. Przewodnik* (1966, 79) and "Operation cleaning-up" (*Lublin. Przewodnik* 1966, 160).¹⁴ The guidebooks repeat the official narrative of prewar "unsanitary conditions" (*Przewodnik po Lublinie* 1959, 8) and Lublin's postwar progress into a bright future. Therefore, until the 1970s, the guidebooks always contain the notorious chapter "Lublin of the future"—according to the immediate postwar rhetoric and Communist narrative—mostly elaborating on Lublin's glorious industrial progress.¹⁵ While thematizing the profound construction work on the "area around the castle," here again, no mention is made of the where and wither of its former inhabitants. Thus, after the catastrophe also marks the beginning of a long era of official memory

policy and historical narrative until the 1980s, which is largely “cleansed” of Jewish traces (Törnquist-Plewa 2012).

Following the collapse of Communism in 1989, there arose an animated interest in this obliterated part of Polish history and culture (Kersten and Szapiro 1989). Several studies on the history of Lublin’s Jews and various aspects of their social and cultural life were published (see Radzik 1995; Hawryluk and Linkowski 1994; later Kuwałek and Wysok 2001; Radzik 2007; Chmielewski 2015; Libionka 2017). A noteworthy example for this phenomenon in Lublin is a group of theater enthusiast who became interested in the building of the Grodzka Gate (the former Jewish Gate, connecting the Old Town with Jewish Podzamcze) in the 1990s. Lublin’s Polish-Jewish past became the first cornerstone of their activities focusing on issues of cultural heritage.¹⁶ Since 1998 the *Grodzka Gate-Centre* has been launching an oral history program,¹⁷ recording inhabitants of Lublin and the region born before 1935, thus, gathering recollections of experienced atmospheres and everyday life before the Second World War. These testimonies encompass vivid sensory memories of prewar Lublin (Kubiszyn 2007, 213). While prewar sources like newspaper articles and archival sources (i.e. reports from the sanitary inspection) generally open up the world of sensory nuisances, complaints, and penalties—that is, the noisome aspects of prewar Lublin—these oral recollections are adding vivid multisensory impressions and experiences, thus rendering an idea of the very atmosphere of the time. Olfactory memories make a crucial part of the collected material, as smells play an important role in the process of remembering and the shaping of narratives (see Hamilton 2010). Witnesses¹⁸ frequently recall the specific *smellscape* of Jewish Lublin: “When you went to the Jewish quarter [...] you were hit by this specific smell [...]” (AS27m) or “the greatest mystery for me was the area around Grodzka Gate [...] when you were approaching the Jewish quarter there was the smell of garlic, onion, herring, it all came from these little stores [...] it was a different smell than in other parts of the city” (JH21f). The interviewees (predominantly Polish-Christian) repeatedly refer to the kind of olfactory “otherness” that can also be found in prewar sources. People claim to have “recognized them also by their smell—they smelled differently” (TP30m) and insist “it was their smell, the smell of this place, where I saw them” (AS27m). Smells are known to be socially and culturally classified and therefore co-determine the symbolic order and imagination of urban spaces. Hence, these oral history sources do not necessarily contribute to a reconsideration of the image of prewar Jewish Lublin. Instead, we are confronted with a vivid afterlife of commonplaces, encompassing experiences of estrangement, impressions of peculiarity, exoticism as well as anti-Jewish stereotypes (kubiszyn 2017, 321–331).

Thus, while not necessarily contradicting the biased picture familiar from prewar sources, the memories of prewar Lublin nevertheless provide a highly sensory picture, recalling the multi-ethnic, multireligious,

intensive everyday life of the city before the War. Most importantly, olfactory impressions are not limited to overfilled cesspools and clogged gutters, kitchen waste, herring marinade, and filthy courtyards—but the testimonies additionally recall the variety of tempting culinary smells associated with Jewish Lublin, especially the evaporations of Jewish bakeries. Therefore, the evocative encounters with Podzamcze and the Old Town in the interviews also encompass the smell of fresh bread, the scent of warm Jewish pastries sold on the street, the fragrances of citrus fruits offered by itinerant Jewish vendors, and the curiosity stimulated by these sensory impressions. Thus, integral part of almost every oral testimony referring to prewar Lublin are the rich sensory aspects of urban life before the War. The interviews of Grodzka Gate's oral history archive open up the whole spectrum of emotionally ambivalent, but vivid, individual attitudes towards (Jewish) Lublin that crucially contribute to the (postwar) sense of the place. The relationship of people to places is known to be a complex one: “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place” (Feld 1996, 91). Hence, prewar sources, as well as postcatastrophic (non-)references regarding Jewish Lublin provide an important insight into the ambiguous perception of and discourse about this urban site. Contrasting the rich sensory reporting on prewar Jewish Lublin in general and Podzamcze in particular to the lifeless rubble-rhetoric and reconstruction of Podzamcze in 1954 involuntarily indicates the missing of its former inhabitants. The representational sterility and somehow “senselessness” of “People's Gathering Square” (which still characterizes the “castle square” today), thus, is implicitly speaking of the missing spirit and former aura of the place.¹⁹ Post-1989 oral recollections, in turn, partly evoked the forgotten atmosphere and again gave sense to the place—also for upcoming generations. Therefore, the examination of odors—their presence, absence as well as their stimulating effect for recollections—spotlights the heterogeneous air of a place and its history.

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Notes

- 1 The article focuses on the outside perspective, that is, the Polish-Christian-perception of Jewish Lublin. Partly also, because the main local Yiddish daily *Lubliner Tugblat* for the period in question was not preserved, see Kopciowski (2015).
- 2 In 1931, 67 percent of the city's inhabitants declared themselves Jewish (Radzik 1995).
- 3 For further information on the socio-cultural life of interwar Lublin see Radzik 2000; Kamiński 2000; Skrzypek 2003.

- 4 With the reforms of Alexander Wielopolski from 1862, the Jews in the Kingdom of Poland obtained the same rights and were allowed to settle and trade in the Old Town of Lublin. Most of the Christian inhabitants moved to the new town, that is to Krakowskie Przedmieście and other, more modern quarters emerging around Lublin.
- 5 Among others Sierpiński 1839; Liniewski 1889 (Gawarecki 1963); Balaban 1919; Döblin 2016 [1924].
- 6 The link between pollution and danger has been discussed, among others, by Mary Douglas 2015.
- 7 On the old fear of Jews well-poisoning, see Chazan 1997.
- 8 See Weiser 2011 as well as Hiemer 1938, 10–13.
- 9 On the history and iconography of Szeroka-Street see Zętar 2016.
- 10 See also Władysław Panas, *Oko cadyka* (Lublin 2004), 13–15.
- 11 “It is hard to believe that not long ago here were the marshy rubble and dirty puddles of the remains of chaotic building and now one after another, new stylish housing blocks are fringing the place.” *Życie Lubelskie* 172 (1954), 4; “On the ground of former Podzamcze, with its hovels and shacks, emerged one of the most beautiful sights of Lublin.” *Kurier Lubelski* 104 (1957), 1; the Association of Worker’s residence “Podzamcze” (*Zjednoczenie Osiedli Robotniczych*) was one of a larger number of prestigious housing projects realized in the 1950s and 1960s in Lublin.
- 12 For the media and its contribution to the construction of reality, see Karis 2010.
- 13 See the guide books from 1959 until 1980 listed in the bibliography.
- 14 However, the credit that the Jewish neighborhood and Jewish sites are mentioned at all, might belong to Henryk Gawarecki (1912–1989), an art historian and bibliophile, main curator of Lublin’s Monument Preservation Office from 1950 to 1978, and chairman of the Lublin branch of the *Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society* (PTTK) and (co-)author of most of the guide books on postwar Lublin.
- 15 Lublin, the regional center of a largely agricultural Voivodship, was hastily industrialized in the 1950s, among others by installing a major truck plant (*Fabryka Samochodów Cieżarowych*). Despite the dismissive description of prewar Lublin as a capitalist-bourgeois interlude and the rhetoric of “cleaning up” with the past, these guide books are at least referring to historical Jewish sites—in contrast to the general amnesia-attitude in People’s Poland (see Törnquist-Plewa 2006).
- 16 For further information see Bednarczuk (2014) and Popescu (2017).
- 17 For *Grodzka Gate*’s Oral history collection, see <http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/dlibra/collectiondescription?dirids=198> [last accessed 11, May 2020].
- 18 Following quotations of witnesses are drawn from Grodzka-Gate-Center’s Oral History Archive: <http://teatrnn.pl/historiamowiona/>, the abbreviations indicate the initials, sex and year of birth of the witnesses.
- 19 *Grodzka Gate* and Władysław Panas claim that Podzamcze still bears the spirit and spirits of Jewish Lublin. See Zętar (2016) and Panas (2004).

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Part II

Contested and Entangled Memories



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8 Addressing the Void: The Absence of Documents and the Difficulties of Representing the Shoah in Postcatastrophic Russian Jewish Literature

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“An Event that is Still Happening:”¹ Introduction

The description of the Shoah as an event that is “still happening” is part of a longer passage on the meaning of “annihilation” in Daniel Mendelsohn’s memoir *The Lost. A Search for Six of Six Million* (Mendelsohn 2006, 289). Many pages of the book are devoted to compensating for the absence of documents and testimonies concerning the fate of those family members who were killed during the Nazi occupation. Mendelsohn understands this absence of information as the ultimate form of annihilation or “reduction to nothing” (Mendelsohn 2006, 289). This “reduction to nothing” was brought about by the specific nature of the “dispersed Holocaust” (Sendyka 2016) in the Western parts of the Soviet Union. However, the complex scenarios of silence, testifying, and taking testimony that mark the writing on the Shoah in the Soviet Union, were aggravated in part by Soviet memory politics which rarely touched upon the killing of the Jews on Soviet soil.

Witness’ and survivor’s narratives as well as the willingness of those not affected by or implicated in the Shoah to receive this testimony and record it, create the basis for narratives and commemorative practices of further generations. The trauma researcher Dori Laub stresses the dialogic character of bearing testimony, pointing out that “testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude” (Laub 1992, 70–71). Testimonies come to life and evolve in a dialogue with another person or a collective and require an emphatic bond. If this prerequisite condition is not met, testimonies are lost. This has implications not only on a personal level but also on a more general plane of collective commemoration. Additionally, testimonies not given and thus not heard, have implications with regard to literature, too: Narratives rely on other narratives and documents in their various iterations. In order to tell a story, you must have heard a story. In order to become a secondary witness, you must have access to primary witness accounts. This is apparent in second- and third-generation writing on the Shoah in American

and European literature which relies on a broad body of historiographical works and testimonial writing to inform itself.

What happens when stories and documents are scarce and often inaccessible? When mechanisms of transmission are ruptured? When narratives have to conform to a culture of remembrance that features heroism? When stories of atrocities, loss, and victimization are relegated to the private sphere, if they are told at all? Contemporary Russian literature explores these questions with regard to several historical events in 20th-century history, such as the turmoil of the October Revolution, the Civil War, collectivization, the Gulag, persecution due to politics, nationality, or religion, the Leningrad blockade, and last not least the murder of Soviet Jews during the Second World War. During Soviet times stories of personal grief, suffering, and loss were almost impossible to tell, and “private pain went underground” (Merridale 2000, 46). Since it was not uncommon for Soviet citizens to experience several of these catastrophes and thus become multiply victimized and traumatized, one can also ask how do these memories interact with each other?

Almost immediately after German troops invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile death squads) began to round up and kill the local Jewish population in the occupied territories on the Baltic and in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Assisted by local collaborators, they annihilated the majority of the Jews living in the “bloodlands” (Snyder 2010, 409), a region that already had been hit by Soviet biopolitics. The “dispersed Holocaust” that took place in the territories annexed under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and in Soviet Republics such as Ukraine and Belarus, followed its own action plan, developed its own methods, and involved local collaborators and implied subjects in the killings. Jewish citizens were taken from their homes and killed on the outskirts of their hometowns, before being buried in fields and ravines close to villages, towns, and settlements. The majority of Soviet Jews did not die in concentration or death camps but close to their homes. Their annihilation is thus not linked to the global symbol of the Shoah—the death camp. Consequently, their death cannot be represented by making use of the repertoire of cattle trains, barracks, crematoria, and prisoners in striped uniforms that governs the literature about the Shoah as well as the collective imagination in most parts of the world.² Most prominently, the difficulties of incorporating the “Holocaust by bullets” into global Shoah remembrance are apparent with regard to the killings at Babi Yar.³ This may be caused by the fact that Babi Yar signifies “the omnipresence of destruction and not just the annihilation of the Jews” (Epelboin and Kovriguina 2013, 237). The killing site in a ravine formerly near and now in Kiev has evolved over time into the main symbol of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking world (Clowes 2005, 154), but still does not occupy a central place in global Shoah memory.⁴

Thus, despite the fact that between 2.6 and 2.7 million Jews living under Soviet rule (Arad 2009, 525)⁵ were killed during the German occupation, this chapter of the Shoah has not figured prominently in the Western imagination or in Soviet public discourse or historiography. “During the lifetime of the Soviet Union, Soviet sources on the genocide of Jews on Soviet territory—the ‘Holocaust in the East’—were almost completely lacking” (David-Fox et al. 2014, vii).⁶ Even the term Holocaust which seems to be omnipresent in the public discourse in the US and Europe, has entered the Russian language only recently (Murav 2011, 151).⁷ The same holds true for Russian literature. Russian readers would be hard-pressed to name a survivor testimony written in Russian, gaining only a belated access to “Holocaust novels,” to use Efraim Sicher’s term (Sicher 2005, ix–xxiii)⁸ via the works of Vasilii Grosmann, Anatolii Kuznetsov, Masha Rol’nikaite, and Anatolii Rybakov. This situation did not change significantly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A number of explanations have been given for the relative absence of the Shoah in the Soviet and Post-Soviet memoryscape. One reason was the (latent) antisemitism that marked late Stalinism and resurfaced in the Brezhnev era, another lies in the very nature of Soviet commemorative practices, which stressed heroism and the active resistance of the military and did not acknowledge the suffering of civilians, let alone their deaths. Amir Weiner emphasizes that the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War made Jewish victims invisible by submerging them “within the general Soviet tragedy, erasing the very distinction at the core of the Nazi” ideology (Weiner 2001, 231–232). The contributions of Jewish soldiers to the war effort were also suppressed. Timothy Snyder argues in a similar vein stating that since Slavs and communists were also targeted by Nazi extermination politics, the “Holocaust could never be seen for what it was” in the Soviet Union (Snyder 2010, 376). Commemorating the Shoah was further complicated by its intrinsic links to local collaboration with the Nazi troops, another topic rarely touched upon in the Soviet Union. Finally, there were fewer survivors who could have given testimony of the mass killings on Soviet soil. The problem only became more poignant after 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, since most of the killing fields in Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states now no longer belonged to a common territory and thus no longer fell within the frame of Russian literature. Finally, several waves of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union since the 1980s further displaced Russian Jewish Shoah remembrance elsewhere than Russian literature.

Thus, even if the Shoah was never completely absent from public discourse and literature it is safe to say that Soviet citizens had a somewhat distorted view of the events due to the limited availability of published testimonies, witness accounts, fictionalized versions, films, and historiographies, and the lack of a publicly shared discussion of the singular fate of Soviet Jews during the Second World War. This as well

as the different form in which the destruction of the Jews was executed on Soviet ground have shaped Russian literary representations and attitudes towards the Shoah to this day. If one adds the multiple other traumas that mark Russian history in the 20th century, it becomes apparent that writing the Shoah in Russian literature was and still is a difficult task. This article argues that the relative absence of primary witness accounts, in addition to the continued suppression of the Shoah as singular Jewish fate in Russian memorial culture, and the general displacement of memory, has had a lasting effect on Russian literature and postcatastrophic representations of mass killings on Soviet soil. The first part of the article explores the conditions of writing and remembering the Jewish catastrophe in the Soviet Union in order to understand the literary background of contemporary postcatastrophic writing, the second part is devoted to the after-effects and post-catastrophic representations in Post-Soviet Russian Jewish literatures addressing the Shoah in Russia and abroad.

“Nothing More to Show—Only to Tell”: Writing the Shoah and the Jewish Genocide in the Soviet Union

Katja Petrowskaja’s *Maybe Esther. A Family Story* (2014) addresses problems of the transmission and commemoration of the Shoah in the Soviet Union using Babi Yar and its conflicted place in Soviet memorial culture as an example. She points out that the writer Anatolii Kuznetsov took people to Babi Yar, “to show that here was nothing more to show—only to tell” (Petrowskaja 2018, 170). Petrowskaja’s use of Kuznetsov and Babi Yar demonstrates how important “recursivity”—that is, “visiting the same places, repeating the same stories” is to “construct[ing] a cultural memory (Rigney 2005, 20) and establishing a *lieu de mémoire*. What may be even more significant is how she draws the reader’s attention to the monuments and missing documents and links them to a feeling of absence but also to questions of Jewish identity.

The impulse to document disaster was an immediate reaction to the Shoah. But due to the nature of the dispersed destruction of the Soviet Jews, there are comparatively few witness accounts, most of the written reports testifying to the aftermath of the killings. As Leona Toker has noted, most writers learned about “the mass slaughter of Jews *ex post facto*” (Toker 2013, 118). The most prominent examples of these being poems by Il’ia Selvinskii, Perets Markish, Der Nister, texts by Vasilii Grossman, and the contributions to the *Black Book of Russian Jewry* edited by Vasilii Grossman and Il’ia Ehrenburg who witnessed the aftermath of the Shoah as war journalists. The list of these texts has gotten longer in recent years, due to work by scholars such as Gennadii Estraiikh, Harriet Murav, Annie Epelboin and Assia Kovriguina, Leona Toker, and others.⁹ The scarcity of literary representations is mirrored

by a scarcity of literary criticism on the topic, as Harriet Murav has noted: “Soviet literary responses to the destruction of the Jews still remain largely unexplored territory” (Murav 2011, 153). One reason for this might be the fact that important texts like those by Perets Markish and Der Nister were written in Yiddish limiting their audience. Another might be the very nature of the “dispersed Holocaust” which resists representation and calls for its own poetic language (Vice 2019, 90). Scholars such as Harriet Murav, Annie Eppelboin, and Sue Vice have argued that the different nature of the genocide on Soviet soil is responsible for the scarcity of literary testimonies. In addition to the low survival rate, Sue Vice points out that the “long-drawn out process of ghettoization followed by deportation, initiation into the world of the camps [...] is necessarily missing” (Vice 2019, 89), resulting in fewer texts as well as posing representational problems.¹⁰ During Soviet times, these representational problems are heightened by the socialist realist aesthetics shaping testimonial as well fictional texts on the Shoah.

The problems of representation notwithstanding, survivors felt compelled to testify and document Nazi atrocities even as the genocidal killings were still ongoing. Several of these testimonies were collected in Vasilii Grossman’s and Il’ia Ehrenburg’s *Black Book of Russian Jewry*. The Jewish Antifascist Committee that initiated the project became a major documentation center of the Shoah on Soviet territory. Material for the book was among others sourced by the Jewish newspaper *Eynikayt* via an appeal for testimonies and written records of war crimes. Soon the committee received diaries, letters, and memoirs from all over the Soviet Union but also reports and essays written by professional writers and journalists. Many of the contributing authors and editors had experienced the war, antisemitism, and loss of family members or friends, and were thus not only intellectual witnesses but in some cases primary witnesses, too (Hartman 1998, 37–38). The *Black Book* was ultimately conceived both as a document containing facts, names, dates, and places relying on eye-witness accounts and as a “memorial to be placed on the countless mass graves of Soviet people who were tortured and murdered by the German fascists” (Ehrenburg and Grossman 2009b, xxii).¹¹ Ehrenburg’s and Grossman’s editorial work established a precedent for later forms of Shoah representation in the Soviet Union in the way, the texts realigned documentation with the stylistic demands of (socialist) realism.

In its composition, *The Black Book of Russian Jewry* roughly followed a geographical principle and complimented the local accounts with reports on the camps in Poland. The documents covered all areas of the Soviet Union that were occupied by Nazi Germany, mainly Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belorussia, Ukraine, and parts of Russia, and contained not only testimonies of victims but also reports by bystanders and perpetrator texts. The real work on the *Black Book* began when Ehrenburg

took over and famous Soviet Jewish writers such as Grossman, Abram Sutskever, Perets Markish, Viktor Shklovskii, Margarita Aliger, Vera Inber, and Veniamin Kaverin among others were co-opted onto the *Black Book* committee to edit testimonies and draft reports. In the final stages of the war, the work on the book began to stall due to political reasons, first Ehrenburg was forced to step down as the head of the committee and Grossman replaced him, then the whole publication process was halted despite the near completion of the book. Although, an abridged English version was published, the Russian edition only reached readers after the perestroika via Israel and Lithuania.¹² To this day, the *Black Book* is a testimony not only to the Shoah in the Soviet Union but also to the fact that witness accounts can be part of the archive without shaping the general cultural memory. If there are no primary sources available, then secondary fictional elaborations become difficult.

The *Black Book* emulated the greater Soviet war narrative that began to take shape already during the war only partially. While accepting some of the templates of socialist realism, the editors made no concessions when it came to depicting on Jews as a special group of victims and to addressing antisemitism. The book also addressed home-grown antisemitism and collaboration with the Nazis. In Grossman's introduction, one could read of the "moral lowlife of society, the outlaws [...] heeding the criminal call of Hitler's propaganda" (Grossman 2009, xxxiv) and the book provided readers with accounts not only of Soviet solidarity but also of denunciations of Jewish neighbors. As an example, one could cite the short text "How Doctor Lyubov Langman died (Sorochitsy)" (Ehrenburg and Grossman 2009a, 21–22) which was prepared for publication by Ehrenburg himself. He presents the fate of Liubov Mikhailovna Langman, a gynecologist who went into hiding with her daughter and was helped by local people. But when she delivered the baby of one of the villagers, he denounced her to the Germans and she was shot. Ehrenburg literalizes this incident without emotional investment or moral judgment in a very matter-of-fact way. The parable-like story clearly illustrates the fact that in his mind antisemitism is a universal problem and not an exclusively German one. Another topic not in keeping with Soviet discourse but highlighted in the book was Jewish resistance. For instance, there are testimonies on the uprising in the Kovno Ghetto and other examples of Jewish resistance from Vilna, Bialystok, and Minsk as well as witness accounts from the Jewish partisan movement.¹³ This is a narrative that was eagerly adapted from the 1990s on in Western accounts of the Shoah in the Soviet Union, fostering images of Jewish agency.¹⁴

Grossmann and other writers reflect on the difficulty of creating testimonies of the "dispersed Holocaust." Grossman, who lost his mother to the Shoah, writes that the witnesses were "stunned by the monstrosity

of these crimes. Often the victims themselves could not believe until the last minute that they were being taken out to be executed, so monstrous and incomprehensible was the murder of millions of innocent people” (Grossman 2009, xxxi–xxxi). Like Grossman, the writer Vera Inber addresses the epistemological and representational problem of the “dispersed Holocaust”:

In all the testimonies and written accounts of the witnesses who remained, in their letters and memoirs, we encounter over and over the same assertion that they do not have the strength to convey what they lived through. (Inber 2009, 55)

She then goes on to cite survivors who appeal to the literature as the only means of representing these atrocities, saying that one would need “the expertise of an artist’s brush” (Inber 2009, 55). As these comments and the dedication to give voice to the primary witnesses also indicate, art and literature are perceived as a means by which to convey the unsayable.

A document entitled “The Young Women from Minsk” about Jewish girls who survived the ghetto and fought with partisan units in the forests around Minsk, integrates the Shoah into the general war narrative. The text maintains an even balance between detailing the ordeal the girls lived through as victims of the “Final Solution” and their accomplishments as partisans. One of them, Sonya, risked her own life, “blow[ing] up three bridges, hold[ing] attacks at bay and [having] dozens of dead Germans to her credit” (Grossman 2009, 155). There is no way for us to say, whether this adaptation to preexisting narratives is due to the aesthetic re-writing of the editor, in this case, Grossman, or whether it was told this way. Conforming to the greater war narrative meant not only turning the girls into model Soviet heroes who overcome their individual limitations but also suppressing the pain and survivor’s guilt they felt. This holds true even when one takes into account the latest studies on the formation of private and public spheres under Stalin, which show there is no dichotomy between the private and the public self in the context of Soviet autobiographic writing. Even apolitical or critical Soviet citizens “ideologized” their life and experiences and shared in the official Soviet images of selfhood (Hellbeck 2006, 13).

Despite the fact that the book never saw publication, Ehrenburg’s and Grossman’s approach to witnessing influenced later attempts to unearth and work with Shoah testimonies. Immediately after the war, in 1947 Ehrenburg managed to publish a novel called *Buria* (1948) [*The Storm*] which depicts the murder at Babi Yar, the death camps, and collaboration, making use of socialist realist aesthetics and hiding these topics within a love story plot. Grossman’s own multiplot novel *Zhizn’ i sudba* (1958/1980) [*Life and Fate*] was kept from the public, because of the frank depiction of the Shoah but also because of the way it parallelized

Stalinism and National Socialism. Grossman's and Ehrenburg's metaphor of the testimony as a monument resounds in many postcatastrophic texts from Evtushenko's famous poem *Babii Iar* (1961) which opens with the line "No memorial stands over Babii Iar" (Evtushenko 1961, 4) to Aleksandr Etkind's thoughts on texts and monuments (Etkind 2013, 179–182). Authors such as Anatolii Kuznetsov, Masha Rol'nikaite, and Anatolii Rybakov also addressed the special fate of Soviet Jews in their works. With the exception of Rol'nikaite who survived the Vilnius ghetto and several camps, none of them had firsthand knowledge of the genocidal events in the Western parts of the Soviet Union. So, in order to commemorate the dead, they had to turn to newspaper coverage of war crime trials, to family history, and other sources.

This approach is reflected for example in Anatolii Kuznetsov's "novel-document" (roman-dokument) *Babii Iar*, probably the best-known Soviet text about the Shoah.¹⁵ The novel was published in a highly censored and edited form in the journal *Iunost'* in 1960. It centers on the murderous events in Babi Yar and is presented from the point of view of a bystander, a young boy at the time of the events. Its ethical charge lies in the resurfacing of documentary material such as the witness testimony of Dina Pronicheva, one of the very few survivors of Babi Yar, but also in the way Kuznetsov stages acts of remembrance and tries to come to terms with his own role as a bystander and witness to the events happening in his immediate environment. Like Ehrenburg and Grossman before him, Kuznetsov addresses other mass killings in Soviet history such as the Holodomor and the Gulag alongside the Holocaust.

Leona Toker regards Anatolii Rybakov's 1978 novel *Tiazhelii pesok* [*Heavy Sand*] as verging between official and unofficial Soviet literature (Toker 2013, 128). Rybakov was a famous and well-established author at the time he began to research the fate of Soviet Jews during the war. Following Ehrenburg's example, he made use of tried and tested representations of the war and a love story, employing them to promote less approved and critical subjects, such as Jewish life in the shtetl and the Shoah. Rybakov incorporates stories about partisan heroism, self-sacrifice, and Soviet solidarity between neighbors of different ethnicities into his text. The death of Dina, the narrator's sister, resembles that of the well-known girl partisan hero Zoia Kosmodemian'skaia but also the pathos of resistance permeating Hersh Smolar's book *Mstiteli getto* (1947) [*The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet-Jewish Partisans Against the Nazis*].¹⁶ Like Zoia, Dina is hanged, naked, and beaten and like Zoia her last words under the gallows are an act of defiance, when she starts to sing "maybe a Jewish, Ukrainian or Russian song, or perhaps the 'Internationale,' the hymn of our youth and our hopes" (Rybakov 1981, 348–349). His writing style functions very much in the fashion of Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory," that is, by way of "cross-referencing" and borrowing elements of an established memorial

discourse (Rothberg 2009, 3). In the case of Rybakov and other Soviet writers this meant, making use of socialist realist narratives and the established war narrative and combining them with representations of Jewish life and death that were contested and problematic (Tippner 2021, forthcoming).¹⁷ In his postperestroika memoir *Roman vospominanie* (1997) [Novel of Reminiscences] Rybakov describes his extensive research aiming to fill in the gaps of the Soviet narrative and the ways he had to accommodate Soviet censorship. His struggle with the templates of Soviet war remembrance is mirrored in Masha Rol'nikaite's memoir *I vsë eto pravda* (2002) [And All This is True]. Here, she describes the long and complicated process to publish her wartime memoir *Ia dolžbna rasskazat'* (1965) [I Have to Tell] about the Vilna ghetto and Nazi concentration camps. Both her memoir and her autofictional novels *Dolgoe molchanie* (1981) [A Long Silence] and *Privykni k svetu* (1974) [Get Used to the Light] constitute the rare example of a Soviet survivor addressing topics such as the Shoah, survivor's guilt, and collaboration (Tippner 2019).¹⁸

In his memoir, Rybakov expands on how he tried to get more information concerning the fate of the Jews during the war and under Nazi occupation, as well as on his attempts to recreate the lost world of the Jewish shtetl.¹⁹ Since there were almost no published sources on these topics, he decided to talk to contemporary witnesses in his family and in his circle of friends and acquaintances. Most notably, he conducted an interview with his only surviving aunt, which he recorded on eight tapes (Rybakov 1997, 231). The importance of oral history is mirrored in the incorporation of oral histories and the search for eye-witnesses in his text. Rybakov's and Kuznetsov's approach to filling in the gaps of documentation prefigures texts by Stepanova and Ulitskaia, Petrowskaja, and Vertlib. His novel also foreshadows later representations of the Shoah and its aftermath, in his reflections of the lack of documents, for instance when he has his narrator character say:

I don't intend to tell you the story of this ghetto, I do not know it, nobody does. It was a little one, and it was short lived. No written accounts of it have survived; it doesn't figure in official documents; it was simply wiped of the face of the earth. (Rybakov 1981, 253)

Rybakov's text also proves prescient in the way it ultimately gestures towards questions of memorialization in the end, confronting the reader with the discrepancies in the Hebrew and Russian inscription on a memorial plaque on the Jewish cemetery (Rybakov 1981, 381) and thus the unresolved issues in Jewish and Russian commemorative practices.

It is also noteworthy that the "massive appearance of personal documents at the end of the Soviet epoch" (Paperno 2009, 1) only marginally encompassed texts about the Shoah. The traumatic events

retrieved from the past and addressed in memoirs were the Gulag and political repression. In other words, the collapse of the Soviet empire did not necessarily mean the end of the silence shrouding the Shoah. Rather, the lack of documents became more apparent and visible at this point

“One of Those Books:” Postcatastrophic Writing and Co-remembering the Shoah in Russian Jewish Literature

Writing the Shoah in Russian Jewish literature still is impeded by conflicting memories and stories, a culture of remembrance that favors other war experiences, and most importantly the relative scarcity of testimonial material. Even today, the information about the murder of Soviet Jews is often contradictory and stories of death and survival are largely “untold,” as a project on the “dispersed Holocaust” in Yad Vashem is titled.²⁰ In some ways, this has been aggravated and in others mitigated at the same time by Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union. Literature about the “dispersed Holocaust” on Soviet territory is no longer confined to Russian literature. The waves of Jewish migration during the 1980s well into the 2000s have displaced Shoah memory elsewhere. Books about the Shoah are now written mainly in Hebrew, English, and German. This means that the image of the Shoah in these literatures is changing, too. In a survey of Russian Jewish literature written in English by David Bezmozgis, Boris Fishman, and Lara Vapnyar dealing with the Shoah, Karolina Krasuska points out that “the Holocaust is remembered differently and it is a different Holocaust that is remembered” (Krasuska 2020, 254). This holds true for Russian Jewish literature written in German, too. Authors Katja Petrowskaja or Vladimir Vertlib, for example, direct the reader’s attention towards the multiple traumatizing historical events Soviet Jews suffered through, such as the political terror of the late 1930s, the wave of antisemitic persecution in the wake of the doctor’s plot, or the Leningrad siege, which resulted in a general feeling of living in postcatastrophic times. This is an understanding of Soviet Jewish history these transnational authors share with their Russian counterparts, such as Margarita Khemlin, Boris Khersonskii, Mariia Stepanova, or Liudmila Ulitskaia.

Since the early 2000s, researching and fictionalizing family history has become a major template for postmemorial narratives about the Shoah and its aftermath. As the Soviet novel, the family history memoir serves as a “memorial form” that allows writers to address the “dispersed Holocaust” despite the lack of testimony. As Ann Rigney has argued, fiction or fictionalization is useful when “the desire to recollect certain marginalized aspects of the past is not met by the availability of archival evidence (Rigney 2005, 22). Employing varying degrees of fictionalization, second- and third-generation authors explore Jewish life and death under Nazi rule in the occupied Soviet territories researching their own

families and using family archives, letters, and photographs. Like their Soviet predecessors, they rely on oral histories, in many cases, interviews conducted with close relatives. Vladimir Vertlib's *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (2001) [*The Special Memory of Rosa Masur*] fictionalizes interviews the author conducted with his own grandmother (Haines 2009, 237) and draws on her life for parallelizing genocidal events such as the Leningrad siege and the Shoah. Many of the books share a tendency towards meta-narrative, reflecting on memory theory, memorial forms, their devices, and the ubiquity of photographs.²¹ Mariia Stepanova too, is well aware of this trend, as an ironic metatextual comment in the book makes apparent: "One of those books where the author travels around the world in search of his or her roots—there are plenty of those now.' 'Yes', I answered. 'And now, there will be one more'" (Stepanova 2021, 391). Researching her family history as well as the vicissitudes of Russian-Jewish life in *Pamiati Pamiati* (2017) (*In Memory of Memory*, 2021), she brings private and collective histories into a narrative format oscillating between autofiction, essay, and memoir. She addresses the Shoah only in passing since none of her family members perished in the war, or during the Great Terror, or in the Gulag, a fact, she deems noteworthy.

In the model of Jewish history in the 20th century offered by Stepanova, Ulitskaia, and Khersonskii, events are entangled, sometimes taking catastrophic turns, sometimes providing respite and rescue in unexpected places. Boris Khersonskii's "quasidocumentary" cycle *The Family Archive* (1996–2001) [*Semeinii archiv*] (Kukulin 2010, 606) constructed of poetic fragments devoted to photographs of his extended family and their fate during the Shoah, Soviet occupation, or later antisemitic campaigns, offers several examples of this.²² Those deemed to have seemingly been spared deportation and incarceration by Soviet occupiers, awaits another even more horrible fate at the hands of Germans and Romanians: "And yet it seemed / that those who are free are lucky.// That's not how it is! All those / whom the Soviets spared,/ were finished off by the Nazis and Romanians" (Khersonskii 2006). Reading these lines, then, is a strong reminder of the complicated constellations Jews faced in the bloodlands, and it also goes to show that the ideological and religious rifts and multiple allegiances (religious, political, national) characteristic of Jewish families (Slezkine 2004) influenced their fates and the way they interpreted history.²³

Fictional accounts written in German or English, such Boris Fishman's novel *A Replacement Life* (2014) also use the template of family history as a device to structure their plot. Fishman mainly employs the family history to convey the differences in Shoah memorialization in the US and the Soviet Union that are played out by his survivor grandparents and their Americanized grandson. The main character Slava Gelman, grandchild of a Holocaust survivor and unsuccessful writer turned ghost-

writer for a community of ex-Soviet Jews in New York, embodies both Russian and American attitudes. His novel directs the reader towards the idea of scarcity while simultaneously pointing him towards the many untold stories of Jewish survivors, focusing on the multiple traumas marking Soviet history and not just on the Shoah. Using stories of old Soviet Jews who emigrated to the US and the archetypal Soviet survivor and wartime stories, Slava creates narratives that are then submitted to the German claims conference for forced laborers. His grandparents have lived through the Second World War and the Soviet repressions. While Slava's grandmother is a Shoah survivor who was in the Minsk ghetto and later fought with the partisans, his grandfather survived in Uzbekistan but later suffered in Soviet camps. The grandfather urges Slava to ascribe his wife's Shoah biography to him not purely for economic compensation, in some ways he also seeks acknowledgment of his own suffering in the Soviet Union during the war which does not feature especially high in American (or German) public discourse (Fishman 2014, 35).²⁴ In effect, what first appears to be an immoral act of avarice eventually receives moral legitimization, providing those who experienced a different type of persecution by the German invaders with a relatable story that fits into the mold of the claims conference. Before he ventures into writing survivor stories, Slava ponders on his grandmother's reluctance to talk about her wartime experiences, especially her fate during the Holocaust:

This Slava couldn't fathom, even at ten years old. Already by then he had been visited by the American understanding that to know was better than not to know. She would go one day, and then no one would know. However, he didn't dare ask. He imagined. Barking dogs, coils of barbed wire, an always gray sky. (Fishman 2014, 4)

The silence of his grandmother Sofia prevents him from hearing and writing her story. The novel here contrasts an American culture of remembrance with regard to the Shoah with a Russian, or rather Soviet one, that is moored in silence, informed by the risks of talking that only aggravate the reluctance of Shoah survivors to speak about their traumatic experiences. Boris Fishman's text is evocative in another way, too. Slava's image of the Shoah is completely Americanized, informed by images of Auschwitz and other death camps, and has little in common with the "Holocaust by bullets." While writing fictitious survivor biographies, Slava reflects upon the different narratives that govern American and Soviet war and Shoah narratives. He relishes the heroic ghetto and partisan stories in the Soviet vein which he uses to plot the biography of Lazar Rudnitzky, another Jewish immigrant with the wrong history of victimization and suffering (Fishman 2014, 208–214). In the end, it is Slava's literary accomplishment and the way his fictional biographies conform to

Western standards that give his ghost-writing away. Vertlib's *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* strikes a similar note, with the main character participating in the oral history project for immigrants, providing German audiences with an "impressive" tale of Russian Jewish suffering (Vertlib 2003, 415). The novel is a study in comparative historiography, constantly confronting Western images of the Shoah with Soviet ones, juxtaposing different types of antisemitism, and integrating the Leningrad siege into the postcatastrophic narrative.

Among the few contemporary Russian writers addressing the Shoah and its after-effects not in the form of an autobiographical or documentary novel is the late Margarita Khemlin. Although, she was born in Ukraine, she wrote in Russian, infusing her texts with Ukrainian, Yiddish, and Surzhik (a combination of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian) elements. Her penultimate novel *Krainii* (2010) [*The Endman*] takes place in the Chernigov region and touches upon many of the topics that characterize the "dispersed Holocaust"—questions of witnessing, collaboration, the partisan narrative, postwar antisemitism, and the survivor's difficulty finding their place in Soviet society after the war. The main character, Nisl Zaidenband, reflects upon his loneliness, before embarking on the story of his life during the war and afterward. He makes no claim to be a reliable eye-witness to the extermination of his friends and family, since he only heard the shots, because he hid in the woods and later on constantly doubts his own memories and recollections. Although, he did not see his next of kin and neighbors die, he stresses his "deep bond with those who were [...] killed" (Khemlin 2016, 9). The "dispersed" Shoah in the village of Oster is described through the ringing of the shots, being narrated only via its effects on his life and those of others. The event itself is absent. After the destruction of the Jewish inhabitants, separated from his parents, he wanders the countryside, looking for food and shelter, always in fear of being betrayed and handed over to the Germans by Ukrainian peasants. His parents meanwhile are ghettoized and then sent to the death camps Groß-Rosen and Bełżec. Following a short interim as "syn polka" (son of the regiment) evoking popular Soviet war narratives, he finally ends up with a group of Jewish partisans amongst whom he survives the war.

Nisl's life after the war is marked by his search for his lost parents and a looming feeling of postcatastrophic dread and disorientation. It takes up more than two-thirds of the text, locating the text firmly in the aftermath. He is also driven by a wish to connect and reconnect with those he met during the war and a profound disorientation that cannot be cured. Revisiting the woods where he hid out with the partisans, he asks his former partisan leader if he has been a hero and receives the answer: "You are a hero. Everyone who survived is a hero" (Khemlin 2016, 162). As it turns out Yankele, the partisan commandant is as traumatized as Nisl, preparing for the next murderous onslaught and catastrophe to strike the Jewish community. Nisl Zaidenband's tale

bears a certain resemblance to Imre Kertész's autobiographical novel *Fatelessness* with its depiction of the Shoah but also Soviet ideology from the point of view of an innocent and detached protagonist who passes few judgments and claims no superior insight.

The Endman addresses many of the problems that characterize the Shoah in the Ukraine, especially the complicated relations between Jewish and Ukrainian neighbors. It can be described as a postcatastrophic text, since it is very much concerned with the after-effect of the Shoah, exploring the "tangle" (*klubok*) that has formed during the war. Yankele points out that Jewish survivors have to thank "one half of the village" for helping them, and they need "to beat the life out of the other half" for denouncing them (Khemlin 2016, 134). The fact that this tangle cannot be unraveled and past crimes cannot be undone, proves to be a constant source of dread and uncertainty for the survivors but it also shows the strong bonds binding neighbors and friends across ideological and national fault lines. This storyline is established through Nisl's unfaltering, if often tested friendship with Grisha, the son of a collaborator, and later on a police officer himself. In Khemlin's first novel *Klotsvog* (2009) (*Klotsvog*, 2019) the Shoah is represented in a more circumstantial way. Nevertheless, it still pervades the entire story. The narrator, Maia Klotsvog, who survived the war in the Soviet hinterland, is terrorized by feelings of trauma that have turned her into an unpleasant and selfish person. She is a constant outsider like Nisl Zaidenband and the epitome of "survivor's fear," as Lara Vapnyar writes in the foreword to the English edition of *Klotsvog* (Vapnyar 2019, xii). Gary Shteyngart's memoir *Little Failure* (2014) shows that this fear was transferred to the next generation of Soviet Jews and constituted part of the baggage they carried with them into emigration. When Shteyngart asks his mother, why he is so fearful and scared of everything, she answers "Because you were born a Jewish person" (Shteyngart 2014, 25), and one would have to add a Jewish person in the Soviet Union. Among survivors and their next of kin, this fear was perpetuated by antisemitic and antizionist campaigns.

Interspersed in Zaidenband's reconstruction of the past is the memory of a "group of Americans" who visit Chernigov, to make a documentary and collect video testimonies. They call "Holocaust" what he calls the damages of fascism (*vreda fashisma*). He claims an immediate understanding of this foreign concept, since it evokes the words "cold" and "bones" (*kholodnaia kost'*) for him (Khemlin 2016, 53). He then wonders, whether he made it into the film. Khemlin uses this short episode to allude to the wave of oral history and video testimony that swept over the former Soviet Union creating documents that are still unavailable for the wider public but nevertheless leaving a trace in the public consciousness. Khemlin's novel can thus be read, as an attempt to re-enact these oral histories and testimonies in fiction.

In her documentary novel *Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik* (2006) (*Daniel Stein, Interpreter: A Novel in Document*, 2011) Liudmila Ulitskaia also reflects on the availability of documents, citing her wish to make the extraordinary life and fate of Oskar Rufeisen known to Russian audiences by translating Nechama Tec's biography of Rufeisen *In the Lion's Den* (1990). She points out that she abandoned the translation project because her view of Rufeisen did not correspond to that of Tec after she did her own research, thus feeling the need to write her own book (Ulitskaia 2007). Ulitskaia's main protagonist Daniel Shtain, shares central biographical elements with Rufeisen, he too assumed a false identity and worked for the German police as a volunteer and translator in Belarus. After being exposed, he hid in a small nunnery for several months and during this time converted to Catholicism. Later on, he joined a partisan unit in the woods around the Belarusian town of Mir and after the war he worked as a priest in Poland until his emigration to Israel in the 1950s. While the Shoah plays an important role in the novel, it is clearly one topic among others. Ulitskaia describes not only Shtain's fate during the war but also describes how the children of victims and perpetrators try to come terms with their parent's legacy.

As in her other books, she makes use of family history to represent suppressed and neglected aspects of the Soviet past. It is important to recognize the mediated way Ulitskaia describes the Shoah—it appears in a talk given by Shtain to German schoolchildren which is cut through by letters and reminiscences by other characters, thus defining the narrative as oral history addressed to a specific audience, receptive to this story. This receptiveness is underlined in an elaboration on the need to remember set in close proximity to Shtain's recollections, consisting of a letter addressed to Eva, the daughter of Shoah survivors. The line reads: "The Holocaust needs to be acknowledged—if only in order to remember the dead" (Ulitskaia 2009, 59). Later she specifically mentions a survivor's initiative to commemorate the Jewish partisans, but also those who perished in the ghetto and during the mass killings in the summer of 1942 (Ulitskaia 2009, 410). This commentary makes clear that the task of remembering the Shoah is still largely performed by survivors and their descendants.²⁵ Ulitskaia takes up a motif already elaborated upon in the end of Rybakov's *Heavy Sand*, present in Mendelsohn's *The Lost. A Search for Six of Six Million* and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*—namely, the fact that memorial practices and forms were and are still mainly performed by the children and grandchildren of survivors and victims. Etkind has argued, that "awareness of the past may be achieved by the publication of a document or by the erection of an obelisk, by writing a memoir or by creating a memorial, by launching a discussion or opening a museum" (Etkind 2013, 177). He characterizes these two types of memorial forms, as "hard" and "soft" memory. The literary works of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Jewish writers also

demonstrate the role Shoah remembrance plays in constructing Jewish identities. The fusion of catastrophic events in these narratives is very much indicative of their postcatastrophic status (Artwińska and Tippner 2021, 10).

Displaced Memories: Conclusion

As has been stated above, postcatastrophic narratives and Shoah remembrance in Russian (Jewish) literary discourse differ from those in East-Central and Western Europe. Soviet narratives still play an important role in Russian cultures of remembrance, not the least because of the prominence given to partisan narratives and the need to establish facts by searching for testimony. Teaching material compiled by the *Tsentr i Fond 'Kholokost'*, edited by Il'ia Altman among others, suggests lessons on Rybakov's *Heavy Sand*, Grossman's *Life and Fate*, and Kuznetsov's book on Baby Yar (Al'tman et al. 2006).²⁶ Despite the pervasive feeling of postcatastrophe, as evidenced in the literature of Russian Jewish authors, the "dispersed Holocaust" is still a "non-self-evident memory" for Post-Soviet Jewish and other audiences (Epstein and Khanin 2013).²⁷ The translation of memory that can be seen in American and German Russian Jewish narratives has a two-fold effect, dislocating memory elsewhere but also providing outside impulses and inscribing the dispersed Shoah and its afterlife into world literature. The "temporal distance implied by the prefix 'post'" and its aesthetic effects (Artwińska and Tippner 2022, 5) are heightened by the spatial effects of displacement but also allow for new opportunities of co-remembering the Shoah and other catastrophic events in Soviet history. Still complicated by polytrauma and the entanglement of national and Jewish narratives, writing the Shoah remains difficult and efforts are needed to secure testimonies and turn them into documents that can incite future narratives.

Notes

- 1 The quote is taken from Mendelsohn (2006, 289).
- 2 Knowledge about the camps and the killing sites was available in the Soviet Union due to war reports and articles in newspapers and it found its way into literary representations, especially by authors who had seen the camps such as Vasilii Grossmann. Still, the camps did not and could not become the main literary signifier of the Shoah in the Soviet Union.
- 3 The spelling of Babii Iar in English varies widely due to transliteration and Russian and Ukrainian spelling. In the following, the name of the killing site is given according to the authors use and transliteration.
- 4 For example, the seminal study of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder does not mention neither the "Holocaust by bullets", nor Babi Yar or any other killing site in the Soviet Union (Levy and Sznajder 2006). Despite arguing that the Soviet Union was the "first place to bear the full brunt of the Nazi's Final

- Solution,” David Roskies and Naomi Diamant include only three Soviet texts in their handbook on Holocaust literature (Roskies and Diamant 2012, 33). This is indicative of the marginalized place Soviet and Russian literature about the Shoah occupies in the general canon.
- 5 The estimates of the total number of Soviet Jewish victims vary. Zvi Gitelman states that “between one-fourth and one-third” of all of the Jewish victims were under Soviet rule at the time of their death (Gitelman 1997, 14). Mordechai Altshuler sets the number between 2.5 and 3.3 million (Altshuler 1987, 4).
 - 6 This echoes Zvi Gitelman’s statement that “most Soviet works either pass over it [i.e. the Holocaust] in silence or blur it by universalizing it,” made almost 20 years earlier in a volume dedicated to the legacies of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union (Gitelman 1997, 14). Peter Black has pointed out that in Western European historiography the “Holocaust by bullets” was never researched as intensively as the Holocaust in the death camps. Still, he states that it was never hidden, citing the vast amount of research done on the Einsatzgruppen (Black 2014, 23). Still, it is safe to say that there is comparably less work on Soviet victims of the Shoah who were shot in ravines and pits than on the victims who were murdered in the camps.
 - 7 Murav thus opts to not use the term in the Soviet Russian and Yiddish context, as she explains (Murav 2011, 112). Eppelboin and Kovriguina coin the term “literature of the ravine” (*littérature des ravins*) in their study on the Shoah in Russian literature (Eppelboin and Kovriguina 2013).
 - 8 The only Russian text Sicher discusses in his study is Kuznetsov’s documentary novel *Babi Yar*.
 - 9 The same holds true for film studies. Olga Gershenson has unearthed and discussed a “number of Soviet films about the Holocaust” and states that with regard to film the Soviet Union was “even ahead of the curve in representing [...] the Holocaust” (Gershenson 2013, 3).
 - 10 Annie Eppelboin notes that Russian literature is marked not only by the absence of survivor testimonies but also by an absence of witness accounts given by the local population who were present at the mass murders and went on to live close to the graves (Eppelboin 2015, 81). The fundamental difference between ghettoization and thus adaption to the mechanisms of destruction and the overwhelming suddenness of death in the ravines, echoes through the postcatastrophic texts by Petrowskaja (2018, 164) and Khemlin (2016, 137).
 - 11 In the following, quotations are attributed to the authors who edited and redacted them and not to the primary witnesses who provided the testimony.
 - 12 For description of the history of the *Black Book* and the different versions published since 1946 see Altman (2008, xix–xxxix).
 - 13 The reluctance to single out Jews as war heroes and resistance fighters is exemplified in the case of Masha Bruskina. She was a Jewish resistance fighter who was known (or not known) during Soviet times as “Neizvestnaia” (the Unidentified) which is also the title of a book documenting her life. As Ekaterina Keding points out in an article on Bruskina, her identity was established immediately after the war, but was suppressed during Soviet times well into the 1960s due to ideological reasons (Keding 2011, 28).
 - 14 Soviet concepts of heroism and Western images of resistance and defiance coincided in the image of the Jewish partisan. See e.g. Nechama Tec’s work on the Bielski partisans which was made into a major Hollywood film featuring Daniel Craig. Tec, Nechama, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) and *Defiance* (2008, Director: Edward Zwick, USA).

- 15 The English title changes the subtitle to “a document in the form of a novel” (Kuznetsov 1970a). After going into exile Kuznetsov published an uncensored version integrating the censored passages in italics and later commentaries in parentheses that he regards as the definitive text, (1970b, 13).
- 16 Smolar had also contributed to the chapter on the Minsk ghetto in the *Black Book*. His account was originally published in Yiddish in 1946. The Russian title translates *The Ghetto Avengers*.
- 17 Western literary critics such as Gary Rosenshield and Eppelboin and Kovriguina criticize Rybakov for this device. See Rosenshield (1996), and Eppelboin and Kovriguina (2013, 249).
- 18 For an extensive discussion of Rol’nikaite’s textual strategies for creating a memorial form for representing the Shoah in the Soviet Union see Tippner (2019). Rol’nikaite’s memories of censorship and editing resemble those of Rybakov, providing us with a clearer picture of Soviet discursive practices.
- 19 Anatolii Rybakov (1997, 231). Part of the text is translated in Anatolii Rybakov (2014). Citations are taken either from the Russian original (Rybakov 1997) or from the partial translation.
- 20 Part of the research can be found in *Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR*, <https://www.yadvashem.org/untold-stories/database/homepage.asp> [last accessed 10, March 2021].
- 21 Among the authors discussed in this article, Petrowskaja, Stepanova, Khersonskii, Mendelsohn, and Shteyngart integrate photographs into their texts, making varied use of them. First of all, photographs are used to support the documentary character of the texts, even despite the way they fictionalize biographies. In Khersonskii’s text the description of photographs (e.g. the images in a catalog auctioning of Jewish objects) plays an important role in triggering both memories and stories.
- 22 Despite the fact that Khersonskii’s *Family Archive* is a poetic text, it shares many aspects of the memorial prose forms discussed here: family history as a mirror of the Shoah, metatextual commentaries, the integration of photographs, and ekphrastic passages.
- 23 Slezkine exemplifies these rifts and allegiances using the example of Tevye the Milkman’s seven daughters who choose between traditional Jewish culture, emigration, communism, and assimilation among other choices. See Slezkine (2004, 204–373).
- 24 Slava tells him, “It says: ‘Ghettos, forced labor, concentration camps ... What did the subject suffer between 1939 and 1945?’ The subject. Not you. You didn’t suffer.’ ‘I didn’t suffer?’ Grandfather’s eyes sparkled” (Fishman 2014, 35).
- 25 Arkadii Zeltser has meticulously reconstructed the history of Shoah memorials in the Soviet Union. See his Zeltser (2018).
- 26 The reader provides material for different target groups from middle to high school students. It provides guidance on how to conduct discussions on this “difficult” topic.
- 27 The authors rely on sociological data and research and are mainly concerned with the knowledge of Jewish students in Russia and Ukraine today. They conclude that “In summation, Holocaust memory is not passed down from generation to generation, but is developed from the outside, as if it concerned some distant historic events rather than something that happened only seven decades ago in Russia and Ukraine [...]” (Epstein and Khanin 2013, 151).

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9 After the Catastrophe. Polish Reactions to the Shoah in the 1940s and after 2010. Illustrated by the Examples of Kazimierz Wyka, Marcin Zaremba, and Andrzej Leder

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The works by philosopher Andrzej Leder *Przeżniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (2014) [*An Over-Dreamed Revolution. Exercises in Historical Logic*] and historian Marcin Zaremba *Wielka trwoga. Poland 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (2012) [*Great Fear. Poland 1944–1947. People's Response to the Crisis*] are very important and popular books of the past decade that shape today's canonic picture of the Polish society in the times of war and immediately after.¹ These books describe the transformations of this wartime society in the wake of the Shoah, as well as reactions to it. Both of them go far beyond the scope of strictly academic considerations and they have exerted an enormous influence on the public debate in Poland. I mean not only the extraordinary popularity of both authors: hundreds of meetings with readers, interviews, and academic seminars, but also press publications in the most-read daily and socio-cultural press, many scientific articles, and above all the fact that the theses presented in the books of Leder and Zaremba shaped popular social imagination and created the canon of contemporary reflection on the 1940s. They offer a clear voice in the dispute about contemporary and 20th-century modernization, about the social changes that occurred right after the war, about the significance of this modernization, in connection to the Shoah. Speaking from the contemporary perspective, they show the significance that this catastrophe had for Polish society² and its condition in present time.

Yet this discussion did not develop in a vacuum and its beginnings can be traced back to wartime. It has been going on for the following decades, albeit with long disruption.³ We can in fact see a link between the forties and the present, in hiding the main threads of Polish guilt, responsibility, or involvement in the Shoah. It should be remembered, however, that this approach, although very important in Polish culture, rarely came to the fore:⁴ the dominant narrative was usually the one on Polish help and unmatched sacrifices made to save Jews, the symbol of which became the Righteous on the eve of antisemitic exclusion of 1968.

Within the context of this discussion, it is worth mentioning a seminal text by the outstanding Polish literary historian Kazimierz Wyka (2010b), written in the 1940s but published a decade later. It refers to the same problems and asks similar questions as the works of Zaremba and Leder, although with temporal proximity: how Polish society changed as a result of the Shoah and what significance it had; what was the Polish contribution to the Shoah. A juxtaposition of these three works allows us to shed light on the meanders of the Polish memory and postmemory and to show how the areas of knowledge and ignorance concerning the Shoah in the Polish society are changing.

The 1940s

Antisemitism did not disappear in Poland at the end of the war in the 1940s. It manifested itself not only in a wave of pogroms in Kielce in 1946 (Tokarska Bakir 2018) and Cracow 1945 (Cichopek 2000), in the so-called train actions (Adelson 1993), but also in the hostile attitude toward the survivors who returned to their towns, villages, and houses (Krzyżanowski 2020). The Polish community was unwilling to accept Jews, who had already been excluded before, whose disappearance had been exploited and taken advantage of, whose place had been taken. Their very existence was perceived as a provocation, which called for defense (that is, aggression). 1946 texts by Julian Przyboś, Witold Kula, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Zdzisław Libera or Stanisław Ossowski attest to the magnitude of this phenomenon.⁵ Jastrun evaluates the hatred toward Jews to be much stronger than postwar hatred toward Germans, which can hardly be blamed on war traumas.⁶ He is of the opinion that antisemitism is not an exception, a marginal or incidental sentiment, but a mass phenomenon. Gas chambers are wished upon Jewish survivors, their disappearance is viewed as a desired scenario. Antisemitism “continues to exist and at times takes on disturbing symptoms,” it gains a new quality and “topicality” (Jastrun 2018, 86).

According to Kazimierz Wyka, postwar antisemitism swells up and, contrary to popular belief, is not just a folk disposition or under-class phenomenon. Antisemitism did not concern only uneducated people enriched on looting and robbing Jews, but also those who took over Jewish houses, apartments, and workplaces. The author points to an aspect that is almost completely unknown today, that is the antisemitism of the intelligentsia, which, as he wrote in the 1940s, “unexpectedly often today devotes itself to the power of antisemitic schemes” (Wyka 2010a, 33).

Wyka indicates that antisemitism of the prewar and postwar intelligentsia is part of an antisemitic culture and is supra-class patterns of culture, and not simply shortage of cultural formation. Intelligentsia in Poland always treats itself as the most important social group responsible

for the development of the country and its future. The relationships of intelligentsia with the other social classes we could describe now as hegemony: In the 1930s but also in the 1940s, the intelligentsia had power to legitimize various cultural models or make them invalid. Wyka noticed the continuity of historical processes. In the 1930s the intelligentsia produced, reproduced, and reinforced antisemitic patterns of culture and social practices. The antisemitic, violent cultural pattern was legitimate, if not dominant, in prewar and war period and intelligentsia played an essential role in reinforcing it (Chmielewska 2018a).

Kazimierz Wyka and an Early Postwar Image of the Shoah

Before I get to the heart of the matter, I would like to introduce Kazimierz Wyka. He was a witness to a time, who on an ongoing basis wrote about the changes and deep social transformations that took place during the war. His text *Życie na niby* [*Life As If*] was published in the immediate postwar period in 1957. Kazimierz Wyka later became the Nestor of Polish literary criticism and history of literature, one of the most seminal figures of Polish literature and literary studies. An employee of the Jagiellonian University, he spent wartime at the family sawmill (Krzeszowice), in a limbo between classes. Of course, Kazimierz Wyka is hardly a typical representative of the Krzeszowice community, a little town with 15% of Jews in population. The young intellectual was deprived of the university, characteristic place, environment, discussion with colleagues, professors, libraries, books, seminars, visits to the theater, reading daily newspapers. He lost his lifestyle, everything that means individual choices and social habitus⁷ and what we can describe as a “second nature” (*altera natura*). The return to the earlier, low stratified social position, to manual work, to uncertain future perspectives happened quite rapidly. Wyka returns to the sawmill, to an under-class environment, as a stranger, never fully belonging to the group, looking at him from a distance. The experience of temporary “downgrading” does not change the earlier habitus fundamentally but allows him to change the perspective, paradoxically to see more and something other than the view from the university window, see various social entities, their different conditions, and situation. Wyka spoke from an interclass position, therefore he noticed social phenomena and games with much greater clarity than those firmly anchored in their own social group: the process of separation of the new bourgeoisie, the flattening of the social hierarchy, the loss of traditional intelligentsias sources of income (closed schools, universities, publishing houses, theaters, magazines, etc.) and thereby the downward mobility; the political and economic emancipation of peasantry.

This has to be said right away: Wyka does not present an image of the Shoah—the description of this event is virtually absent from his work:

there are no ghettos, no death camps, no mass or individual deaths, no devastation of synagogues, no blackmailing, no denunciation of Jews, no German or Polish violence. His text cannot be perceived as an eye-witness account by any means.⁸ What is more important, he fundamentally focuses on the Polish experience, on the significance that the Shoah had for Poles and on their role in it; in this sense, we may speak of a polonocentric perspective, which is not implying that Wyka wanted to protect the Polish image or whitewash the truth. Already in the course of the war, he grasped the magnitude of this event ("a crime unseen in all of history"⁹), the key significance for the society; key in the sense that it propelled economic, social, and mental changes. The universal phenomenon of *szaber* [plundering] and the trade associated with it, taking over Jewish property, houses, means of production, and jobs ushered in a deep transformation in the structure of ownership and class divisions. This process would not have been possible had it not been for the war, yet it was preceded by a deep-seated tradition of prewar exclusion, in which antisemitism played a central role. The exclusion of Jews from the Polish world had its stages. Wyka notices the change, but also the continuity of cultural patterns that led to it in the first place.

In the picture painted by Wyka, there is no clear boundary between the Shoah and Poles, which does not mean that he believes the fate of Poles and Jews to be a shared one, as the latter ones have been wiped out, and the former ones have not. He does emphasize, however, that the issue of Polish involvement remains common social knowledge; it is universally accessible and not subject to discussion. In his view, there is no space for the Polish popular and time-honored image of the witness characterized by indifference or simple lack of sympathy, there can be no reference to existential fault, as subsequently formulated by Jan Błoński in his famous essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na Getto* (1987) [*The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*]. Neither does Wyka consider whether the Poles helped, or if their help was sufficient, as he assumes a different angle: He is interested in the measurable advantages of this position for the Poles. Thus, the Polish bystander, as passive and observing, does not figure in his text; such a figure would be a mere veil, a mirage blocking reality. What replaces the innocent eye is the *agens*; the so-called Polish witness becomes an actor of the Shoah.

Wyka may not be a witness to the Shoah, but he is certainly a witness to the Polish society in times of the Shoah.¹⁰ The significance of this text derives primarily from the fact that it does not offer narrative closure, it does not allow the dubious figure of the innocent observer to prevail. His account of the war and the analysis of the contemporary world undermine the tale of sacrifice and they impede the process of denial of reality in the collective memory: of expropriation of Jews, of appropriation of their property, and of their exclusion in the material and social context.

Wyka repeatedly stresses that the condition for the possibility of these tectonic movements in the construction of Polish society was the extermination of Polish Jews, and more precisely, the taking over of their property and social roles, the seizure of their place. "The new wartime middle class spawned on the ruins of Polish Jewry" (Wyka 2010b, 94) is in fact a new social class, as it will later turn out, internally differentiated:

[A] central psycho-economic fact of the occupation years is undoubtedly the disappearance of the trade and mediation of the million-strong Jewish mass. Definitive and final disappearance. This is the main and permanent fact. On the other hand, a less permanent, although equally important, is the attempt at inertial and automatic entry of the Polish element into a place emptied by the Jews. This is why I call it inertial and automatic entry—the entire process, speaking bluntly and brutally, looked like this to those taking up the vacated space: the place of the unbaptized was taken over by the baptized, but with all the abominable cynicism of a conman, an exploiter, the psychology of the social function, not the nationality. All the joy of the Polish "third state" comes down to this hope: there are no Jews, we take their place, without changing anything, inheriting from the addictions which the national moralists considered typical of the Jewish psyche, but this time it will be national goodie-goodie and taboo. That is why, in economic psychology, this issue is central and must get the utmost consideration, if it is not to harm the moral health of the nation. (Wyka 2010b, 129)

I would like to emphasize that no one, for a long time, would state so succinctly the effects of the extermination of Jews on Polish mentality, and its importance as a factor of social transformation as well as war (and postwar) economy. Since these phenomena, are usually treated separately, as painful and monstrous, but without direct connection to the fate and position of the Poles themselves, eliciting compassion and dread, sometimes met with indifference. With this assumption, the relationship would be at best moral in character.

Wyka claims the opposite, namely that it is precisely the Shoah and the elimination one must look for as a key to understanding what has happened in Poland after the war. The appropriation of property and place in society had had a mass character and took place on a large social scale. It was also widely regarded as a boon, historical justice, and met with the satisfaction of the masses. The clear and unambiguous expression of "all the joy" from "taking the place of the Jews" leaves no room for interpretation. Nothing is left of the image of innocent and traumatized witnesses, so popular for decades. According to Wyka, the facts speak for themselves, the death of the Jews was accepted with

approval, relief, like a twist of fate. One cannot speak in this case of passivity; Polish society has shown activity. The macro-perspective that Wyka chooses, the perspective of socio-mental change, allows to avoid idle discussions that are essentially diminishing the problem, with arguments such as: “one cannot generalize,” “how many Poles actually saved people,” “there were many decent *people*,” “there were even worse people.” The way in which the problem is presented by Wyka, allows us to deal with the scale of the phenomenon, see its significance and mechanism.

In the passage quoted above, Wyka confronts reality with prewar antisemitic imagery and slogans of “de-Jewing” the economy, banks, and trade as a remedy for the economic crisis and bad living conditions (Anderton and Brauer 2016). Elsewhere he writes: “Occupation shows that it is the reverse. Jews were excluded and finally a “national” merchant was created. Did something change? It turned out that group psychology or nationality is not the conditioning factor—it is the appearance of the economic base in the whole system” (Wyka 2010b, 130). In short, antisemitic slogans are not only morally and socially disgusting, but they have no basis and are falsified by reality.

This confrontation leads to a bigger realization—namely that for Wyka, the Shoah is not only a cataclysm that Germany brings, it is not entirely external. He also looks at it from a logical perspective and the history of Polish culture, its patterns, and ideas. He clearly raises the question of Polish reactions to the Shoah and the Polish role in the whole process. He does not intend to stop at the mantra on the German guilt.

Much more serious question concerns the form which this elimination has taken place and the way in which our society wished and desired to discount it. Were the morally and objectively acceptable? Well, even if I speak only for myself and have no one to back me up, I shall repeat—no—a hundred times no. These forms and hopes were shameful, demoralizing and low. The short version of the economic and moral position of the Pole against the tragedy of the Jews goes something like this: Germans have committed crimes by murdering Jews. We would not do that. For this crime the Germans will be punished, the Germans have smeared their conscience, but we are already benefitting, and in the future, we will benefit too, without dirtying our consciences and staining our hands with blood. It is hard to find a nastier example of morality, than that of our society. (Wyka 2010b, 131)

The Shoah is not something external, which comes from abroad and has no connection with Polish culture and social relationships. The image that Wyka presents has nothing to do with the vision of an “indifferent bystander” who sins only in the existential sense:

abandonment, separation.¹¹ There is no such thing as an innocent eye. On the contrary, the “Polish bystander” takes action, benefits, and is involved:

[T]his time, from under the arm of the German executioner, performing atrocities thus far unseen in the history of crime, the Polish shopkeeper took the keys to his Jewish competitor’s cash register and thought he had acted the justly. For the Germans crime and punishment, for us keys and money. The shopkeeper forgot that the “legal” destruction of a whole nation was part of a process so unheard of that it was unlikely that history would have staged it to change the sign on someone’s shop. The ways that the Germans used to eradicate the Jews are on their conscience. The reaction to these forms is on our conscience. The golden tooth ripped from a corpse will bleed, even if no one remembered where it came from. That’s why it is forbidden to allow this reaction to be forgotten or fixed, for therein is the breath of petty necrophilia. (Wyka 2010b, 131)

The image of a bleeding golden tooth that has been “ripped from a corpse” becomes an emblem of the Polish role, an extremely powerful message that will be engraved on the Polish imagination, will be reproduced and repeated, but will also be neutralized by the story of the common horrors of war. In the quoted passage, we also see another important element of the picture, namely active forgetfulness, the suppression of knowledge commonly available in silence, the elimination of the past from public consciousness and public discourse. The conviction that Wyka’s voice in this matter would rather be isolated and not universally accepted, proved to be accurate. *Życie na niby* has entered the lists of school and university required reading, but his message was pacified with formulas of exceptional sensitivity of the author, bright humanism, and concern for the moral condition of the nation.¹²

Against widespread belief, Wyka does not speak from a humanistic position. Very seldom does he resort to moralistic lecturing, he bitterly and firmly opposes moralism that seeks an ethical trial in war, from which only the righteous may come out victorious.¹³ This is because politics of remembrance in the spirit of humanism, the memory of a noble trial, of fire that burns through cheap ore leaving solid gold untouched is a false one, it is a radical misrepresentation of the past. In many passages, Wyka manifested his doubts about collective memory as the safe keeper of truth, even more distrustful was he of the official memory. He did all in his power for the image of reality not to be effaced, but he had the sensation that he was facing powerful forces of the social machinery. This is due to the fact that memory obviously does not settle “naturally.” It is subject to strong pressure of social forces.

Internalization

Thus, we arrive at a difficult concept which puzzles contemporary researchers: whether the Polish culture and Polish remembrance have internalized the fact of Jewish Shoah and Polish role in this process (Janicka 2010). What does it mean that Poles internalized¹⁴ (or failed to internalize) anything? To what extent can we speak of internalization? The answer may seem enigmatic, but everything depends on how we understand the term “to internalize.” Does “internalize” denote knowledge, originating for example from participation, observation, being well-versed in the rules of Shoah? Or does this word designate critical reflection which analyses not only a certain sequence of events, but above all its significance, reasons for it and one’s own role? Wyka’s text clearly indicates that Poles have internalized the Shoah in the former meaning and failed to do so in the latter meaning, as the Polish consciousness defends itself against the critical stage. Wyka’s work is precisely an attempt to sow such consciousness, to force readers to reflect and change their ways. “Internalization,” in light of Wyka’s text, consisted in the conscious participation in the system, in enthusiastic following, taking advantage of the events and then creating a mechanism of denial, in citing ignorance or partial ignorance, in constructing various defense strategies in the face of a past not so distant, including the image of the traumatized witness, so en vogue these days.

Appropriation of Jewish property and the exclusion of Jews from the society and from the community was trivial and unexceptional, it did not spark mass opposition. Neither did it happen clandestinely. Wyka did not believe that the Polish mentality would work out this problem by itself and history has proven him right. The critical attitude toward own history was a result of a long and painful process and it is not yet completed.

Modern Perspective: Differences

Wyka’s text seems particularly relevant today, not only owing to the state of debate on the Polish guilt, but also in relation to the aforementioned contemporary works. Particularly Marcin Zaremba’s seminal *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (2012) [*The Great Fear. Poland 1944–1947*] and the book by Lacanist Andrzej Leder *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (2014) [*An Over-Dreamed Revolution. Exercises in Historical Logic*]. Both books were published recently and quickly received critical acclaim not only in the small circles of those interested in Lacan’s psychoanalysis or of specialists in recent history: Both enjoyed by a wide readership and exert a significant influence on contemporary thinking about the war and its aftermath,¹⁵ both also touch upon the subject discussed by Wyka, taking

up similar problems and posing similar questions. However, this common ground does not feature in either of these works. Leder does not even mention Wyka, and Zaremba does so only in passing. Nevertheless, both books have plenty in common with Wyka's essay. They try to restore the social context of historical events, they reverse the political perspective, challenge the memory, or rather "bad memory," and denial of shameful, often traumatic processes and phenomena that lie at the foundations of our present.

Zaremba's book is rooted in the anthropological perspective; its heroes are neither the great political actors nor representatives of the ruling elites. To the contrary, it is a narrative from the micro-scale, from the level of civilian, everyday experience, and the still-fresh wound of wartime. It is told via private letters, social practices, local stories. The link is the eponymous fear, a social phenomenon that is both universal and overlooked, or marginalized, by the great narratives. Zaremba paints a mental landscape of unrelenting horror, danger, panic, violence, monstrosities, plundering, denunciations, and uncertainty. This atmosphere shows that war is not over yet. His description of social relations is shocking. Without a doubt, Wyka's text was an inspiration, which the author himself admits. Sometimes it can be seen in a succinct commentary to Zaremba's observations. Wyka writes: "The grim slaughterhouse of the trenches and the money swelling up on the home front, money wedded to lofty phrases. Escape of millions, panicked movement that no human power could ever stop" (Wyka 2010b, 19). "War as an aggregate of visible and directly felt front line operations [...] was so far removed from these vicinities that in this sense it becomes something unreal, something thoroughly fantastic in its current dimension" (Wyka 2010b, 21). Both Zaremba and Wyka consistently stress the perspective of the civilians—danger of death, contribution, plundering, robbery, etc.¹⁶ Wyka too underscored how common plundering was during and after the war:

[S]oon the plundering started, at first shyly, and then more boldly. The perpetrators were locals. I remember a woman who [...] came to cut out pieces of the carpet from palais. Nothing was helping [...] the militiamen were helping in the plundering. (Wyka 2010b, 185)

The universality of plundering and trade in goods of suspicious origins are recurrent themes, both in Wyka's and Zaremba's texts. Similar to Wyka, Zaremba focuses on the bending of social rules and customs, on the shifting hierarchies, on the emancipation of lower classes, the dwindling role of the intelligentsia, and the radical influence of everyday economy on the perception and practice of daily life. Yet while registering similar facts and phenomena, they describe them differently. Zaremba employs the conservative language of the "collapse of authorities" and "civilizational crisis" (Zaremba 2012, 62) whereas Wyka sees

a revolutionary transformation of the social hierarchy. At the same time, just like Zaremba, Wyka speaks of the degrading, destructive role of war, of the corrosion it brings, which taints its victims and has nothing to do with moral nobility.

Both contemporary authors employ the category of trauma, which links Zaremba's text with the work of Andrzej Leder, whose main theoretical framework is Lacan's interpretation of recent history. In their approach, both the war and the Shoah are traumas; an assertion that seems to undermine Wyka's conclusions. Considering the text by Andrzej Leder, it has even more similarities and common points with Wyka's essay than Zaremba's book, but the psychoanalyst does not quote *Życie na niby*, he seems not to notice his predecessor. Like Wyka, Leder points to the revolutionary metamorphosis of the social structure that occurred during the war and immediately after. A new bourgeoisie emerged and replaced the Jews. A new, emancipated intelligentsia took the place of the old one. The Shoah was a precondition for the emergence of a new class, one made up not only by those who took over the Jewish property, social and professional position after 1945, but also by the aforementioned new intelligentsia and, in those times, a new middle class brought to the social top by the first wave of capitalism that washed over the country after 1989. Leder underscores the declassification of the landed gentry, the forging of a new time of bonds that go beyond the old feudal pattern. While pointing out the modernization of the society, its real revolution (according to Leder this was a bourgeois revolution, not a proletarian or people's one), Leder observes the reproduction of bourgeois patterns—modernized bourgeoisie that denies its difficult genealogy (underclass), its provenance; that's why a bourgeoisie is disintegrated and susceptible to crises. The new Polish bourgeoisie has denied its own past and the social transformation to which it owes its new status. It does not remember its (largely) peasant origins nor the wiping out of Jews, who constituted the main bourgeois stratum of prewar Poland.

Wyka looks at this entire phenomenon from a different point in time: from the postwar years, and not from the capitalist transformation of 1989, but also from a different cognitive perspective. He stresses the popular nature of the ongoing changes, the transformation of the traditional intelligentsia elite: "The intelligentsia man, ousted from nearly every prewar post, mingled with the other strata. He walked in their shoes and learned for himself just how fragile was his social position when not supported by the system of a free society" (Wyka 2010b, 103–104). The social transformation that occurred during the war and in the first half of the 1950s does not only mean the abolition of peripheral feudalism, but also a radical flattening of the social structure. To Wyka, this is not a bourgeois revolution, but a people's one. Wyka points out the continuity of the historical process that has been ongoing since the 1930s, although he is fully aware of the geopolitical circumstances and

of the role of the USSR in introducing communism. This is a fundamental difference between the two authors. To Leder, the revolution is “over-dreamed,” unconscious or denied. Quite the opposite, Kazimierz Wyka (as a witness to the era) shows that we cannot describe this situation as a lack of consciousness, that this was a process happening with the awareness of various social actors actively participating in it.¹⁷ Paradoxically, the text from the past undermines the constructs erected by the contemporary text, and Wyka becomes a critic of Leder. In fact, more questions could be asked about Leder’s book, for example: why does the author identify the Jews with the bourgeoisie? As if he ignored the existence of the Jewish poor masses and the Jewish proletariat.

Despite his sharp vision, Leder also fails to grasp the phenomenon of the Polish reaction to the Shoah which, as demonstrated by Wyka’s text, can be neither treated as trauma nor disregarded as something unconscious. The Polish reaction was a conscious action and economic participation; it did not play out in ignorance, and the silence that shrouds it does not result from a trauma, but from a discursive practice of suppression meant to cover up the processes that took place. Wyka’s text allows to realize us that the silence after the Shoah, the denial of Polish contribution do not match the category of trauma and we should rather talk about active functioning of the mechanisms of politics and memory.¹⁸

Wyka’s text allows us to take a closer look at the more recent acclaimed works, such as the book by Marcin Zaremba. The eponymous great fear and trauma as the engulfing “atmosphere” of the postwar years depict a convincing emotional and mental landscape, but this depiction blurs the lines that Wyka successfully grasped. Zaremba shows a broken society in midst of collapse, decay, and crisis of authority. People are haunted by fear of another war, hunger, epidemics, lack of perspectives, and livelihood. Poland after the war is brimming with violence and cruelty, it revels in the macabre: fighting between the army and the militia, threat from the new authorities, deserters, bandits, hundreds of thousands of maimed, orphans and beggars, pogroms of Jews, all coalesce into a fearful and hostile scenery. In this carnival of violence, there is, however, one relativization: it all boils down to fear, as everyone is equally afraid with equally good reason. Meanwhile, as evidenced by Wyka’s text, the situation of the various social groups was not the same: the fear that Jews had of Poles cannot be equalized nor neutralized with the universal horror and suffering. Zaremba, who deals with “popular reaction to crisis,” does not discern the social order; he only notices the overall collapse, civilizational undoing, chaos, and eruption of barbarity. It escapes him that these processes followed a certain symbolical order which, albeit variable, maintained its core contents. Therefore, he disregards antisemitism, and especially prewar antisemitism, which is not linked in this work with wartime antisemitism and the situation of Jews

in this period. Postwar pogroms do not stand out from the avalanche of monstrosities, in fact, they are often relativized as economic violence, and thus not motivated by antisemitism. *Wielka trwoga* (2012) [*Great Fear*] gives the unshakable impression that the old social elites,¹⁹ stripped of their significance, all but evaporated, that they are not partaking in this horrific process of fear mongering (with the exclusion of fear of communists), which is attributable to the common people and, possibly, the new authorities—which, as it happens, tended to have a popular provenance on the local level. Zaremba also underestimates the tectonic movements of the time, which yielded our modernity and which Wyka describes. Where Zaremba sees an arena of cruelty and irrationality, Wyka discerns recurring social patterns.

Last but not least, let us return to the issue of witness trauma, a category so obvious today as to be almost transparent. As I have underscored a number of times, Wyka is fully aware of the horrors of war and of its destructive force. Yet his text cannot be imbued with the category of trauma, not even *ex post*, as the entities that took part in these events, are not, in Wyka's opinion, disturbed, passive nor ignorant, neither at the time nor after. The Polish reaction to the Shoah does not bear signs of trauma, it must be described as intentional and conscious. Even if the Poles merely succumbed to a general process designed by someone else (by fascism in all of Europe), they did so willingly and with widespread approval. Once we realize this, nothing remains of the image of trauma of the Polish witness.

Notes

- 1 This is a well described period in Polish history: Borodziej (2009); Kersten (1993) and (1990); Leszczyński (2013); Paczkowski (1999a, b); Lebow (2013); Porter-Szücs (2014).
- 2 For further information see Barbara Engelking (2011) and (2012); Engelking and Grabowski (2011).
- 3 Discussion on the attitudes of Polish society in the 1940s often returns: in the years immediately after the war, and then particularly intensively in 1968 (an antisemitic purge in the Polish state), after the film by Claude Lanzmann "Shoah" (1986) and after *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (2001). This discussion was a new opening each time, expanding the boundaries of public debate, but was also defensive in nature, protecting the image of Poles. See more: Forecki (2018).
- 4 Currently, the works of Polish historians restore the memory of real relations during and immediately after the war. In addition to the ones mentioned earlier, see Jan Grabowski (2004), (2005), (2010), and (2012).
- 5 These texts penned just after the war, most frequently as a reaction to pogroms, may be found in an anthology of Adam Michnik (2010/2018); Mieczysław Jastrun (2018); Libera (2010); Andrzejewski (2018).
- 6 Lately, the trauma narrative is gaining increasing ground, it is almost becoming the dominant narrative. Here I refer mainly to the work of M.

- Zaremba *Wielka Trwoga* (2012) [*The Great Fear*]. I will revisit this theme once again.
- 7 Term of Pierre Bourdieu, see Bourdieu (1977) and Bourdieu (2000).
- 8 More about construction of witness: Katarzyna Chmielewska (2018a and 2018b, 53–98; 98–150).
- 9 Dispatch of A. Berman and L. Feiner from 28 of April 1943 (Mórawski 1993, 122).
- 10 The meaning of witness close to Derrida (1998, 20–34).
- 11 The figure of “indifferent witness” and “Polish indifference” appearing in the debate about Polish wine is quite widespread, similarly popular as another (in fact contradictory) figure of the “Polish helper” who does as much in his power to save Jews as possible, most often at the cost of the highest sacrifices. The figure of the indifferent onlooker was given the most iconic image in Jan Błoński’s *Biedni Polacy patrzą na Getto* (2018). Błoński attributes the existential blame to Poles—looking with indifference but not moral guilt—participation in crime (“God has stopped this hand”). Wyka, on the contrary, speaks about actions and their measurable effects, the commonness of theft, sabotage, forced trade, compulsory donation, the benefits that the Polish society has drawn from the Holocaust. There can be no mention of an indifferent witness in this case.
- 12 Adam Michnik, in his post-script to the 2010 edition, wrote about his subjective vision, accusing Wyka of forming an incomplete picture and unauthorized generalizations, blurring the issue by his remark about the extraordinary experience of Miłosz’s generation: “It is a moving picture, demanding a reckoning of one’s own society, this is the testimony of the 1910 generation” (Miłosz et al.). Finally, he uses the classical evasive argument: other states and societies have experienced similar events, so it is not a question of Poland alone. “So, we were like that, but was it only us?” (372). Although dismissing Wyka’s diagnosis, he does not stint on compliments, praising the moral courage of the uncompromising approach: “Words about Jews” is “a glorious card in Polish humanities; civil courage “morally uncompromising,” “challenge of the common stereotype of martyrology and heroism” (375).
- 13 What strikes Wyka is “a certain moral uselessness of history. When they start crowing that we have come out purified and bettered, it is a lie. When they moan from their pedestal that ploughed souls will yield a new crop, it is a lie.” (Wyka 2010a, 17)
- 14 I use this term in similar way to Jürgen Habermas. See Habermas (1987).
- 15 It is also worth mentioning here a series of historical reportages by Magdalena Grzebałkowska, which describe the reality immediately after the war in a spirit similar to the one of these two books (2015).
- 16 The focus of Wyka’s essay is on the wartime years, although the period immediately after the war is important too. Zaremba’s approach is opposite: he concentrates on the final years of war and its aftermath, treating the war itself as mere background.
- 17 Leder also exhibits a telling tendency to underestimate the autonomy of the peasants. He completely omits the prewar peasant movements, the emancipation of this class, limiting himself to an interpretation of a scene from Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke* (1937), in which peasants are depicted as semi-animals, unfinished entities stuck in the rut of slave mentality. To Leder, peasants are not historical actors; at best they were forced onto the arena of history. prompted by the Party of by the communists, but they mispronounce

the lines they are fed, they do not understand their role. To Wyka, the war is a period of intensive emancipation of the peasants.

18 More on this topic in my text “Konstruowanie figury polskiego świadka podczas Zagłady” (Chmielewska, 2018b and 2018c).

19 It’s worth to observe: this voluminous work does not address the role of the Catholic church, even though its structures are held uninterruptedly and as an institution it did not suffer any substantial losses. Yet the symbolic power of religion was not of interest to this author, who speaks of a crisis of traditional authorities, but fails to subject this thesis to an analysis.

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10 Commemorating the Shoah in the GDR's (Post-)Perpetrator Society

Alexander Walther

In 1994, the writer Jurek Becker gave a lecture in Weimar on his life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Becker concludes as follows:

[F]rom its first hour, the GDR lived with a lie. [...] The crimes of the Nazis were addressed, of course, extraordinarily much so, but these were the crimes of the others. Fascism did not have anything to do with us, the GDR people. [...] School lessons about the Nazi past were no education about our recent history. They dealt with the atrocities of these horrible aliens, who we, the antifascists, had defeated with some help of the Red Army. Of the ten thousand antifascists who might have existed in Nazi Germany up to eight million lived in the GDR. (Becker 2007, 266–267)

Becker's sarcastic comments are not only an expression of his disenchantment with the state he had lived in for some 20 years, but also aptly summarize the shortcomings of East Germany's coming to terms with its past—at least on the governmental level.

The legacy of National Socialism in both German states after 1945, and East German Antifascism, in particular, has been discussed for decades, yet while there is a substantial amount of research on the political aspects and the manifold personal continuities of former perpetrators in both German states, the attitude of the population remains rather underrepresented (Hammerstein 2017; Herf 1997). While most studies published after 1990 mostly criticized the East German approach to its Nazi past, leaving hardly any room for differentiation and diversity (Peitsch 2015, 117–118), several recent accounts have argued that the situation was much more complex.¹ After all, “the GDR may not have been a pluralist state, but it was not without plurality,” as Bill Niven concludes (Niven 2009, 207).

Accordingly, Mary Fulbrook has argued focusing more on the German perpetrator society and its reactions to state-sponsored forms of remembrance to gain a more holistic impression of the actual repercussions of National Socialist crimes for the self-conception of German societies

(Fulbrook 2013, 2016). Therefore, this paper will present a perspective on Holocaust memory in the GDR by arguing that commemorating this particular crime served different purposes for dissimilar groups: first, it provided the ruling party with opportunities to intensify their political dispute with West Germany during the Cold War; second, it served as a reminder to the East German population of their own entanglement and guilt; and, third, it was utilized by Jewish survivors in their struggle to combine a political belief with their distinct Jewish experience of persecution. In this paper, I will first discuss the major conflict between the new elite and the population already inscribed into the legitimization of the GDR's foundation; second, provide examples of how three Jewish survivors and returned *émigrés*—Arnold Zweig, Helmut Eschwege, and Rudolf Hirsch—dealt with the seeming friction between Antifascism and the Jewish perspective, and, third, propose an approach to evaluating the reception of these commemoration practices. In doing so, I will also explore if and how the GDR's population can be seen as a post-catastrophic society (Artwińska and Tippner 2017), and which role the Shoah played in its culture of remembrance.

From Diversity to Unity? Early Remembrance Practices in the Emerging GDR

In his study on the political utilization of the past in the GDR, Jon Berndt Olsen stressed the importance of the party's memory politics for its own claim to power (Olsen 2015). It has long been established that writing and staging history was of great importance to socialist regimes. It helped to justify the respective party's claim to power and the measures it took to pursue an allegedly brighter future. However, while other socialist states in Eastern Europe were acting similarly at the time, the leadership of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) [Socialist Unity Party of Germany], the sole ruling party in the GDR, was confronted with a unique situation: the GDR was one of two successor states of the German Reich and, thus, the land of the perpetrators. Therefore, the party could not simply present the GDR as a continuation of democratic traditions within German history, such as the revolution of 1848 or the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), but had to incorporate the recent past—National Socialism and the war—as well. The answer was antifascism.

Subsuming a broad range of political beliefs, cultural activities, and acts of resistance against fascist movements throughout Europe, antifascism is as vague a concept as it is politically charged (García et al. 2016). In East Germany, antifascism culturally and politically infused most aspects of everyday life, especially due to its different time references: addressing the past, the political elite constructed a narrative of National Socialism and the war in which the resistance of German

Communists was exaggerated. For the present, however, this resistance was not only presented as a heritage worth remembering, but was turned into a duty for future generations of (East) Germans, and served as an authenticating basis for propagandistic attacks against West Germany. Drawing on a Marxist interpretation of fascism, National Socialism was presented as the mere rule of the German financial capital with Hitler as its henchmen. The SED leadership then drew a simple conclusion in arguing that fascism could simply not exist in East Germany anymore as capitalism was eliminated there. This was not only a means to vindicate a socialist restructuring of the economy, but was also directed at the population. While the Communist Party of Germany, and later the SED, did, in fact, address the role of the German population during National Socialism, this started to change only months after the war when party officials started to use a different rhetoric. Now German crimes were still demonized, but so-called “tiny party comrades”—former Nazi party members who did not serve in a higher position—were offered a deal. By acknowledging their deeds, they could redeem themselves from this “disgrace” if they “actively help eradicating Nazism [...] and accomplishing our aims,” as Wilhelm Pieck, first and only president of the GDR, explained at a rally already in 1946 (Danyel 1992, 920).

The party’s antifascist rhetoric also featured an offer of exculpation to the East German public, directing questions of guilt to Hitler and the financial capital, and hindering all those longings for a proper discussion about the nature of National Socialism and the population’s role in it (Danyel 1995). In emphasizing the alleged non-involvement of most Germans, and providing an offer to the masses to identify themselves with this founding myth of having remained “decent,” the GDR government secured the goodwill—or at least the overall acceptance—of its population for its project of building a new Germany. Highlighting an event such as the Shoah, however, which could so strikingly reveal the involvement of major parts of the German population in the crimes committed, was a constant danger to this fragile truce between the Communist elite and the majority of the population (Gerber 2000, 19–36). Yet, this was not a distinctly East German phenomenon, but a German one, and could be found in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and Austria as well (Hammerstein 2017, 91).

Still, while the SED leadership used history to justify its measures, the establishment of a potentially “better” Germany, legitimized through antifascist resistance, was also the realization of their dream. After all, virtually everyone in the new political and cultural elite had endured the concentration camps, or survived in exile, either in Western countries or in Moscow, especially the ones in the inner circle of power (Hartewig 2000, 101–106). The discrepancy between these forms of experience was to shape the commemoration of the war throughout the GDR’s existence. Invoking this experience of persecution, many survivors and

returned émigrés felt obligated to assist in the establishment of a new state and the re-education of its population (Graf 2011). Among this group was a substantial number of Jewish Socialists and resistance fighters who, although not always religious, still shared experiences significantly different from those of non-Jewish Nazi victims. Most of them strengthened their ties with the party, and largely refrained from publicly criticizing the new course despite their concerns and inner rebellion. The seemingly greater cause of creating a Socialist and truly antifascist Germany, which became even more urgent with the ensuing Cold War, was usually valued higher than their private experiences of persecution (Leo 2008). This would become a challenge for some survivors as the Communist party opted for a clear hierarchy of Nazi victims already in summer 1945, manifested verbally and financially in the following years (zur Nieden 2003). Jewish victims were still addressed, but the lavishly staged public endorsements of Communist resistance fighters—who also could be Jewish, but were then praised for their political activities rather than the reason for their persecution—eclipsed everything else.

In the four years prior to the foundation of the GDR, however, the antifascist narrative was fluid and yet to be filled with contents. Thus, under the auspices of a common association, the Union of those Persecuted by the Nazi Regime (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes*, VVN), spanning all four zones of occupation, former Nazi victims and survivors found a place enabling them to communicate their experiences, to share their hopes and worries, and feel enabled to speak with a unified voice. Hence, the public discussion about German crimes and its repercussions was entirely dominated by the victims while the vast majority of the population shared their experience amongst the like-minded, if at all (Fullbrook 2018, 201–202). Yet, Jewish victims soon had to realize that even among their peers their distinct experience of having been persecuted not based on their activities (for the most part), such as resistance and political work, but due to antisemitic and racist forms of aggression, was not always acknowledged, let alone honored. Granting pensions and the status as a Victim of Fascism (*Opfer des Faschismus*, OdF) was soon linked to an individual's behavior. Following the introduction of new standards in evaluating the status of OdF in 1950, the VVN played an active part in reviewing, and often dismissing, its own members for allegedly unworthy or politically unreliable behavior (Hartewig 2000, 274–314). Moreover, while most VVN groups ensured a public commemoration of Jewish victims on a local level, often in places where no Jewish population survived, this attitude was not shared by everyone. In 1949, for instance, a VVN group in Dresden, backed by the local SED administration, asked whether the annual event in memory of 9 November 1938, commonly known as *Kristallnacht*, had to take place at all because the effort would be in vain if only a small number of

their own peers will be attracted.² The VVN did fulfill its purpose as an “imagined community,” as Mary Fulbrook termed it referencing Benedict Anderson’s famous dictum, but with the growing interference of the SED in all fields of public life, the VVN lost its initial inclusive intention (Fulbrook 2013, 38; Groehler 1995).

Despite—or sometimes due to—the obvious exploitation of the anti-fascist narrative for political purposes by the SED, many Jewish and non-Jewish survivors and *émigrés* clung to its potential for (self-)critical exhortation and discussion. After all, the *Victims of Fascism* were regularly presented not only as losses but as *sacrifices*, as the German term *Opfer* allows for both meanings. Thus, learning from their deeds, and keeping the memory alive was presented as an obligation of future generations (Fulbrook 2013, 38). It would be remiss to neglect this conclusion as mere propaganda because this distinct political mandate was one of the main reasons for Jewish survivors to consider living in Germany again after the Shoah. Drawing conclusions from National Socialist crimes, and the Shoah in particular, for future generations, was a central concern for many of them. While it was never discussed as prominently as other crimes, the Holocaust was still visible within the East German antifascist discourse. If the antifascist conviction of Jewish survivors is taken seriously, then, antifascism should not be seen as a mere obstacle to Holocaust remembrance in the GDR, but rather as a catalyst, enabling some to mention this particular crime in an increasingly regulated public dominated by the non-Jewish elite, and consisting of a population mostly indifferent or dismissive of the Jewish experience. Using three examples, I will discuss the complex strategies used by different actors—understood here as individuals taking agency—to implement a Jewish perspective within the East German antifascist narrative.

Intervention—Arnold Zweig

The former concentration camp Buchenwald was a key element in the antifascist story of the GDR, soon forming the central focal point of its self-image, and serving as the SED’s “Calvary and Easter” in one place (Knigge 1997, 83). The partial self-liberation of the camp by its inmates was utilized to authenticate the *new* Germany ready to continue the fight against fascism, just as suggested by the oath of Buchenwald, sworn by the surviving inmates in 1945 (Overesch 1995). In the narrative about the camp constructed and upheld by the party, the illegal resistance of (German) Communist inmates was exaggerated whereas suffering and dying in the camp were usually only addressed to highlight the perpetrator’s cruelty, or to interpret it as martyr’s deaths for the good cause. An overall neglect for the experience of the vast majority of former inmates was the result, especially of those in the “little camp”—a special, closed-off section within the camp mostly for Jews and with had

particular dire conditions (Knigge 1997). The stereotype of indifferent Jewish victims who had not resisted their persecutors was perpetuated in this narrative.

This, however, did not pass unopposed. A few weeks after the opening of the memorial, a collection of texts on the Shoah in Poland was published by the East Berlin-based publishing house Rütten & Loening, entitled *Im Feuer vergangen: Tagebücher aus dem Ghetto* (1958) [Gone with the Fire. Diaries from the Ghetto]. The anthology's five texts, which were published in Yiddish in Poland shortly after the war, are accounts of Jewish life and suffering in occupied Poland, of the Warsaw Ghetto, and of mass killings. The book was a great success, seeing seven editions in only five years. Arnold Zweig, the prominent German-Jewish writer and honorary president of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin, was asked to provide a preface for the book. Having attended the opening of the Buchenwald Memorial, Zweig was furious that in the speeches the fate of the Jewish inmates was neither explicitly addressed nor in the design. Furthermore, there were no groups representing them in the opening ceremony.³ In his preface to the book, Zweig expressed his concerns firmly:

Among the 21 flags of the peoples gathered at the Ettersberg [the hill where the camp was located] in order to combine the inextinguishable memory of the heroes and martyrs with the cry for combat against the return of barbarity, the flag of the age-old emblem of the Star of David was missing which would have represented the Jewish victims of fascist terror. Here, in this book, it is hoisted next to the red one. (Zweig 1958, 9)

Zweig made it quite clear that the antifascist narrative presented in Buchenwald displayed a large gap: the Shoah. Admittedly, Jewish victims were not altogether absent at the memorial. One of the earliest memorial stones placed at the site commemorated some 10,000 men considered Jewish who were seized during the November 1938 pogrom, and then held captive in a fenced-off section next to the roll call square for several months. In addition, in the first permanent exhibition, which opened in 1954, artefacts from the Auschwitz Memorial were exhibited, including women's hair and a Cyclone B container (Knigge 1993, 75). However, in the new memorial, which was considered to be the centerpiece of the premises, a distinct commemoration of Jewish victims was missing.

By highlighting Jewish victims and effectively elevating them to the level of Communist resistance fighters, Zweig added an important layer to the public commemoration of National Socialist crimes. However, this does not imply that he denounced antifascism as an idea and as the GDR's *raison d'être*. Even in this short text, he managed to combine a Jewish perspective with antifascist motifs, such as the "combat" against

neo-fascist activities in West Germany. By juxtaposing both aspects, Zweig achieved three goals: first, he participated in the propagandistic attacks against West Germany, thus fulfilling the regime's desire and ensuring that the text was welcomed. Second, he highlighted the absence of the Jewish experience at the new memorial, thereby publicly expressing his frustration. Third, he managed to combine his own political interests with his experience of persecution. After all, Zweig thought of himself as a politically conscious writer and antifascist who kept stressing his support for the SED's fierce criticism of West Germany (Gordon 2013; Wasmuth 2004).

Contributing to this volume, which shortly after its publication was employed by the SED for a new wave of attacks against West Germany, was part of Zweig's conviction and what he perceived as his role as an intellectual in the GDR. He continued this effort to address the Shoah on other occasions, either by pressing for the publication of a Jewish survivor's account or by providing a preface for a book on the subject. What might seem insignificant at first could have lasting effects because books deemed dubious or possibly deviant by the Ministry of Culture were often only permitted to appear if provided with a preface by a trustworthy author who set the *right* tone, addressed the controversial topics in the book and reminded the readership of the seemingly correct interpretation (Barck et al. 1997). Naturally, once the books were published, readers could easily skip these prefaces and form an opinion of their own.

Pioneering—Helmut Eschwege

Zweig was able to publicly intervene—albeit in a conciliatory manner—not only due to his own prestige but also because of the field he was acting in: literature. In other contexts, however, different rules applied. While the Shoah was not subjected to censorship as an historic event, certain interpretations and explanations of it were indeed censored or banned, especially if they challenged the antifascist core. An impressive example for this can be found in GDR historiography. Leading historians interpreted antisemitism as one characteristic of the Nazi ideology among others, and as a means to divert the public's attention from the alleged actual topic: the fight against the working class (Käppner 1999, 85–88). A deviation from that view was hardly possible and works offering an alternative view were usually scotched. One such example is Helmut Eschwege (Walther 2020a, 2020b). Born in 1913, he was trained as a gardener, joined the Social Democratic Party and several Jewish Youth Organizations before emigrating to Palestine via Denmark and Estonia. Returning to Germany in 1946, Eschwege became interested in historical research and continued even after being dismissed from his job at East Berlin's newly founded *Museum für Deutsche*

Geschichte [Museum for German History]. Never allowed inside official academia, he remained an outsider both in terms of research interests and positions held, mostly working in a library of the Technical University of Dresden (Eschwege 1991).

In the 1950s, Helmut Eschwege started working on a study on the Shoah, being among the first historians to do so in both German states (Berg 2015). Following a multi-year struggle to persuade two publishing companies, among them Rütten & Loening, which had published the anthology to which Zweig contributed the preface, Eschwege's manuscript was ultimately refused.⁴ Since every book needed to be approved by an editor and one or more experts before printing, the company had asked several historians to provide an assessment. The controversial nature of Eschwege's work is underlined by the fact that his manuscript was reviewed by five different individuals producing eight assessments over a course of four years.⁵ (Eschwege 1991, 184–211) In the end, Eschwege's colleagues rejected his text, albeit to varying degrees and for different reasons. In any case, his book deviated significantly enough from the party's view of the past. His work had shown that the Holocaust could neither be explained nor depicted properly by applying a Marxist theory of fascism. If the main goal of the National Socialists had been to exploit the workforce of those deported, as the leading historians of the time like Heinz Kühnrich, Klaus Drobisch, and others saw it, why would they have killed so many directly after their arrival? Rather, Eschwege concluded, the main idea was to murder a significant percentage of the Jewish population, leaving only a smaller group to be exploited physically. Murder, not exploitation, was thus at the core of Nazi persecution. Eschwege was not opposed to exploring the role of German companies at killing facilities such as Auschwitz-Birkenau; yet, by focusing on sources from the Jewish victim's perspective—something his colleagues hardly ever did—Eschwege achieved a much more complex narrative, and was able to grasp the scope of the Shoah more effectively. By contrasting sources from both the victim's and the perpetrator's perspective, Eschwege also anticipated the approach Saul Friedländer, who would later choose to write an “integrated history” of the Shoah (Friedländer 2010; Walther 2020b).

Eschwege's work could not appear in its original form, mostly because his arguments challenged the Marxist understanding of fascism, which by the early 1960s was still very rigid. However, he was able to publish a collection of sources and pictures on the Shoah, published as *Kennzeichen J* [Label J], which would become a standard reference for that topic in the GDR (Eschwege 1966). The anthology did not only feature a preface by Arnold Zweig, who had met Eschwege already in exile in Palestine years before, but also an introduction by Rudi Goguel, a Communist survivor of various prisons and camps, composer of the famous *Moorsoldaten-Lied* [Song of the Peat Bog Soldiers], and

historian at East Berlin's Humboldt University. Goguel acknowledged in his text, albeit cautiously, that antisemitism had played a special role within National Socialist ideology, and that the regime had enjoyed a "certain autonomy" despite being closely linked to the "monopoly bourgeoisie" (Eschwege 1966, 19). In this, he tried to highlight the distinctiveness of the Shoah, making him a rare example of non-Jewish Germans (in both German states) taking an interest in the topic and recognizing its importance, at least in the 1960s. Although he never abandoned his Communist belief and the party's doctrines, Goguel represents the attempt to acknowledge the role of the Shoah within National Socialist crimes. This holds true for Eschwege as well, who continued his studies on German-Jewish history throughout the GDR, facing many obstacles, and achieving few accomplishments.

Exemplifying—Rudolf Hirsch

While Zweig and Eschwege's publications mostly addressed a small audience, Rudolf Hirsch, the final example provided here, had a much broader readership. Born in a German-Jewish family, he emigrated to Palestine in the late 1930s. After his return to East Berlin, he soon became a legal correspondent writing about trials with diverse kinds of content (Hirsch 2002, 5–85). The weekly paper he was working for, the *Wochenpost*, had a circulation of more than 1.3 million copies, and reached about four million readers per issue. Hirsch did not only report from ordinary trials, but kept visiting those against Nazi criminals, both in East and West Germany. As a correspondent, he attended the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt (1963–1965 & 1966), and the Majdanek trial in Düsseldorf (1975–1981) (Hirsch 2001; Walther 2018).

In his texts, Hirsch wavered between two interpretations of the Shoah. He kept emphasizing and exaggerating the influence on the murders committed in Auschwitz by companies active in there. Writing in a highly polemic tone, he played a prominent role in the SED's campaigns against West Germany in the 1960s. Furthermore, in highlighting the physical exploitation of forced laborers by German businesses, he helped to foster the image of prominent industrialists as the true perpetrators of the Shoah. However, Hirsch never fully adopted this position, but always tried to focus on the victims and the survivors in his texts. For a large part, his reports from the first Auschwitz trial consisted of recitals of the witnesses' accounts he had heard. Doing so, Hirsch made their stories accessible to a much larger audience, thus countering propagandistic slogans with personal recollections.⁶

One especially empathetic account, *December Morning in Auschwitz*, resulted from his visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum where he joined a group of journalists accompanying the Frankfurt judges to

the crime scene in 1964. He depicted the exhibition at the memorial, and shared his emotions with his readers:

[A] large, a huge showcase. Women's hair. Hair of young, of old, of motherly, of loving women. One would be unable to entangle it, it is lifeless. [...] Other showcases. Enormous heaps of torn shoes. Men's shoes, women's shoes, children's shoes. Heaps of smashed glasses, heaps of shaving brushes, toothbrushes, combs. [...] Heaps of wretched and threadbare suitcases. The names of the owners are written in large letters on it. They had hoped to be handed back their suitcases. With a racing heart I read the names and dread, hope, to find a known name. No, no familiar one. There are too many. (Hirsch 1965, 227)

Hirsch was not an objective observer, nor was it by chance that he chose to report from the Auschwitz trial. His mother was first deported to Theresienstadt, and later to Birkenau, where she was immediately killed in 1944 (Hirsch 2002, 106–110). Initially unknown to his readers, Hirsch revealed this fact in one of his columns (Hirsch 2001, 216). This experience is reflected in a much more sensitive style of writing, mostly absent in newspaper articles on the topic by other authors at the time. This also prevented him from entirely adopting a Marxist reading of the Shoah when instead he kept searching for an explanation that would both integrate his Communist beliefs and the experience of having lost his family. While he mostly adopted the official reading of the Holocaust in the 1960s, he shifted toward a more nuanced interpretation around the end of the GDR.

Addressing the Shoah in a (Post-)Perpetrator Society

These three examples illustrate that the antifascist culture of remembrance could form an obstacle to Shoah memory, but could also function as a transmitter, enabling certain artists, writers, or intellectuals to address the crime within, and with the use of, the antifascist discourse. Yet, observing such scattered attempts to address the Shoah still reveals little about the people involved, their intentions, and even less about its reception within GDR society. Following Jay Winer and Emmanuel Sivan, however, examining forms of “collective remembrance”—rather than collective memory—entails that certain remembrance practices are viewed as an “outcome of agency,” and the “product of individuals and groups who come together, not at the behest of the state [...], but because they have to speak out” (Winter and Sivan 2009, 9). This observation makes a strong case for the attempt presented here not only because it stresses the necessity to go beyond the state level of remembrance, but also because it highlights the aspect of agency.

This holds true for the entire duration of the GDR's existence. Up until the late 1960s, almost every attempt to address the Shoah was initiated by someone who had endured antisemitic persecution by the National Socialists—whether they deemed themselves Jewish or not. In this, they formed a special “community of experience,” as Mary Fulbrook described it, within the “imagined community” of other antifascist resistance fighters and survivors (Fulbrook 2013, 34). While Zweig, Hirsch, and others would publicly stress the cohesion of this group, they were often painfully aware that their work was not always welcome. In addition, despite their self-conception as antifascists in a GDR sense, their own Jewish experience significantly differed from the experience of the former political inmates, and, even more fundamentally, from the experiences of the broader public. When Lin Jaldati, a Dutch-Jewish singer and actress who lived in the GDR and was famous for her repertoire of Yiddish songs, was asked in an interview with the BBC while touring Great Britain in the 1960s how it was possible for her as a Dutch Holocaust survivor to live in Germany, she justified her choice by saying: “I don’t live in Germany. I live in the German Democratic Republic, and the people in my government have had the same experience as I have, *or* they were in the concentration camps or in exile.”⁷ Although Jaldati is defending the GDR and its government in this statement, her distinction is crucial since it indicates that the experience of the Shoah could not be found in the common antifascist narrative. Instead, those who had experienced it had to add a layer to include their own experience. Her reaction could also be seen as a necessary means to reassure herself that she did not, in fact, go to Germany, of all countries, after the war, but to the *better* Germany.

Furthermore, the actors described here should neither be viewed as dissidents, nor as isolated in their cause. Instead, they formed a loose network of people sharing a similar interest—in this case: commemorating the Shoah. Some already met in exile in Palestine like Eschwege, Zweig, and Hirsch as well as Lea Grundig, a painter who dealt with the Shoah in drawings early on, and continued exhibiting these artworks after her return to Dresden. Others, like Lin Jaldati, or the GDR's only rabbi, Martin Riesenburger, were equally active and used their voice and position both to address the Shoah *and* to criticize West Germany for its insufficient persecution of National Socialist crimes, thus again serving their own and the party's interests. Despite their connections, however, a close exchange or deep friendship was scarce. Rather, they may be described as a community of kindred spirits who occasionally supported each other, helped in the process of publishing, or popularized the other's works. Other than that, they were not in close contact, and usually went their separate ways due to their different fields of work. In addition, their connections did not result from a wish to provide an alternative to state-sponsored antifascism. On the

contrary, they probably would have rejected the notion of fostering such an alternative as they usually regarded themselves to be part of the antifascist resistance fighters' legacy. In fact, they viewed their works concerning the Shoah to be valuable contributions to the antifascist struggle for a better world. Yet, for them, the dead were never merely numbers or arguments in a campaign as they often were in the dominating narratives, but friends and family. While the SED's antifascism was mostly interested in fiercely attacking (West German) perpetrators, there was always a small group genuinely commemorating the victims. By applying this *Eigen-Sinn*, a concept "denoting wilfulness, [...] a kind of self-affirmation" and "demarcating a space of one's own," as Alf Lüdtke defined it, they interpreted antifascism in their way, and considered themselves part of a broader context, while the antifascism as acted out by the SED usually did not include an acknowledgment of the Shoah (Lindenberger 2015; Lüdtke 1995, 313–314).

The SED had every reason to minimize the discussion about the persecution of the Jewish population because it was this crime in particular that could most easily reveal the role of the German public in National Socialism. The government, however, depended on a society consisting mostly of former supporters and beneficiaries, or at least indifferent spectators, and, thus, wanted to elude discussions about individual responsibility and guilt (Danyel 1992). After all, "it is difficult to rule over people who feel somehow guilty" in the long run, as the writer Stephan Hermlin once put it (Hermlin 1983, 399). Yet, to assume that this reasoning prevented any form of discussion about public support for National Socialism would be simplistic. Several actors made these but always had to keep their audiences in mind. Accordingly, after the immediate postwar years were over, there were only few and very cautious attempts to talk about German perpetrators. This was approached through terminology, for instance, when Rudolf Hirsch insisted on writing about National Socialist crimes instead of *fascist* ones, thus stressing that the perpetrators were German (Walther 2018, 207).

For the most part, however, actors like Hirsch, Jaldati, or Zweig were interested in conveying knowledge about the Shoah as a crime distinct from other forms of National Socialist persecution, something that was only rarely uttered publicly in the GDR. Following Anna Artwińska's and Anja Tippner's definition, the texts, drawings, or performances of these actors can be described as postcatastrophic in the way they are used in contemporary societies in Central Eastern Europe, namely to process new knowledge about the crime itself (Artwińska and Tippner 2017, 30). However, it seems that another distinct feature of postcatastrophic texts—addressing the loss of the dead and their culture—was almost absent in the public, at least for the first two decades. One explanation might be that addressing this loss would, again, have diverted the focus onto the German society before the Shoah, and, thus, before the

deportation of neighbors. Nevertheless, it was considerably easier for the German public—in both states—to talk about German victims instead of the perpetrators. It is telling that most literary texts about the Shoah published in the GDR are set in occupied Eastern Europe, mostly Poland, and not in Germany, thus externalizing the crime and positioning it outside of most German's memory landscape (see in general Breysach 2005). Still, drawing attention to a lost Jewish culture was in the interest of some individuals like Rudolf Hirsch, who published an anthology of Yiddish stories, or Lin Jaldati, who continually educated her audience about Yiddish folklore (Shneer 2015; Walther 2018, 205–207).

The generational shift, usually associated with the rebellious generation of 1968, was a decisive step in reaching a new state of public and private processing the National Socialist past in West Germany, but also in the GDR. Although this effect must not be exaggerated, some repercussions can be traced in public memory. From the 1970s onwards, an increasing number of groups in both German states, often associated with the churches, took an interest in Jewish history, and often started by investigating local stories. Others articulated their interest publicly, such as the journalist Heinz Knobloch, who wrote biographies of Moses Mendelssohn or Mathilde Jacob, the former secretary of Rosa Luxemburg, and filled their stories with reflections of his own search for traces of Jewish history throughout East Berlin, making his texts prime examples of post-catastrophic literature.⁸ As the conflict between the two German states shifted towards a more consensual relation, a decrease in Cold War rhetoric and propaganda attacks ensued, enabling writers and artists in the GDR to address controversial topics more openly. Now it was easier to discuss the extent of the population's role in National Socialism, and their indifference to victims' suffering at least to some degree. Knobloch, for instance, recounts a dialogue with his grandmother and her antisemitic beliefs (Knobloch 1979, 335–341). The Shoah was even used by the second generation as a means of rebelling against the state as commemorating Jewish victims could be used as a way to address contemporary issues (Stach 2015). Still, state-sponsored antifascist rituals hardly changed, often resulting in disapproval or rejection among the youth (Wierling 2002, 249–267). In addition, all too ambitious approaches were still prohibited, especially if they threatened to sharply criticize the antifascist narrative.

To date, scholars have hardly attempted to evaluate the outreach of efforts to commemorate the Shoah in the GDR. Compared to politically promoted texts like Bruno Apitz' novel *Nackt unter Wölfen* (1958) [*Naked among Wolves* (1960)] these texts saw significantly smaller editions. Nonetheless, there are still traces demonstrating these attempts did have an effect on GDR citizens. In 1959, for instance, the artistic director of the German National Theater in Weimar expressed how deeply moved he was by the earlier mentioned anthology *Im Feuer vergangen*, and that he decided to direct Friedrich Wolf's *Professor*

Mamlock, a play about the persecution of a Jewish doctor in Nazi Germany.⁹ When Rudolf Hirsch and his wife, the writer Rosemarie Schuder, published a voluminous study on antisemitism in German history in 1987, the demand was so substantial that the second edition had a print run five times larger than the first (Walther 2018, 209). Others wrote to authors like Heinz Knobloch, Peter Edel, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, Christa Wolf, and others, expressing not only an appreciation of their work but often also sharing personal experiences or thoughts on the legacy of National Socialism.

Thus, it may be simplistic to speak of a dominating antifascist discourse in the GDR, albeit the SED did all in its power to uphold this particular narrative. As the example of the actors introduced here demonstrates, there were a number of individuals trying to broaden the boundaries of that narrative. More so, their works resonated with parts of the public, assuring some that there was, in fact, an alternative to state-sponsored antifascism. While these actors contributed to an array of works on the same topic, members of the audience were able to identify the pieces deviating from the ubiquitous narrative. This connection can be described as a “cloud:” a set of possibilities, interpretations, and offers of a more emphatic understanding of the Shoah. Commonly denoting a network of servers, the term “cloud” has recently been used to describe the intricate forms of absorbing and utilizing knowledge throughout various imperial European states (Kamissek and Kreienbaum 2016). In the GDR context, it gives credit to the loose connections of the actors, and encapsulates the idea of a set of alternative readings of history being available to a larger group. Since socialist societies were closed and controlled, debating a controversial topic openly and freely was hardly possible. The cloud could, therefore, also be seen as a substitute for a civil society, and a way of evading or even surpassing ideology’s boundaries. This concept might help to contribute to a more holistic understanding of how the Shoah was commemorated and narrated in the GDR. More importantly, it not only gives credit to the relevant works but also to the people behind them.

Conclusion

Antifascism in the GDR foremost served the SED’s efforts to retain power, yet was able to produce outcomes that the government did not necessarily envision. A range of Jewish survivors, for whom antifascism was a decisive reason to re-migrate to Germany after the Shoah, utilized it to pursue their own agenda of discussing the Shoah and commemorating Jewish victims. In contrast to contemporary postcatastrophic societies, the GDR consisted mostly of former perpetrators, beneficiaries, or supporters of National Socialism for several decades—except for the political elite—which complicated, and often hindered, a discussion about guilt and a reflection

about the loss of those murdered in the Holocaust. These interests were articulated more vigorously towards the end of the GDR, due to the generational shift coinciding with growing skepticism of SED policy within the population. The GDR was quite similar to Western Germany because decades passed in both German states before a broader interest in Jewish history occurred, although West Germany's political elite—despite an initial reluctance—was accepting responsibility for German crimes more sincerely than the SED ever did.

Still, some attempts to commemorate the Shoah were made, and did resonate with parts of the public. Those who took initiative and publicly spoke out on behalf of the memory of Jewish victims alternated the dominating antifascist narrative without disregarding it entirely. Discussing a Marxist view of the Shoah enabled some, like Hirsch, to find a voice in a restricted public discourse, and might have also been the result of a personal longing for an explanation of this crime, given the reduction of complex matters to rather plain answers, especially when it came to the question of perpetrators. Additionally, the voice these actors used was recognized by those eager to find an alternative and genuinely interested in the history of the Shoah. Acknowledging this connectivity challenges a rigid understanding of memory culture in the GDR, and makes a case for individual agency both by the actors and their audience. The GDR was conceived as a home to victims of fascism where they would be able to share their experience among kindred spirits. The Shoah was hardly considered to be an experience that truly mattered, but those who wanted to share their story of persecution, and those who wanted to listen, found a way of meeting each other.

Notes

- 1 See among others (Gerlof 2010; Hoffmann-Curtius 2018; Walther 2019b)
- 2 SED Kreisvorstand Dresden to the SED Landesvorstand Saxony 26 October 1949, SächsSta-D, 11856 SED-Landesleitung Sachsen, IV/A/1800. See also Walther, 2019a.
- 3 At the time, there were no diplomatic contacts between the GDR and Israel. However, the organizational committee at the memorial invited the *Union of Anti-Nazi Fighters of Israel*, based in Tel-Aviv, to be present at the opening. They were delighted to receive the invitation but lacked the funds to go to Germany. No effort was then made by the committee to bring them along as they themselves had limited financial means, at least according to their reply. See Buchenwald Memorial Archive (BwA), VA 109, 4, 512–513. It is quite telling, though, that they only invited an organization of resistance fighters, thus strengthening the practice of deeming only those worthy of commemoration who had *fought* rather than *suffered*.
- 4 The manuscript can be found in Central Archive of the History of Jews in Germany, Heidelberg (ZA), B. 2/11, no. 6–9.
- 5 The letters and assessments in ZA, B. 2/11, no. 13.
- 6 See e.g. the accounts of the witnesses Otto Wolken and Otto Dov Kulka (in Hirsch, 1965, 110–111; 167).

- 7 “s‘brent” *Erinnerungen von Lin Jaldati*, 1982. Film. Directed by Lew Hohmann. TV, DDR 1. 13 Dec 1982, TC 38:00–38:11. My emphasis. Since no visual record of the interview exists it is unclear whether Jaldati actually said these exact words. However, she later recounted it that way on various occasions such as in the interview cited here (Shneer, 2015, 223).
- 8 See Knobloch (1979, 295–297; 368–370 and 1985). See also the documentary movies by Róża Berger-Fiedler, a filmmaker of Polish-Jewish origin who came to the GDR in the late 1950s. Especially her movie *Erinnern heißt Leben* (1987) [Remembering Means Life] explores remnants of Jewish life in Berlin.
- 9 See Manfred Seidowsky to Bernard Mark, Jewish Historical Institute Warsaw, 26 May 1959, Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute Warsaw (AŻIH), 310/397.

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11 Explaining German Expulsions through the Lens of Postcatastrophe: New Discussions Concerning the Shoah and the Expulsions

John C. Swanson

This chapter presents an attempt to examine some issues that underlie my larger research project concerning the German minority in Hungary, more specifically concerning the changing meaning of “being German” throughout 20th century Central and Eastern Europe. My work so far has resulted in a documentary film about a former German (Swabian) village in southern Hungary as well as a recent book monograph: *Tangible Belonging: Negotiating Germanness in 20th-Century Hungary* (Swanson 2017). One issue that frequently arises in reaction to my work, especially after screenings of my film, is whether Germans (however, that designation is defined) can ever be considered victims of Second World War, and, if Germans are victims, how do they relate to other victims of the war. This, of course, is not a new topic, but it is a topic that has been co-opted at times for political purposes. My goal in this chapter is to examine scholarship about the Shoah and about the expulsion of Germans after the Second World War and explain how a post-catastrophic perspective—essentially knowledge of the Holocaust and of other 20th century genocides—influences the way we explain the expulsion of Germans today.

The Holocaust is a familiar historical topic. Scholars and laypersons alike understand it as the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews and other victims by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War. Yet what is not as well known, especially in the English-speaking world, is that at the very end of the war and in the immediate postwar years up to 12 million (some estimate 15 million) ethnic Germans either fled or were expelled from Central and Eastern Europe. Approximately two million died during this forced migration (Neary et al. 2002, xiii, xxi, 219–221). Official expulsions—those sanctioned by the Allies at the Potsdam Conference in 1945—targeted German minorities in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, but Germans from Romania and Yugoslavia were also forcibly removed. These refugees and expellees were most often housed in camps in one of the zones of Germany until distributed to various communities.

Today there are thousands of studies (scholarly books and articles) as well as novels, films, and art works that try to explain and chronicle the Shoah, as well as some which attempt to recreate feelings and emotions from that time. There are far fewer, but still a sizable amount of studies concerning the German expulsions. Most frequently these two events are presented independently of one another, but recently they, along with other forms of state-sanctioned violence (e.g. the Balkan wars of the 1990s and Kosovo beginning in 1999), are presented as part of a larger trajectory of ethnic cleansing, genocide, a “century of conflict,” or even a “racial century” (Naimark 2002; Levene 2016; Weitz 2015). The narratives are changing, and the trend is to include multiple tragedies in one presentation, thereby emphasizing a universalized understanding, especially when referring to the Holocaust, and even implying the ability to compare suffering.

Framework

My subject is the literature on the Holocaust, the literature on expulsions of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as scholarship that tries to combine both events in one narrative. In this chapter, I will not explain the development of the larger field of genocide studies or the tension between genocide and Holocaust studies. I am interested instead in using the concept of “postcatastrophe”—as put forth by Anna Artwińska and Anja Tippner—to think about how scholars have explained the Holocaust, the expulsions, and especially how some of them have developed ways to include both in discussions concerning the Second World War and its aftermath. “Postcatastrophe” offers an interpretive framework concerning contemporary memories of the Shoah and a framework to explain the relationship between the Shoah and other forms of genocide or state-sponsored violence:

Whereas postmemory stresses individual transmissions within the family, postcatastrophe is more focused on the afterlife of the Shoah as seen through things, objects, remains, and ruins, not through terms of (biological) inheritance. (Artwińska and Tippner 2017, 26)

Artwińska and Tippner understand postcatastrophe as a focus on things, objects, remains, and ruins. I would add that a postcatastrophic view also means that memories and scholarship of the Shoah cannot be ignored when explaining other forms of state-sponsored violence. In the last decades, Holocaust vocabulary and references to the Holocaust have entered discussions about slavery, colonialism, Japanese violence against China, and, specifically for this chapter, about the expulsions of Germans and other forms of state-sponsored violence (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 5).

Narratives Concerning the Holocaust

I would like to begin by summarizing how narratives concerning the Shoah and those concerning the expulsions, as two separate events, have changed during the last 70 years, mainly in order to provide a general context. Even though some scholars have argued that the Holocaust was not discussed immediately following the war, survivors and scholars did write about their experiences and their findings. Yet it is correct that until the 1960s the murder of millions of Jews during the war was emphatically not included in general discussions, other than sometimes as a component part of the story of the Second World War. The Eichmann trial in 1961, the growing interest in group identities in the 1960s and 1970s, and the influence of film, television, and literature changed that. Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* was published in 1961. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* appeared in 1963. Arthur Morse wrote *While Six Million Died* in 1967. Of course, within this new atmosphere, not everyone agreed on every detail or on the exact causes of the Holocaust, but no one could ignore the fact that the Holocaust had entered general historical knowledge by the 1960s (Marrus 1987, Novick 1999 and Cole 2004). The scholarship on the Shoah has during the last 50 years continued to develop in a variety of directions, which both Dan Stone and Omer Bartov have documented in their excellent collections of articles (Stone 2004, Bartov 2000 and 2015). Since the 1960s, the Holocaust could no longer be ignored in any explanation of modern history. It is central in how we understand Second World War; in how we understand Germany; in how we understand human nature; and in how we define human rights.

The prominent role that the Holocaust and Nazi Germany hold today in our historical consciousness has also at times normalized the Nazi regime and diminished the atrocities that Nazis and their allies carried out. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld examines this phenomenon at length. He argues that the process of normalization has intensified and "the effort to relativize, universalize, and aestheticize the Nazi past has manifested itself in many areas of contemporary intellectual and cultural life: in historiography, literature, film, television, and the Internet" (Rosenfeld 2014, 24).

It is important to point out that for a long time, scholars writing about the Holocaust could be separated into two groups. One group considered the Holocaust a unique event; these scholars were often historians concerned with particular circumstances within a specific context. The other group made comparisons and generalizations between different forms of genocide, and they were often social scientists. Historians of the Holocaust frequently saw comparisons as a trivialization of the defining event of the 20th century, while other scholars considered a

focus on Holocaust uniqueness as the denial of indigenous genocides and a Eurocentric position that ignored the colonial origins of the Holocaust (Rosenbaum 2001; Moses 2004, 534–535).

The dichotomy of explanations that describe the Holocaust as unique, on one side, and explanations that describe it in comparison to other forms of state-sponsored violence on the other, has itself a long, twisted history, and recently we see a preference for comparisons.¹ It is true that very few scholars today argue in favor of complete “uniqueness.” Deborah Lipstadt emphasizes that we should think of “unprecedented” and not “unique” (Lipstadt 2017). Nevertheless, the tension that the debate sowed and in ways continues to foster influences how we talk about expulsions and other events in our postcatastrophic world.

Narratives Concerning the Expulsions

The development of expulsion historiography is not as well known, especially outside of Germany. Even in communist Central and Eastern Europe, until the fall of communism, the topic of the forced removal of Germans had remained an unpopular (as well as unknown) event. Within West German literature, the portrayal of the expulsions essentially went through three phases. In the years immediately after the war and the expulsions, the memories of what happened were familiar to most people in the Federal Republic of Germany. Expellees told their stories; the government and political parties listened. West Germany created a new ministry to assist the expellees, as well as raised a new tax to compensate them, and money was invested to document what happened.²

It was in these early postwar years that Germans developed a narrative that focused on their collective claim to victim status (Niven 2006). The postwar tendency to compare communism and Nazism—to see both as forms of totalitarianism—played down “German” crimes and played up shared persecution. It was also common for Germans to argue that the expulsions were a sign of Soviet aggression; thereby implying that the expulsions were caused by the burgeoning Cold War, not by the actions of Nazi Germany, the ethnic Germans themselves, or even the desire for revenge.

It was not until the 1960s that the memories of the expulsions became a taboo in the Federal Republic of Germany and remained a taboo until the 1980s. At this time West Germany had entered a period of detente with Eastern Europe (one need only think of Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*), and the arguments being made by the expellee organizations became unpopular among the broader population. The younger generation wanted information about their parents’ actions during the war, and the way they approached German national identity changed. They accepted and confronted Germany’s perpetrator status; many people rejected the idea that Germans were victims of a conflict that they started.

At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the memory landscape, as well as the scholarly landscape, shifted again. Perhaps the beginning of this shift was a book by Andreas Hillgruber (*Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*, 1986 [*Two Kinds of Ruin: The Fall of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry*]) that helped start the *Historikerstreit* in the second half of the 1980s. In the book, Hillgruber implied a similarity between the deportation of the Jews and the expulsion of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe. The general narrative not only wanted to normalize the German past and play down Nazi crimes, but it also began to place an emphasis again on Germans as victims (Levy and Sznajder 2005, 9 and 26). Similar to the immediate postwar years, competing victimhoods became common. A concrete example of this is the support for a Center Against Expulsion—spearheaded by Erika Steinbach (who earlier was a member of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands [Christian Democratic Union of Germany] and leader of the League of German Expellees—which was to be located near the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (Rosenfeld 2014, 42).

Discussions about the expulsions after the war and to some extent again beginning in the 1990s focused mainly on the “suffering” of the Germans as a specific postwar event. This, however, began to change—following a similar pattern as Holocaust literature. Both topics were slowly being detached from their postwar context and universalized. The expulsions of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe are now often portrayed as a sign of a larger trend or part of a larger phenomenon, frequently as examples of ethnic cleansing or as forms of human rights abuses.

The general transition toward an emphasis on German suffering has begun to alter the discussion about the Second World War and the Holocaust and weaken the focus on German guilt that was common in the late 20th century. Some studies aim to emphasize Soviet crimes against ethnic Germans. One thing that much of the recent scholarship (and memory) has in common is the desire to rehabilitate the German nation and thereby view the past, present, and future through the lens of a healthy, proud German nation-state. Again, this move is being accomplished by comparing the expulsions to other forms of state-sponsored violence, which often results in reducing the extremity of German-caused violence.

As mentioned at the beginning, the topic of German expellees and refugees is not well known in the Anglo-American public, for that matter it is not well known outside of Germany. Therefore, I would like to provide a few examples of the historical scholarship—mainly English-language studies—in order to familiarize the reading with some of the literature but also to point out some of the trends that affect this scholarship. The multi-volume work by the German Ministry for Expellees,

Refugees, and War Victims (part of the West German federal government from 1949 to 1969) published in German in the 1950s was printed in a condensed English translation in the early 1960s. Similar to the German version, these English-language volumes provide summaries of the war, flight, postwar, and expulsions, as well as transcripts from interviews with expelled Germans who found themselves in Germany. These volumes in many ways are a document of the expulsions as well as a document of the attempt by individuals (expellees and scholars) to expose the suffering of ethnic Germans. It seems somewhat doubtful that these volumes influenced English-language historiography on general German or European history, especially since many histories of Germany in English (throughout much of the postwar era) do not mention the expulsions or only give them cursory mention (Fulbrook 2014).

This does not mean, however, that scholarship on the expulsions was non-existent. Beginning in the mid-1970s Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, a lawyer and human rights activist, began writing on the topic in English (as well as in German). He published *Nemesis at Potsdam* in 1977 and *The Wehrmacht War Crimes Bureau* in 1979. Perhaps his most well-known book is *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944–1950*, in which he summarizes a story of retribution and suffering. This book, published first in German in 1986 and then in English in 1993, is one of the first to present the expulsions as a human rights violation and a form of ethnic cleansing—a trend that has become quite common.

There have been memoirs and personal accounts published in English concerning the plight of German refugees and expellees, such as Ulrich Merten's *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II* (2012) and Brigitte U. Neary's and Holle Schneider-Ricks's edited volume *Voices of Loss and Courage: German Women Recount Their Expulsion from East Central Europe, 1944–1950* (2002). These and other examples frequently present a somewhat non-critical, emotional perspective. Neary et al. argue that the German civilians who died during the expulsions “joined a long list of 20th century victims of modern horror” (Neary et al. 2002, xiv). Neither of these two books nor David Rock and Stefan Wolff's *Coming Home to Germany? The Integration of Ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe in the Federal Republic* (2002), aim to directly compare forms of suffering, but similarities to other tragedies are implied.

More recently, R.M. Douglas, in *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (2013), sets out in 512 pages to tell the story of the expulsions. Douglas's book is not meant to reduce Germany's guilt (Levy and Sznajder 2005, 20). He makes it clear in the introduction that he is not comparing what happened to the ethnic Germans with what happened to the Jews. His carefully argued narrative focuses on the expulsions as their own event, essentially continuing an

earlier trend that started after the war. Yet, unlike other works mentioned, Douglas is not specifically interested in highlighting the suffering or in discovering “victims.” Douglas breaks with earlier accounts, and he tries to tie the story of German expulsions to a larger issue: the underlying goal in his book is to expose the complicity and responsibility of the Allies in the expulsions. He in many ways is critical of the involvement of the United States in ethnic cleansing.

English-language scholarship has also benefitted from the serious work of Bill Niven, such as his book *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (2006). Niven explains how Germany has dealt with the topic of German suffering during and after the Second World War, specifically the move toward newer explanations in Germany that shift discussions away from a focus on Nazi crimes and German perpetrators and toward German suffering during and after the war. Niven chronicles the move away from the Holocaust and German actions to a focus on Allied bombings of German cities and on German expulsions. Robert Moeller also examined how West Germany tried to tell the story about German involvement in the Second World War through a type of “selective remembering,” first in an article in the *American Historical Review* in 1996, then in his 2001 publication *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, with a focus on crimes committed against Germans. West Germans in the late 20th century emphasized German suffering, both caused by the expulsions and the experience of German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union.

Narratives Concerning Ethnic Cleansing

Most of the examples of expulsions mentioned earlier are mainly studies of the expulsions as a separate event, even though the literature cannot help but imply some form of comparison or some similarities with other tragedies. Today more and more studies are actually including the expulsions and the Holocaust within the same narrative; they accept the fact that we cannot always ignore our knowledge of other tragic events. The narrative that is becoming dominant is most often a larger, broader narrative of 20th-century ethnic cleansing. In a way, Norman Naimark’s *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in 20th-Century Europe* exemplifies this trend. Mark Mazower’s *Dark Continent* could also be mentioned as another book that follows a similar path.³ In Naimark’s book, published in 2002, he uses the framework of ethnic cleansing to discuss what the book calls “the bloodiest century of the past millennium.” He provides five examples: the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide of 1915, the expulsion of Greeks from Anatolia during the Greco-Turkish War of 1921–1922, the Soviet forced deportation of the Chechens-Ingush and the Crimean Tatars in 1944, the expulsion of Germans from Communist

Poland and Czechoslovakia, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo. Naimark's arguments are not meant to compare victims of ethnic cleansing or to create a hierarchy of suffering. He is arguing that ethnic cleansing is a 20th-century phenomenon and not a product of ancient hatreds. It is a result of our times (Naimark 2002, 6).

Timothy Snyder's well-known book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* challenges the idea of the Holocaust's uniqueness, and looks at crimes, especially mass murder, committed by both Hitler and Stalin against a variety of peoples. In the final chapters of *Bloodlands*, Snyder turns to the postwar expulsions of Germans (12 million Germans) as well as the forced relocation of Poles, Ukrainians, citizens of the Baltic states, and minorities in the Crimea and the Caucasus (22 million people). He is not arguing for their sameness, but he is pointing out that this kind of ethnically motivated violence—a form of ethnic cleansing—was carried out against more groups than just Jews (Snyder 2012; Rosenfeld 2014, 104).

More recently, Philipp Ther's *The Dark Side of Nation-States: Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*, first published in German in 2011 and then in English in 2014, continues a narrative that tells the story of the 20th century—a story of the forcible, often violent removal of people from their homes and communities for no other reason except their supposed ethnic, religious, or national affiliation. If Naimark searches for multiple causes for this similar and continuing violence, Ther sticks to the argument that it was caused by new, modern nation-states and the European state system. In his review of *The Dark Side of Nation-States*, Naimark criticizes Ther for his insistence that the weight of responsibility for ethnic cleansing rests on the international actors, not on nationalist movements, ethnic resentment, and hatreds, or even on spontaneous action (Naimark 2011). Nevertheless, both Naimark and Ther are examples of this new narrative of ethnic cleansing that includes both the Holocaust and the expulsions.

De Zayas, Snyder, Naimark, and Ther may disagree on many things, but they are all examples of this direction in the historiography: a move toward telling a broader, even universal story about ethnic cleansing in the 20th century, much of it borrowing vocabulary and methodology from scholarship on the Shoah. I would argue that Naimark's *Fires of Hatred* represents our current understanding of the relationship between the Holocaust and the expulsions—back to the main topic of the chapter. In a very sophisticated way, Naimark argues that the circumstances and conditions of each case need to be examined to understand what happened in the past, but he also wants the reader to realize that the conditions that could lead to ethnic cleansing exist in every society, and we must try to understand this in order to prevent it from happening again (Naimark 2002, 16). In a way he warns against direct comparisons; he describes the five forms of ethnic cleansing as products of our times. And

such a book that presents different forms of violence in one study is a good example of how similar ideas, methodologies, and vocabularies can be employed to explain what happened across the 20th century. It also demonstrates how current explanations take into account other things, objects, remains, ruins, and scholarship, especially from earlier studies of the Shoah.

Conclusion

What I would like to argue at the end of this chapter is that this move in favor of broad historical developments, such as ethnic cleansing, as well as in favor of comparisons—away from uniqueness or unprecedentedness—is about how we explain the causes of the Holocaust in our postcatastrophic world and even about basic elements of historical understanding.⁴ The shift to arguments in favor of ethnic cleansing and human rights highlights abstract causes, such as the spirit of the times, the 20th century, the modern world, or the Second World War in general, not specific tangible causes that would be necessary if local, individual perpetrators and causes were sought. I admit that this is a bit of an oversimplification, since Naimark and others do emphasize individual perpetrators, but I am still arguing that a move toward transcending causes implies some form of spirit of the times as the real culprit for violence.

Another obvious result of this shift toward broad narratives is that the Holocaust has become the quintessential act of genocide (or ethnic cleansing) according to which all others are measured.⁵ R.J. Bernstein argues that in the West, the Holocaust has become the archetype of evil.⁶ Norman Naimark calls it “the dominant historical metaphor of our time” (Naimark 2002, 58). Jeffrey Alexander refers to it as the foremost symbolic representation of evil in the late 20th century and a foundation for a supranational moral universalism (Alexander 2002, 5–8 and Alexander 2009). Within the ambit of early versions of genocide research, the Shoah was the prototypical genocide, seen as “unique, singular, unparalleled, or unprecedented,” (Moses 2004, 535) thereby retaining some form of uniqueness within the framework of genocide studies. A. Dirk Moses referred to this as a “comparative and non-exclusive turn” in both Holocaust and genocide studies (Moses 2004, 535). Already in 1999, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld pointed out that the battle against universalization is a losing one, since not only had the Holocaust become an ideal-type construct, but the historicization of the Holocaust had led to most narratives conceiving of it in universal, not specific terms (Rosenfeld 1999, 48).

What this means, in our new broad narratives, is that the Holocaust has become a concept that is dislocated from space and time resulting in, as Levy and Sznajder argue, “its inscription into other acts of injustice

and traumatic national memories across the globe” (Levy and Sznajder 2005, 6). In our postcatastrophic world, the Holocaust has become a “decontextualized symbol.” It is about extremes and about the violation of human rights. It is not always about the murder of six million Jews (Levy and Sznajder 2005, 6). All too often, the Shoah becomes a benchmark for pure evil, not the actual destruction of people and people’s lives.

I am positing that this is the result of the trend toward a universal narrative and a trend to compare, yet I also strongly believe that comparisons are not necessarily bad. Vidal-Naquet argued that “any history is comparative, even when it believes it is not” (LaCapra 1998, 100). And Richard Terdiman argues that memory is the past made present (Rothberg 2009, 3). My point is that since all history is written from the present looking backward, we can never ignore our knowledge of other events. So, yes, all history is comparative. The goal, however, would be to avoid obvious comparisons that normalize parts of the past, such as Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, that is by presenting the Holocaust as just an example of the violence of the 20th century, or even to highlight the Holocaust as the quintessential form of genocide and ethnic cleansing. This may seem useful, but it can also blur our knowledge.

If I come full circle, my interest in this dilemma is to try to decide how to explain German suffering that was connected to the Second World War. I do not really have an answer as to what is the best way to discuss the expulsions, especially in connection or in comparison to the Shoah. I struggle with talking about the expulsions because there is an immediate desire on the part of an audience to compare them with other forms of state-sponsored violence, most often the Holocaust.

The underlying question really is how to compare. Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory provides a good model since he is arguing in favor of viewing memory as multidirectional: “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (Rothberg 2009, 3). Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder also try to overcome the dichotomy between uniqueness and comparability by arguing that their objective is “to disentangle these terms [particularism and universalism] from their conventional ‘either-or’ perspective and understand them in terms of ‘as well as’ options” (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 11). Levy and Sznajder also describe this trend as a move toward “cosmopolitanized memories:” the process of “internalized globalization” through which global concerns become part of the local experiences (Levy and Sznajder 2005, 2). Yet when one includes the expulsions, there is another complication. Can ethnic Germans be victims of the Second World War?

I would also recommend that one should not ignore the regional and micropolitical levels that have been championed in the work of Celia Applegate and Charles King. Digging deeper into society—looking at more everyday occurrences—muddies many narratives, and this helps to complicate comparisons. Since all too often historical studies aim to provide answers and present a chronologically linear, coherent narrative, explanations are clean and make sense. As we expand the scope and look at ethnic cleansing and its transcendent causes, the narrative all too often has to be simplified. This is why Dan Stone calls for “new narratives” on the Holocaust that challenge simple explanations (Stone 2003, 212 and 224).⁷ I am arguing that when narratives about the Holocaust and the expulsions can highlight complexities and point out inconsistencies, then perhaps the comparisons will not be as obvious, and direct competition can be avoided.

Let me conclude by saying that the recent trend to emphasize a larger narrative of 20th-century ethnic cleansing or even genocide is useful for describing what happened in the last 100 years, but it has its drawbacks. Transcending causes reduce the need or desire to search for the local perpetrators or even to decipher the local causes of events. This is fundamentally an issue of how we understand agency. Did individuals just go along with the trends (just following orders) or were they responsible for decisions that they made or at least accepted? Perhaps if we return to a perspective that more directly takes into account the unique aspects of all events, and if we recognize how a postcatastrophic view encourages us to compare, we can better talk about the Holocaust and the expulsions in the same narrative.

Notes

- 1 There is no lack of literature concerning narratives that focus on uniqueness. See Rose (2017, 34) and Rothberg (2009, 317).
- 2 For example, the German Federal Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims collected, edited, and published the multivolume *Documentation of the Expulsion of Germans from East-Central Europe*.
- 3 Also see the works mentioned in Moses (2004, 548–549), especially footnote 107.
- 4 In Germany politicians and scholars on the Left had since the 1960s emphasized uniqueness in order to keep the focus on German guilt and responsibility. This changed with Joschka Fischer’s comparison of his own expellee experience with the Kosovars as well as the publication of Günter Grass’s *Im Krebsgang* (2002) [*Crabwalk*, 2002]. See also Levy and Sznajder (2005, 8 and 22).
- 5 In this regard Levy and Sznajder point to Naimark and Mazower as examples of this trend (2005, 2, footnote 5).
- 6 See R.J. Bernstein (2002), especially Part III: *After Auschwitz*. See also Stone (2004, 1).
- 7 See also Tim Cole (2001, 7).

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12 The Silence Cartel. Representations of the Genocide of Roma in Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature

Davor Beganović

Introduction

In his theory of collective trauma, Jeffrey Alexander points out that “only if the victims are represented in terms of value qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma” (Alexander 2012, 19). He does not hesitate to introduce the problem of Roma and put them in the group of those whose experiences do not make part of the usual benevolent and empathetic reception. According to Alexander, “Roma (‘Gypsies’) are acknowledged by many contemporary Central Europeans as trauma victims, the bearers of a tragic history. Yet insofar as large numbers of Central Europeans represent Roma people as deviant and uncivilized, they have not made that tragic past their own” (Alexander 2012, 19). Alexander’s point is obvious: empathy with the Other is necessary in order to enable those others to work through their traumatic experience. In the case of Roma, empathy is scarce because for two reasons. First of all, their image in society is extremely negative and this negative picture has been created over the course of centuries. Secondly, the Roma themselves were not able to counteract this negative tendency. They were not seen as capable of giving any positive input to the host societies they met on their nomadic path through Europe. As a result, a precarious situation emerged that made the idea of Roma as victims with whom it is possible to share experiences and feel compassion almost unacceptable for the local societies. In contrast to the Jews, they could not count on solidarity that, at least as existed in the case of this far better integrated minority, one possibility.¹ The result was the “silence cartel,” mentioned in the title of this essay, and its domination in the interpretation (or, to be more precise, the concealing and denying of any interpretation) of the genocide of Roma in Europe during the Second World War.

In a short introduction, I will try to make clear why this marginal position of Roma is detrimental for their integration in the model of genocide memory within European history and culture. For the purposes

of this analysis, I will concentrate on the former Yugoslavia and give only a small statistical sample for the disaster for the Roma society and that went into history as the *Porajmos* (fragmentation, destruction). In the second step, I will focus on the special position of Roma in the former Yugoslavia and give a short overview of their presence in that space. The final step will lead me to the analysis of two essential texts of Post-Yugoslav literature, both of which are written by non-Roma. These novels deal sympathetically with the Roma's situation within society, the refusal of any measure that would simplify their integration and, finally, the persecution and oppression of Roma that reached its sad summit in the *Porajmos*—the Holocaust perpetrated upon them in Yugoslavia and beyond during the Second World War. The two texts are *Oblak boje neba* (2015) [*The Cloud in a Heaven's Color*] by Nebojša Lujanović and *Ciganin, ali najljepši* (2016) [*The Gypsy, but the Most Beautiful*] by Kristian Novak. Neither of the authors are themselves Roma. In a sense, the fact that Roma are seldom involved in translating their own individual or collective experience of genocide in literature or fiction, bears witness to their difficulty in coping widely with the tragedy. Clearly, Roma are not willing to share their tragic experience with others. In this way, they confirm Alexander's theses about the lack of empathy by Central and other Europeans Non-Roma concerning their suffering during and after the Second World War. The peculiar closeness of their culture (which is also related to insufficient knowledge of their language) is just one obvious reason for this. In this sense, the notion of the postcatastrophic with its focus on the *effects* of traumatic and tragic experiences on the coming generations could be extremely helpful in our confrontation with the past. The very fact that the novels discussed here were written as a response to two catastrophes—one which is already a history (*Porajmos*) and the other that still engages us (refugee crises), probably more than ever—is sufficient to demonstrate how the tragedy of Roma is virulent theme, writing back from the margins of our society. The words of Katie Trumpener could be read as a warning against cultural amnesia: “One of the far-reaching consequences of the European myth of the Gypsies—on several levels about the erasure of history and the struggle to preserve memory—has been the obliteration of a people's actual and tragic history” (Trumpener 1992, 861).

Roma in European History

According to Angus Fraser, the main achievement of the Roma “is to have survived at all” (Fraser 1995, 1). Fraser follows at least two trains of thought. On the one hand, there is the Roma's alleged unwillingness to accommodate to or be assimilated by the host society. On the other hand, there is the refusal of host societies to accept them as full members. The immediate consequence of this condition is the accumulation of

stereotypes on both sides that harden into exclusivist positions. Of course, the burden of exclusion is laid on Roma in the first place. However, they themselves have prejudices concerning foreign societies too. Naturally, the prejudices of these societies are deeper and more dangerous. The story underlying them supposedly originates in the Bible, but there is no trace of its existence in the Holy Book. The Roma, who according to this legend are originally natives of Egypt, allegedly refused to give refuge to Maria who, escaping the terror of King Herod, fled from the Promised Land with baby Jesus. The punishment for this misdeed is eternal flight, not incomparable to that of the Wandering Jew. This is more than a typical example of creating prejudice *ex post*: it is a strategy that can be widely applied in order to generate excuses for one's own unbearably intolerant acts and is often used for the oppression of minorities. Hans Sachs,² emphasizes Fraser, "leaves the Gypsy reputation in shreds after associating them with theft, lock-picking, purse-cutting, horse-stealing, casting of spells, and general witchcraft and trickery" (Fraser 1995, 124).

On the other side, the Roma tended to isolate and exclude themselves from the ruling society. Fraser describes this somewhat paradoxical situation as follows:

[T]here is abundant evidence that the Gypsy people were recognized as constituting an *imperium in imperio* and that when they came into conflict with one another the authorities made little attempt to discover or punish the guilty party but left it to the Gypsies themselves to do whatever was necessary. (Fraser 1995, 125–126)

One of the main reasons for the politics of conscious exclusion is the taboo that arises from the fear of contamination. Roma are almost obsessive about cleanliness: for them "to be polluted is the greatest shame a man can suffer, and along him his household. It is a social death, for the condition can be passed on: anything he wears or touches or uses is polluted for others" (Fraser 1995, 244–245). This attitude has serious consequences:

[G]adzé are by definition unclean, being ignorant of the rules of the system and lacking in a proper sense of 'shame': they exist outside the social boundaries, and their places and their prepared food present a constant danger of pollution. The code thus serves to isolate those Gypsies who practice it from any intensive, intimate contact with gadzé; and its existence makes all the more understandable the concern, so apparent in their history, to avoid any form of employment that would require such contact. (Fraser 1995, 246)

In a word, both sides—the settled and the nomads—decline any sort of assimilation and can accept only a cohabitation, without a deeper exchange of social values.

On the other hand, European literature, paintings, and music cemented the cultural exclusion of Roma. This is the *image* which does not have much to do with the actual sociological position of Roma in society:

In popular images gypsies were (and sometimes still are) mostly represented as thieves and impostors, as lazy, as immoral, and even as cannibals. As a rule, these pictures are in absolute contrast with the social and cultural ideals cherished by non-gypsies themselves, by the *gaje*. Oppositions between images of gypsies and self-images comprise elements that are strongly symbolic and that are part of semantic fields related to the opposition 'wild'—'civilised', which is deeply embedded in the European cultural history. (Kommers 2007, 171)

There is a double rejection, both on the side of Roma as well on the side of the host society. Katie Trumpener emphasizes:

Moving through civil society, the Gypsies apparently remain beyond reach of everything that constitutes Western identity, as Franz Liszt's influential mid-19th-century summary suggests: outside of historical record and historical time, outside of Western law, the Western nation state, and Western economic orders, outside of writing and discursivity itself. All the Gypsies have, all they need, all they know is their own collectivity, which survives all odds and persecutions, as if their identity inheres in their very blood. (Trumpener 1992, 860)

One effect of the strategy of mutual exclusion is the insufficient integration of Roma in the host society, making them vulnerable to diverse manifestations of violence on the part of the dominant majority. This could be compensated in relatively peaceful times. In times of crises, however, their situation could become especially precarious. The Second World War was one such time. The results of the violence perpetrated upon the Roma minority are well-known. From the very first point of power seizure by the Nazis until the end of the war, Roma were the victims of extreme violence. More importantly, Roma settlements were widespread in the racist satellite states that appeared at the very outset of the Second World War, such as Slovakia and Croatia, for example, or in the philo-fascist, regimes already been in power in Romania and Hungary. The result of this constellation was devastating for the Roma. The greater part of the European Roma was first persecuted and then annihilated—in concentration camps and by death squads.

According to Rajko Đurić (2002), about 40,000 Roma were killed in the camps in the so-called NDH (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska [Independent State of Croatia] stands in for the puppet construction formed under aegis of German and Italian occupation forces), but in the

whole of Yugoslavia there was still more victims. The estimated number of Roma on Yugoslav territory was 100,000. The highest estimate of victims is 90,000, the lowest 26,000. As we can see, the numbers vary and none of these estimations provide us with reliable numbers.³ Nevertheless, there are at least two conclusions that can be drawn from this short overview given here. The first is that there was no serious research on the Roma extermination until very late in the 20th century. The second is that the tragedy of Roma is deeply culturally determined. The Roma, as Alexander already observed, are defined by their fixation with orality and are therefore unable to share traumatic experiences with non-Roma—or with the world in general. Oral modes of communication are not suitable for the widespread dissemination of experiences. Cultural memory preserved in this way is addressed almost exclusively to members of their own community. The *Porajmos* is part of the Roma culture of mourning but it is restricted to those who can understand the music and lyrics in which it is expressed. Its claim to universality is consequently restricted. This restriction can be seen in the sluggish persecution of the Nazis and their crimes against Roma in postwar Germany. Robert Ritter,⁴ the notorious physician and representative of racial anthropology, was never persecuted as a war criminal. He was able to start a new medical career as a senior medical officer of health (*Obermedizinalrat*) in the Federal Republic of Germany and even continued to work with his former assistant from the Nazi era, the especially cruel nurse Eva Justin. In his “research center” Ritter compiled a fundamental racial survey of some 24,000 samples that served as foundation for sanctions against Roma. The final result was deportation in “Zigeunerlager” [gypsy camp] in Auschwitz as stage of mass annihilation. Justin researched behavior of adolescents. Especially in the case of Roma, his results showed that they are extremely “antisocial,” due to their racial inferiority. It remains obvious that this catastrophe could and should be mediated by an empathetic Other who takes on the role of the victims, if it is to find a place in the cultural memory of detached communities. This is the case in the Post-Yugoslav literatures. But here is a short sketch of an outline of the role of Roma in Yugoslav literature and culture before the breakup of the country.

Roma in Yugoslav Literatures and Culture

There is a long presence of the Roma in the atlas of South-Slavic literary. Following the pattern of other European literatures, South-Slavic authors developed a two-fold representation strategy that depended on idealization on the one side and demonization on the other. The Roma were represented either as criminals and thieves or as the symbols of freedom. The first dimension can be seen in Ivo Andrić's well-known novels *Na Drini ćuprija* (1945) [*The Bridge Over the Drina*, 1977] and

Travnička hronika (1945) [*The Days of the Consuls*, 1992], the second in the drama *Koštana* by Bora Stanković (1905), the novella *Hanka* (1929) by Isak Samokovlija and the novel *Vranjara* (1949) by Ivanka Vujčić-Laszowski.

Andrić uses Roma only as “supporting actors.” The role given to them is that of the hangman. They execute rebellious members of an oppressed Christian community, mostly Serbs. In *The Bridge Over the Drina*, a Gypsy figure called Merdžan impales the Serb peasant, Radisav, found guilty of destroying the building site of the bridge. And he even asks members of the Serb community for money in exchange for giving them back Radisav’s corpse for the funeral rites. A similarly violent scene featuring cruel Gypsies is found in another of Andrić’s classic novels, *The Days of the Consuls*. Here again, Roma are executioners, but they do not use the stake this time. Their horrible device is a modified version of the garrotte, which is applied as an instrument of execution as well as a means of torturing. It is used in a delayed and prolonged process of killing. Even if we suppose that Andrić realistically represents the Roma as executioners by occupation, we must still ask why exactly they serve in such a low and despised job in “real life.”

Borisav Stanković was a Serbian author from the early 20th century. His most popular work is the play *Koštana* (1900). The eponymous heroine is a young Gypsy singer and dancer who turns the heads of all the men in the provincial town of Vranje. Passionate and beautiful, she is sent away because she disturbs the pattern of regular life in town. She is forced to marry a distant cousin and moves to Niška Banja. The gypsies from Andrić’s novels live on the brink of society, and this is where *Koštana* is banished to, in order to rid the patriarchal society at home of her dangerous influence. Tellingly, this influence is the romanticized striving for freedom, something she only allegedly possesses. As a woman and as a member of a marginalized community, she is predestined to fail.

As such, the two cultural stereotypes—the two images—are fixed in the pre-war literary tradition. This tradition is continued in films. Although shot almost 20 years after the war, the *Black Wave* films⁵ did not mention the genocide at all. Regarding themselves as free-minded democrats and the opposition to the Communist Party, these directors never tried to represent or describe the crimes perpetrated upon the Roma minority and the horrible consequences for their already dire situation, although they were more than present in their films. The Roma are again either represented as passionate lovers who do not stop short of murder if their love is in danger (*Skupljači perja* [*I Even Met Happy Gypsies*] by Aleksandar Petrović, 1967) or as petty criminals and reckless musicians (*Čovek nije tica* [*The Man is not a Bird*] by Dušan Makavejev, 1965). In Makavejev’s film the Roma are marginal figures, unskilled laborers stealing copper from the factory where they work. To complete the stereotype, the director shows the act of stealing in a

comical way, one which shows the special ability of this community to act and react enjoying life in any situation. On the other hand, Petrović's film is completely dedicated to Roma, with the Serbian population playing only a secondary role. The Roma are represented as passionate, impossible to rule, always on the brink of breaking the law. They are not capable of controlling their emotions. The result is an excessive tendency toward violence—upon themselves as well as upon others. A later film, *Dom za vešanje* (1988) [*The Time of the Gypsies*] by Emir Kusturica, can be seen as a kind of synthesis between these two approaches. The connection between freedom and criminality, or freedom through criminality, is synthesized in characters who are able to embody them while abolishing the difference between them. Perhan, the protagonist, is a petty criminal and a boy equipped with supernatural abilities. He is the villain *and* the hero. As a result, he is destined to fail. There is one more pertinent fact concerning this film: Kusturica's main actors and actresses that represent Roma are more or less not Roma themselves. He uses a casting and narrative strategy already employed by Petrović. Moreover, the authentic Roma—the amateurs—are either ugly and disabled or unable to perform their duty appropriately. Their unattractiveness is underscored through the film's cinematography. At the very least, Kusturica repeats (and even reinforces) the stereotypes and clichés of Roma that are well-known in the European cultural tradition.

Roma in Post-Yugoslav Literatures

The two novels mentioned at the beginning of my essay try to avoid the well-known images or stereotypes of Roma and those strategies designed to put them in an unreal, rather fictional environment. One important fact plays a significant role here. After the horrors of the civil wars in Yugoslavia, political correctness was almost a reflex on the part of liberal intellectuals. The Roma community benefitted from this new development, at least in literature and film.⁶ It does not mean that their lot actually improved. They are still, probably more than ever, seen as “the Other of the society,” with all the consequences that such a label implicates. Poverty, violence, exclusion: these are all unavoidable components of Roma life in the lands of the former Yugoslavia nowadays.⁷

In *Oblak boje neba* (2015) [*The Cloud in a Heaven's Colour*], Nebojša Lujanović⁸ develops a highly entangled story that encompasses two wars—the Second World War and the civil war in Yugoslavia. The narrative comprises the experiences of a young Roma, Enis, who escapes Zagreb after he was accused of burning down the coffee shop where he had been working. Enis lives in a Roma ghetto together with his sister Sanda, who does not look like as Gypsy, and his old grandaunt Semiha, who raised the children after the death of their mother. The victim of the fire is Dado, the son of the coffee shop's owner. Dado is a strange,

disabled young man who is racist and a latent homosexual, with an obvious interest in the handsome young Gypsy. This false accusation leads to a pogrom that extends to the Roma ghetto on the periphery of Zagreb. The ghetto is besieged by a violent mob trying to avenge the youngster's death.⁹ But at the moment the pogrom starts, Enis is already on the way to Bosnia, which is preparing for the war, in search for his non-Roma father, Fabo. On his way he meets refugee convoys traveling to Croatia. His movement is a paradoxical one: to avoid lynching or at the very least a false accusation, he moves to the very center of the looming apocalypse, a war that would be much worse than the one in Croatia.

A taxi driver and natural-born loser, his father accidentally comes across the diary of a German Roma who was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. Having some vague information about German plans for *Wiedergutmachung* (this can be translated as “(financial) compensation”),¹⁰ he tries to create a second identity and earn some easy money by cheating the Germans. The diary itself becomes a second part of the novel, a text-within-a-text. Its hero is a skilled worker. Therefore, he is imprisoned in the work camp, not in the extermination camp. This gives him the possibility to escape, but it becomes obvious that his attempt will be unsuccessful. He dies but the diary is left behind as a testimony. Moreover, there is an intriguing connection between the two parts of the novel, quite apart from the same Roma heritage of the two main characters. Both of them attempt to flee from a precarious situation by crossing a river. The narrator is insistent in underlining this fact:

[T]he branches are moaning over the rising Vistula, once upon a time all this swayed, blossomed and sprinkled the dead mass with petals and now in the waters that bite two or three meters of coast everything squeaks and moans under the surface [...] (Lujanović 2015, 135)

This is the river that the Roma refugee has to cross in order to gain freedom. A Chinese box structure governs the main part of the novel, suffusing it with a new theme. This one becomes even more connected with the past. Through associations and allusion, a picture emerges of events that are interconnected, even mutually exchangeable, despite being historically remote. There are two stories that are separated in time, or even three, if we count the Zagreb one, but interwoven in postcatastrophic connection that projects the events from the past in the present, giving them an additional impulse in bridging the gap between two-time dimensions.

The interconnection exists, initially, in a parallel between two types of violence: one visited upon Roma in concentration camps and another that represents the looming war in Bosnia. The narrator searches for the

similarities that can eventually build a thick net of associations between two extremely violent events.¹¹ Both of them impregnate the cultural memory of their respective societies. The node is the common experience of violent power destroying a fragile social network from the inside. The Roma have always been outsiders, but they *remain* a part of society, at least as a visible minority. At the very moment in which they are excluded from the social environment, they lose the small advantage given to them by empathetic members of the host community and established in the laws protecting them from abuse by a potentially hostile majority. This is something they share with all the minorities in Bosnia and Hercegovina threatened by the imminent war. It is meticulously reconstructed by a narrator who first puts the fleeing Roma in the column of refugees. But although he tries to escape from the unsympathetic atmosphere in the Croatian capital, he is paradoxically moving in the wrong direction. The relative insecurity of Zagreb, where he can still find someplace to hide, is exchanged for the absolute insecurity of central Bosnia. Or is it a no-win situation? It is something that could be compared with one unusually wise statement of the Bosnian president of that time, Alija Izetbegović, who said that for Bosnia and Hercegovina the choice between Serbia and Croatia is the same one as that between cancer and a heart attack.

Be that as it may, Enis's sojourn in his father's homeland consists of a rapid accumulation of catastrophes that culminate in his death. His relationship with his father is anything but simple. Accordingly, this must lead to a violent end. When he becomes aware of Fabo's dirty plan, Enis first steals and then destroys the manuscript. Fleeing from Fabo's rage, he is shot dead as the collateral victim of two warring factions, just as open hostilities erupt violently between them. In this context, a complex historical constellation typical of Yugoslavia is developed. After the ideological completion of the postapocalyptic structure after the Second World War, there comes a paradoxical, impossible second post-apocalypse triggered by the tragedy of civil war. The ultimate apocalypse is now substituted with the new one, with smaller repercussions (in the sense of world history) but no less tragic for the population affected by it, bringing with itself yet another catastrophe and add to the sense of postcatastrophic.

In order to explain (or at least approximately understand) this new ultimate condition, the narrator of *Oblak boje neba* employs the same discourse that dealt with the previous one. Here, the way back to theory appears extremely meaningful. The narrator of the novel gives his account from the position of a survivor of war. He is the bearer of the traumatic memories himself. However, on another level, he calls forth another layer of memory, one which is not part of his own tradition but one that he tries to incorporate into his traumatic experience by empathic gesture—that is, the genocide of the Roma. Applying this narrative

position from the embedded story, he becomes the bearer of a special condition that Marianne Hirsch defines as postmemory. According to Hirsch,

[...]‘postmemory’ shares the layering and belatedness of these other ‘posts’, aligning itself with the practices of citation and supplementarity that characterize them. Like the other ‘posts’, ‘postmemory’ reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. And yet postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it rather as a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. (Hirsch 2012, 5–6)

In this way the narrator addresses himself to “foreign” events that happened in the distant past in order to comprehend his own experiences that lie in the immediate past. By working through the trauma of the Other, he—at least theoretically—enables himself to cope with his trauma and with the trauma of his generation too. It is a highly intricate and complicated narrative procedure—applied on a highly challenging thematic and, as such, appropriate for its accomplishment. Connecting two temporally distant events that have similar traumatic potential (one realized, the other announced at the time of the narrative), he searches for an explanation of their intrinsic affinities. What is the purpose of this endeavor? It is not obvious if there is any. In any case, this is not a novel with intention or with explicit theses. It is not a novel with the therapeutic intentions either. It aims at bridging the gap between two distant historical moments, at finding the similarities between them and, in this way, constructing a cohesive structure able to show unusual connections between past and contemporary racism. In this way it is constructing a new level of cultural memory, specific to the post-Yugoslav societies. It is mainly nostalgic and tries to deal with traumatic events as a way of contemplating the lost past.

The second novel I examine here, *Ciganin, ali najljepši* (2016) [*Gypsy, but Most Beautiful*], does not thematize the Roma genocide. The problem here is the construction of Other, and consequently it is dealt with on a different semantic level. Kristian Novak¹² intertwines the virulent themes of refugees as victims of the relatively new process of globalization and Roma as eternal Other of Yugoslav culture. It is shown how two stereotypes can be connected in the process of the creation of hatred. The first one is local, it was always present in the cultural consciousness of the people on the Balkans. Roma are the bearers of the most vicious prejudices implanted in the local population. The other one which implemented, in the form of the refugees, from another part of the world and, loaded with dangerous material, inserted on the Croatian territory.

In this way, Novak handles something that was already noticed in imagological research:

[T]oday, in so-called multicultural societies, groups like the Gypsies seem to have been ousted from public attention by other ethnic minorities like Muslim and Africans. They have disappeared in the anonymity of unprivileged places. (Kommers 2007, 173)

The place of Roma is now taken, or appropriated, by more endangered communities. The story in Novak's novel is extremely complex and I cannot even approximately represent all its meandering. Its main point concerns the human trafficking involving the young Roma Sandokan, Sandi. He is an outsider, both in his community and in the community of locals where he tries to establish himself with the help of an older woman who becomes his lover. Of course, his integration is impossible, especially if we know that she is on the losing side too. After an unsuccessful marriage and the end of her professional career, she comes back to her home village in the Croatian province of Međimurje, where she tries to find recovery. Only her brother, who organizes trafficking and hires young Roma to work for him, is paradoxically the connection between Sandi and the rest of the villagers.¹³

Another story develops parallel to this one. Its "hero" is a refugee from Iraq. At the end, he will die as the victim of a failed journey across the Croatian-Hungarian border. The story is narrated in a series of flashbacks, starting with the death of the refugee and rewinding itself until the beginning of his flight from war-torn Iraq. Novak's narrative strategy is quite unusual. He does not use the similarities between the destinies of the two protagonists in order to pull together the narrative threads in an all-resolving denouement. On the contrary, he leaves them to develop independently. Even as the reader becomes aware that Sandokan's work involves smuggling refugees into the West, and when they become aware that the anonymous corpse that Croatian policemen found in the vicinity of a river belongs to an Iraqi Christian, even then they know that the only connection between the two is not a narrative but a symbolic one. Both of them are hopelessly lost in a world in which they do not belong, although they long to become part of.

But what they do share is the common accumulation of memory instigated by traumatic experiences. Even if they do not act together on the narrative level, they possess the same pattern of affective structure. My thesis is that the two protagonists are bound together through the memory of physical injuries inflicted by members of a hostile society. Having used Marianne Hirsch's conception of postmemory in my analysis of *Oblak boje neba*, I will now have to apply another theoretical approach to memory. The concept of "multidirectional memory" developed by Michael Rothberg seems to be appropriate. He contrasts his

concept with that of “collective memory.” It is crucial that multidirectional memory excludes *competitiveness*. The memory becomes “a subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (Rothberg 2009, 3). Rothberg introduces the highly valuable concept of “imaginative links:”

[A] certain bracketing of empirical history and an openness to the possibility of strange political bedfellows are necessary in order for the imaginative links between different histories and social groups to come into view; these imaginative links are the substance of multidirectional memory. (Rothberg 2009, 18)

Now, such links are essential for constructing the fine line that connects such disparate social groups as Croatian Roma and Iraqi Christians who are refugees from their own country.

Obviously, the situation of these two marginal men is incredibly precarious. Although the Iraqi suffers more at first sight, the situation of the Roma is no less dangerous. He is at least integrated by a common language (an advantage the other lacks) but that does not mean much if one is stigmatized by his otherness from the outset. Neither of them is able to work through their traumatic experiences. They do not have help from outside and are compelled to cope with horror all on their own. They do not have the capability to solve that intricate task. Therefore, they are doomed to fail. Moreover, they are not even allowed by the narrator to survive them. Paradoxically, Sandi is not killed by the raging mob of villagers who would pursue him as an eternal Other. He becomes the victim of his “own people” of Roma who are not able to bear the envy produced by his allegedly successful involvement in a dirty local business and his love affair with a “white woman.”¹⁴ Accordingly, the narrator remains the only legitimate instance of the construction of a plausible and acceptable concept of memory. This is perhaps paternalism, but it seems necessary. The memory he represents must be multidirectional because only in this way can such diverse initial situations be put together. According to Rothberg, “the multidirectional memory frequently juxtaposes two or more disturbing memories and disrupts everyday setting” (Rothberg 2009, 14). In this manner, the neutral¹⁵ but empathetic narrator is able to coordinate the memories of oppressed people, leading them to some sort of sedation or pacification (which may also be tragic) and, finally, bringing at least some semblance of relief to disturbed communities.

As we have seen, the solutions that Post-Yugoslav literatures offer to the traumatic experiences of Roma are sparse and deficient. The greatest deficit in this pessimistic arrangement is the voice of Roma themselves. As long as they are dogmatically bound to their own—mostly oral—tradition, they will not be able to share their cultural memory with the dominant society.

That means that they stay bound either to malevolent misunderstanding or benevolent, empathetic understanding which is, mostly, misunderstanding again. Alternatively, it is more or less the same if the Roma stereotypes are positively or negatively shaped. They still remain what they are: the stereotypes. From the perspective of postmemory or postcatastrophe (Artwinska/Tippner 2018) it is possible to ask the question, if the new media offer the possibility of transferring the traumatic experience in new media, such as internet. In his book *The Longest Shadow* (1996) Geoffrey Hartman discusses Holocaust phenomena as ineffable and seeks the possibility of its representation exactly in alternative media, even media of popular culture. It could be that YouTube or broadly seen internet itself offer the platform for self-representation for Roma.

Klaus-Michael Bogdal concludes his long book on the “invention” of Roma in European history with four theses. The first is the most important. Therefore, I shall quote it extensively:

[T]he bare existence of Roma people is sensed as threat [...] Thereby, the experience of a single person does not play any role. Only the identification as a member of a foreign community matters. Perceived threat asks for a distance as answer. It refers exclusively to this group and does not have to be created in the space of the ‘invention’ of Roma-people, as the Other of European society starts right here. It is made possible and implemented through a series of declared hostilities towards an imaginary collective that is called ‘Zigeuner’ in Germany. [...] The exclusion does not break up the relation, but regulates them one-sidedly and to the disadvantage of the excluded. It assigns them one social place and range ‘at the bottom’ that they can leave again at any time. Only one way is offered to overcome this non-excludability: (spatial) expulsion and (biological) annihilation. This is the way situated in the logic of one threat by ‘Zigeuner’, which is subjectively perceived as ubiquitous. (Bogdal 2011, 480–481)

The pessimistic conclusion of his unique book is something that could be seen as universally applicable to European societies, even today. Despite all efforts, the Roma are still the victims of the politics of exclusion. And there is little hope that the situation will change any time soon. The latest developments in East- and South-East Europe seem to confirm this sad and somewhat fatalistic presupposition. Obviously, the only way out of this impasse would be the voice of Romani themselves. The voice of the others, independent of how benevolent they are, could not cover up for the victims. It seems that substantial development of postcatastrophic postmemory is possible only if the new models of memorizing are applied. They could be combined with traditional ones, such as writing, photography, film, or arts. This combination is fertile in the process of coping with traumatic experience, especially those transferred across the

generations. The new media are probably easily to be appropriated and applied on traditionally oral structure of Romani culture. The generation of survivors is slowly approaching its biological end. The following generations, the children as well as grandchildren, may be able to achieve the consolation with traumatic past only in tedious and demanding work on creating and recreating memory that, if this process is completed successfully, could appear only in form of postmemory.

Notes

- 1 The Jews in Europe went, from the end of 18th century on, through the process of secularization which led to increasing integration in the society. Central movement that led to the process of liberation of Jewish life in Europa was Haskalah, Jewish enlightenment. Standard work on it is Litvak (2012).
- 2 Hans Sachs was a German author from the 15th century. In his play *Ein faßnacht-spil mit sechs personen, und wird gewandt die fünff armen wanderer* [A Shrovetide Play for six] (1559) he describes the encounter of an innkeeper with five poor wanderers that can be recognized as Roma. About Sachs see Bogdal (2011, 50).
- 3 The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust states that “[s]tatistics on Gypsy losses are especially unreliable and controversial.” (Niewyk et al. 2000, 422) The quoted figures are based on Vossen (1983) and Zimmermann (1996).
- 4 More extensively about Ritter, see Wippermann (1997, 142–144).
- 5 Black Wave cinema is the general denotation of films shot in Yugoslavia from the middle of the Sixties to the beginning of the Seventies. The label is given because it is insinuated that these films illustrate a hostile picture of life in socialist Yugoslavia. Mostly filmed in black and white, they tend to show the dark side of societal development in the country. They concentrate on the periphery and avoid glamorous inner cities. In addition, Black Wave films are very free in their depiction of sex, stopping just one step short of explicitness. Because of all these reasons, they had an aura of dissidence.
- 6 *Epizoda u životu berača željeza* (2013) [*An Episode in the Life of Iron Picker*] by the Bosnian director Danis Tanović is a film that widely differs from the ones mentioned previously. In highly realistic form it describes a couple of days in the life of an ordinary Roma family. The main actors are Roma themselves, moreover they are lay actors, not professionals. Tanović’s position is empathetic, he does not stop short of heavily criticizing the precarious situation and harsh everyday life of the Roma in contemporary Bosnia and Hercegovina.
- 7 A conclusive representation of this situation, especially in Serbia, is to be found in van de Port (1998). This anthropological study deals with Roma and the relation of non-Roma to this population.
- 8 Nebojša Lujanović (1981) is a Bosnian-Croat author of younger generation. He was born in Novi Travnik, (Bosnia) during the war he emigrated to Croatia where he settled as a writer and literary scholar. He has published four novels and one collection of short stories. He holds a PhD of Zagreb University in contemporary Bosnian literature. He teaches in Split at the Faculty of Philosophy.
- 9 Here is the short description of the siege narrated from Sanda’s perspective: “Something like two hundred of them stood at the west entrance to Zagreb’s

Plinarsko naselje, organized and persistent. Perhaps some of them remember Dado, the youngster with burned skin, on the life-support machines who is waiting for death, but that was three or four days ago. Unity, rebellion, the burning of tires and breaking of bottles are in the foreground now. During the day there is a desk with drinks there, in case someone gets thirsty from chanting. By night one of them had set a fire in an iron barrel; spring nights are still a little bit cold and a sore throat is not good for anyone.” (Lujanović 2015, 230)

- 10 About the *Wiedergutmachung* [compensation] in postwar Germany, and in unified Germany too, s. Wippermann, especially chapter “‘Wie mit den Juden’. Die verweigerter Wiedergutmachung” (2015, 82–90).
- 11 Christian Gerlach defines “extreme violent societies” as follows: “By extremely violent societies, I mean formations where *various population groups* become victims of massive physical violence, in which, acting together with organs of the state, *diverse social groups participate for a multitude of reasons*. Simply put, the occurrence and the thrust of mass violence depends on broad and diverse support, but this is based on a variety of motives and interests that cause violence to spread in different directions and in varying intensities and forms” (Gerlach 2010, 1–2, emphasis Ch. G.). This definition is quite useful for my purposes. It helps put Roma in a double position: direct and indirect (cynically one can say that they are the collateral damage of war of every man against every man) victims of acts of war.
- 12 Again, a member of a younger generation, Kristian Novak was born in Germany in 1979. He is a linguist and teaches as an assistant professor in the department of Croatian studies at the University of Rijeka. He has written two more novels. His PhD dissertation was published in Zagreb. Already in his first novel *Črna mati zemla* (2014) [*Black Mother Earth*] Novak combined the elements of provincial and metropolitan, rural and urban to describe the complex relations within divided contemporary Croatian society. The central question in this novel was the eternal conflict between the two parts of the country, intensified by the criminal transition from socialist to capitalist society in the Nineties. This examination of deviations is consequently pursued in *Gypsy, but Most Beautiful*.
- 13 In a self-description Sandi gives one unusual definition of failed identity that is, again, a sort of self-inscription: “Because we belonged nowhere, we could only go to Globoko.” (Novak 2016, 192) Globoko is a village in Međimurje which is transformed into a Roma ghetto.
- 14 As Sandi, after being beaten by his friends, drifts slowly through a coma, he invokes the strategy of forgetting as the only way of escaping from the horror of the everyday world: “If I forget it, I will hate Mirza and Tompo who didn’t allow me to live with her. / If I forget that too, I will hate myself. / If I don’t forget anything, I will hate everything” (Novak 2016, 370).
- 15 When I say neutral, I mean that his position is outside the narrated events. In Genette’s terminology, it is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic.

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Part III

Postcatastrophic Aesthetics and Re-Readings



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13 Lost and Saved in Translation: Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther. A Family Story*

Barbara Breysach

Introduction

The question whether a literary *oeuvre* belongs to a given genre or an author adheres to a current literary phenomenon seems increasingly difficult to ascertain. In the case of the German-Ukrainian author Katja Petrowskaja, one might use migration literature, German-Russian-Jewish-literature, or post-Shoah as classifications. One could question the necessity of genre definitions in general, since contemporary writing often bends genre rules and thus rejects outright submission to any one genre. For instance, Olga Grjasnowa, born in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1984 and lived with her family in Germany since 1996, criticizes the term migration literature that has been used with regard to her texts as “racist and paternalistic,” and sees it as a way of defining a text as “different” from the mainstream (Anon. 2017). Her refusal to submit a dominant mother tongue resembles Jacques Derrida’s rather poetic and also partly autobiographical essay *Monolingualism of the Other: or, the Prosthesis of Origin*. Derrida’s understanding of language also doubts the priority of a mother tongue: “language is for the other, coming from the other and represents the coming of the other” (Derrida 1998, 68). His concept tends to understand both culture and language as a process of continuous translation or a movement between different players or structures. The term “translation” does not exclusively refer to the praxis of translating from one language into another or the phenomenon of cultural contacts. Instead, it is a concept that questions cultural centrism and refers—for instance—to traveling as a basic cultural dynamic—or, to give another example—to the image of other, different cultures as a stable and constitutive element of the culture to which somebody belongs.¹ In a similar vein, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used the term rhizome as a model for underlining non-hierarchical, non-central processes of cultural understanding and stressing the importance of circulation in culture. In the introduction to their *Thousand Plateaus*, they explain the concept of rhizome as a sort of construction, an artifact

of escape lines, a network without center or origin, a sort of contradiction to any genetic thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 21–26).

As with Olga Grjasnowa's writing, Katja Petrowskaja's novel *Vielleicht Esther* (2015) [*Maybe Esther. A Family Story*, 2018] is also individual, but Petrowskaja's writing shows a special awareness for central questions and even significant details within German–Ukrainian–Russian history, as the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact, for instance, and above of all the massacre of Babi Yar in 1941. Furthermore, it is situated in the context of the aftermath of the Shoah in East and Central Europe and postcatastrophic narratives, which reflect this constellation (Artwińska et al. 2015). In contrast to the first decades after the catastrophe of the destruction of the Jews and the period of the Second World War the present postcatastrophic literature is based on an extended understanding of catastrophe as a permanent and recurring element of history. The contemporary texts are therefore postcatastrophic in a deeper sense because they also reflect on present crisis situations as in the present Russian–Ukrainian conflict. In this context, one should add that the 20th century has often been understood as the catastrophic century. The answer to Eric Hobsbawm's famous study *Age of Extremes* as well as Walter Benjamin's concept of catastrophism in his essay *On the concept of history* is to be found in the present postcatastrophic interpretation of the destruction of the Jews and the War Crimes. Hobsbawm underlined that nobody would have imagined that the catastrophic interwar period would lead into an even more cataclysmic war period (Hobsbawm 1994, 271). Of course, the understanding of catastrophe through the postcatastrophic prism does not refer to the classic understanding of catastrophe as a decisive turn in a series of events: "The turning character of the catastrophe recedes here and gives way to the idea of a perpetuation of the catastrophe to a permanent state or normalized state of emergency in history" (Kasper 2014, 13).² The permanently present catastrophe in this respect cannot be situated in the model of history as development and progress.

To date, Petrowskaja has only published one book-length work. Due to this fact, my considerations will present a literary case study on a transgenerational memory construction regarding *Maybe Esther. A Family Story*. The story starts at Berlin main station, where the autobiographical narrator is waiting for a train to Warsaw and begins traveling through Central and Eastern Europe, always in search of facts and impressions that might help to fill the missing links in her Jewish family history with new details or fragments. The story consists of a journey into space, but space inasmuch as it is also a substitute for time, and represents a journey into the past. The journey also reflects the historical scattering of an Ashkenazi family in Eastern Europe, in that traveling itself is an imitation of the history, since members of the family have been living both in Ukraine (Kiev, Odessa), as well as in Russia and Poland, while other relatives studied in Vienna or Paris, or were deported to

Mauthausen (Austria). The main pattern within this research is the experience of war and the destruction of the European Jews. “Holocaust is our antiquity,” Katja Petrowskaja explained (Küveler 2014). Whenever the narrator arrives at a concrete place, be it Kiev or Warsaw, the narration focuses on war events, on the Shoah, on missing witnesses and evidence. Petrowskaja’s writing reflects the postmemorial constellation (Marianne Hirsch) in contemporary European–Jewish literature and thus offers a transgenerational perspective. Some photos and rare, very personal documents that could be saved and are added to the text. As to her literary technique, she prefers a lingual strategy based on letter- and word-play, anagrams, as well as a technique of free association. This “literal” method (concentration on letters) is connected with a repudiation of classical narrative and epic strategies. The text also refers often to signs and trans-lingual symbols. German is not Petrowskaja’s the first language (she learned German only at the age of 26), but it is her literary language. One might see her literal use of words in the context of switching between languages but also as a way of handling the change of language (from Russian language to German). But this playful work with words and letters reflects also the gaps in the family memory, it is based on signs of loss and destruction, as I shall point out later. The work consists of six main chapters, of which the fifth is dedicated to Babi Yar and ends with the book’s eponymous subchapter “Maybe Esther.” The book centers on the grandmother, still living in her hometown Kiev at the time of German invasion, whose health had not allowed her to flee, and who was as the narrator presumes, shot by a German in summer 1941 in a street near her home.

Writing Between Languages

In 2013, Katja Petrowskaja won the very prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt, Austria, one of the most respected prizes for German-language literature. Once her book *Vielleicht Esther* (2015) [*Maybe Esther. A Family Story*, 2018] was published, the author received further prizes for her literary debut, including outside the German speaking countries. The autobiographical narrator of her text relates a family story, mostly without referring to reliable, documents, sources, or memories, as so many documents and sources had been destroyed during the Shoah and many family members did not survive the catastrophe. Additionally, the family was spread over Central Eastern Europe and murdered in very different locations. The book has been translated into around 20 languages.³ Via translation, Petrowskaja also re-migrated back to Ukraine, by being translated into Ukrainian by the well-known author and translator Yurko Prohasko. Prohasko, living in Lemberg, is also well-known as an expert on German-Ukrainian relations and a commentator on the so-called *Euromaidan* movement. In a talk with

Lesley Vos from the online *Jewish Journal*, Petrowskaja characterized Prochasko's translation as an astonishing way of coming home to a beautiful, but alien home.

I've read the Ukrainian translation of my book [...] It's wonderful: stylish, rhythmic, and tasty. And alien at the same time. You see, it's the same problem with all translations: when you read them, you always have this oh-my-god-what-is-that thought in mind. But the Ukrainian translation is surprisingly warm. And the thing is the language itself, not its separate dialectisms. It's about the tone: it sounds as if people who speak it came from a comfortable and warm world. I don't know if this owes to Yurko Prokhasko himself, but it's the different world where everything becomes cozy. The book doesn't have such coziness, but its translation does. (Vos 2016)

The Ukrainian translation marks a difference because it represents a different language culture, a sort of Ukrainian dream that differs from a very complex reality. Petrowskaja appears to feel "lost and saved" in this translation. It is no return to an origin but seems instead to echo a higher degree of coziness. Petrowskaja, born in Kiev in 1970, into a city with more than 70% people of Ukrainian nationality, where Russian is still the dominant language although a growing tendency to speak Ukrainian and to regard oneself as Ukrainian has been observed since the 1990s. She studied at the University of Tartu, Estonia, and was also awarded research fellowships to study at Columbia University in New York, and Stanford in California. She received her Ph.D. in Moscow. Since 1999, she has been living and working in Berlin. Only there did she start speaking and later writing in German. She views herself as a member of the last Soviet-Russian generation and describes a coincidental personal connection with the leading figure of the October revolution with great irony:

I was born as a part of the state's metabolic cycle, a hundred years after Lenin. I celebrate my birthday together with Lenin, minus a hundred. I knew this would always help me to find my coordinates in the history of the world, but the vitality of the up-and-coming-state...had long since withered away. (Petrowskaja 2018, 31)

This remark underlines a gradual loss of vitality, which is often characteristic of the postmemorial constellation, even if it reflects history in general, in this case the history of the Soviet Union and the succession states. As Helmut Böttiger stated, the Petrowsky family belongs both to the history of the USSR as to a deeply oppositional, rather bourgeois milieu (Böttiger 2014). The author's perception of history focuses on history as a shadow of the past, which is even more threatening in the context of a persecuted and partly annihilated Jewish family in Eastern Europe.

With regard to her German language proficiency, Petrowskaja calls herself “underage” and defines her status as that of a “young German writer” (Bisky 2013). Her relationship with the German language and to language in general is playful with specific attention given to hidden and contradictory meanings. In her book, the assumed meaning of words is sometimes ignored, while alternative arrangements of the material components of the words, namely the letters, appear. One might understand this as a process of lingual research:

With Maybe Esther it was really very complicated—I started to write in Russian first, because it was told to me in Russian and I made notes in Russian. And there were documents and memoirs that existed as a basis in Russian. But gradually the text wanted to be in German. That was not clear from the beginning, it was a process. (Schneider and Krautstengel 2020)

In the first chapter of *Maybe Esther* it is the name of the Canadian company Bombardier, a manufacturer of aircrafts and railway technology that initiates the story of the book. The narrator’s attention is drawn to an advertisement, while waiting for the Berlin–Warsaw Express at Berlin main station, a building that was built in a wasteland, not what you might expect to be the center of a pulsating modern capital. In Petrowskaja’s book, it resembles more a memorial place of the last war. The narrator is reading the letters on the top of the main hall in Berlin main station *Bombardier Willkommen in Berlin* (Petrowskaja 2018, 2). An older man approaches her and immediately delivers a torrent of words on Bombardier which for him is associated with bombing, war and—the destruction of the Jews. The man, later introduced as Sam, a Jew from Teheran who lives in the United States, wonders why Berlin welcomes its guests with such bitter words. The narrator later finds herself together with Sam and his wife in the train to Warsaw as both—she and Sam’s wife—are doing research on the origins of their respective Polish families. This chance group of three happen to be sitting in the Polish train restaurant called WARS. As through the unconsciousness history were reflected in the name of the Polish train restaurants company, the name is acronym derived from the first letters of the words “wagons,” “eating,” and “sleeping” (*Wagon Restauracyjny Sypialny*), and could possibly be read as an allusion to the legendary founder of the Polish capital: Wars. It also echoes, however, the English word “war.” Back in Berlin, the narrator starts to research on Bombardier on the internet, and she learns that Bombardier is starting a new advertising campaign: “Bombardier Your City” *nomen est omen*, but the name itself appears as a doubtful fact in the literal sense. The words reveal a different meaning and thus become symbols of difference, whether they refer to biographical or historical events.

This scene as well as the narrator's associations with and interpretations of brand names and advertising slogans are variations of the topics of war and destruction, serve as an introduction into both the subject as well as into the method of narration. They illustrate the meaning of "war is our antiquity" quoted by Petrowskaja above. It is impossible to narrate the family biography in a linear chronology, rather the text resembles a mosaic, the pieces of which still do not fit together. Although Petrowskaja was the beloved child of a small and somehow happy family, the feeling of loss was already familiar to her from childhood. Instead of reconstructing the family tree by literary means, the text resembles a litany of the dead or missed or at least absent family members. The first main chapter contains a subchapter named *The List*. Here the narrator lists the different names of the closer and more distant relatives and has to recognize the lack of knowledge on the life and the fate of these relatives. What remains of a rich family history is exactly a list of names: Stern, Levi, Heller, Geller, Krzewin, Petrowski is not an original family name, it was chosen as a cover name, a fact that may explain the narrator's tendency to question the words and names. Members of the family lived in Polish Lodz, Cracow, Kalisz, Koło, Warsaw but also in Vienna, Kiev, and Paris. Memory fragments are quoted:

Ruzija attended the university in Vienna, and Juzek studied in Paris, I recall my grandmother saying. I never learnt who Ruzija and Juzek were; they were simply relatives of mine. Maybe it was the other way round: Ruzija studied in Paris and Juzek in Vienna ...And I recall being told that Ruzija and Juzek had to clean the sidewalk with a toothbrush. (Petrowskaja 2018, 19)

This passage from the text suggests that Ruzija and Juzek were also persecuted and murdered during the period of the Shoah. Thus, the narrator underlines belonging to the family of the Shoah victims and her generational status as an afterlife with a postcatastrophic view.

The next chapter *The Recipe* is about an abbreviation (or an anagram) of Cyrillic letters: EBP.KBAC. It is the name of a recipe, one of the very rare family documents that have been saved, and it represents the heritage of Aunt Lida:

When Lida, my mother's older sister, passed away, I came to understand what the meaning of the word *history*. My longing was fully developed, I was ready to submit myself to the windmills of memory, and then she died. I was standing there with bated breath, ready to ask, rooted to the spot, and if this had been a comic book, my speech bubble would have been empty. History begins when there are no more people to ask, only sources. (Petrowskaja 2018, 22)

The recipe is an example for sources, which often are not clear and need interpretation. A concrete source is an everyday object, a sheet of paper with notes how to prepare a drink and consists of an ambiguous abbreviation. EBP.KBAC. It might be: *Evropeiskii* or *Evreiskii Kvas*: European or Jewish Kvas, a liquid or a drink, made out of lettuce, garlic, and water, conserved in a three-liter container: “an innocent utopia of the Russian language and the *urbi et orbi* of my aunt, as though Europe and the Jews were descended from one root” (Petrowskaja 2018, 23). Indeed, the quintessence of the book is to be found in the idea that the narrator’s Jewish family represents the true European idea, a community for which frontiers and languages do not represent barriers. This interpretation refers to the mother family’s profession as teachers of deaf-mute children, a profession they practiced through seven generations “two hundred years long:”

When my mother told me how our ancestors spread out across Europe and founded schools for deaf-mutes in Austria-Hungary, in France and Poland, I recalled the passage ...Abraham begat Isaac Isaac begat Jacob. Jacob begat Judah and his brothers. Judah begat Perez and Zerah with Tamas—and more unfamiliar names. I knew this passage as vaguely as my own genealogy, but it seemed to me that our set of ancestors had no end either. One generation after the other, beyond our line of vision and beyond the horizon of family memory, taught speaking to the deaf-mutes. Do you hear their fervid whispering?

Sh'ma Yisrael, in the morning and the evening, Sh'ma Yisrael, Hear, o Israel, hear me! (Petrowskaja 2018, 41–42)

Thus, the family history appears like a European revenant of the old Jewish, biblical stories. It is characteristic of Petrowskaja’s writing that she combines the lack of family documents with the richness of Jewish traditions so that the one illuminates the other. Similar to the old Jewish genealogy the family trusted in a European genealogy, transcending borders, nations, and languages. A portrait photo of aunt Lida as a young woman, integrated into the text, proofs of a clear resemblance between aunt and author/narrator and underlines the affiliation with the family tradition.

The Shadows of Babi Yar

The more or less hidden significance of the recipe-anagram is a commitment to the European-Jewish or Jewish-European identity. Petrowskaja’s text is not only a family biography made out of blanks, conjectures, mysteries, associations, unanswered questions, unexpected

coincidences, and missing documents, it is also an autobiographical commitment to and engagement for the European-Jewish affiliation. Part of this Jewish affiliation is without any doubt the “guardianship of the Holocaust,” as Eva Hofmann wrote, and Petrowskaja accepts her generation’s role as the “hinge generation,” which tends to transmute “received, transferred knowledge of events [...] into history, or into myth” (Hoffmann 2004, XV). Lida’s grandmother was shot to death at Babi Yar and the descendants of the generation that “received” a traumatic history often come face to face with the missing links among the family memories. The general knowledge of the events of the Holocaust may be widespread, but Petrowskaja’s family history reminds us of the fact, that for thousands of Jewish families this history is rife with blanks and the loss of witness testimonies.

The family identity as teachers for deaf-mutes, a group which is perhaps most in need of teaching, is associated with the well-known biblical saying about “A voice cries in the desert” or “A prophet is without honour in his own country” (Petrowskaja 2018, 41). One might conclude that history did not reward the family for their social engagement and fulfillment of a moral duty. The narrator’s ancestors founded schools for deaf-mute children all over Europe and thus became their advocates. This highly humanistic engagement was brutally ended by persecution or even murder. On the other hand, it seems that Petrowskaja’s family text is motivated by a sense of confidence and a certain optimism, which is also the fruit of the family’s heritage: “We have always taught, my mother said, we have all been teachers, and there is no other path for us” (Petrowskaja 2018, 41). One of the family teachers, Ozjel Krzewin, founded a school in Warsaw and had the reputation of a saint, a savior of children. He left Warsaw during the First World War and was among the thousands of Poles who moved to Kiev, where he also founded a school and taught so-called pogrom-children: orphans who had lost their parents. He was able to fulfill in this way his life’s work, Krzewin never returned to Warsaw but died in 1939 before the German troops occupied Kiev and committed the inconceivable massacre at Babi Yar, Petrowskaja’s text mentions that the name Babi Yar can be translated as “women’s ravine. An oddly sweet name” (Petrowskaja 2018, 163). The narrator herself questions whether her pedagogic heritage follows a broadly interpreted Jewish educational engagement and tradition of assimilated European Jews: “As I saw it, our Jewishness was deaf-mute, and deaf-muteness was Jewish. This was my history and my heritage, yet it was not me” (Petrowskaja 2018, 43).

Petrowskaja’s narration turns her alienation from her Jewish roots into a research project on her family history: In Warsaw, one of the most heavily destroyed cities in Europe, one of the so-called “capitals” of the Second World War, she recognizes the difficulties of tracing her family’s history and experiences an irritating loss of speech:

As a descendant of battlers against muteness, I was ready for action, yet mute. I did not speak any of the languages of my ancestors: not Polish, not Hebrew, not sign language; I knew nothing about the shtetl, or any prayers, I was a novice, at all the disciplines in which my relatives were highly qualified. I used the Slavic languages I knew to divine the Polish, hunches stood in for knowledge, Poland was deaf, I was mute. (Petrowskaja 2018, 88)

But giving speech—therapy and lessons to the deaf-mutes could demonstrate a solid path for learning and understanding, even confronted with the double-catastrophic history of the Polish capital, symbolically linked with the years 1943 and 1944.

The core of Petrowskaja's book is without doubt the chapter on Babi Yar, today part of the Kiev municipal area and even the subway system. In September 1941, at the time when about 37,000 men had been shot in the gorge of Babi Yar within just two days, it was situated outside the city limits. The estimated number of victims at Babi Yar is between one hundred and two hundred thousand. "Babi Yar is part of my history, and I have no other, but I am not here on that account, or not exclusively. There is something that brings me here because I believe that there are no strangers among victims. Here, everybody has someone" (Petrowskaja 2018, 164).

The Babi Yar chapter also deals with Soviet lies and protracted silence on this crime, as well as Stalinist antisemitism that followed the National Socialist antisemitism. However, it was not only the official Stalinist ideology but also the behavior of the Kiev inhabitants which appears dubious to the narrator: "There must have been hundreds, even thousands, of people who saw the Jews as they proceeded through the city" (Petrowskaja 2018, 170) on their way to Babi Yar. Petrowskaja's maternal great-grandmother and her paternal great-grandmother were both shot. The latter is the title figure of the whole text, she is "maybe Esther," because no one has been able to confirm her name. She was called *babushka* [granny] or mother but not by her given name. Between the "intimate" you of Petrowskaja's father, for whom the grandmother remains a concrete person with a fading but still present face, irrespective of her name, and the narrator-perspective there is a generational distance and difference. This is due to the difficulty of the narrator's generation to put a family member without a name in the center of the family memory. Perhaps the loss of the name is because of a trauma barrier and is a symptomatic repressing of memory since the family left the grandmother behind when the German front approached and the family left Kiev. *Babushka*, "maybe Esther"—the title figure—was shot down, killed in the street near her house, which no longer exists. She is the heroine of a blank story without witness:

When Maybe Esther made her way alone, walking against time, there were many invisible witnesses to our story: passers-by, the salesladies in the bakery three steps down, and the neighbors behind the curtains of this densely populated street, unmentioned, faceless masses for the refugee processions. They are the last storytellers. Where did they all move to? (Petrowskaja 2018, 198)

This lack of witnesses for the victims' suffering represents an important aspect of the postcatastrophic constellation. It points to the shadow of history that still determines the postmemorial generation. Confronted with unattained moral demands, they re-enact a vacuum resulting from the lack of testimony. Thus, they express a mourning perspective, since the murdering of the Jews and the destruction of their world remains unforgotten. The Shoah and its shadow also represent radical changes and fractures in the history of Eastern Europe, turning it into a post-catastrophic world. If there were not the positive heritage of passionate teaching, the narrative perspective of the Esther book would certainly be much more pessimistic. As the above quotation shows, the narrator is full of admiration for the passion for teaching deaf-mute children. Whether the family members or the narrator herself are a deaf-mute Jew, whether they have lost their Jewish knowledge in the process of assimilation, they were able to re-integrate children into the human society as a lingual community. Here the narrator recognizes a tradition that should be and can be continued in Europe and elsewhere.

There is a famous memory book in Polish, situated between the Polish, Ukrainian, and Austrian culture that was published in English in New York in 1946. Despite belonging to another period and another language, Józef Wittlin's essay *Mój Lwów* (1946) [My Lviv] is a very warm and detailed portrait of the multicultural city of Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv, its history, its minorities, the richness of different cultures and languages. It also succeeds in presenting an optimistic view of the city and does not concentrate only on reciting violent events, war, and the destruction of men and culture. The work shares the memorial aspect and the postcatastrophic perspective with Petrowskaja's text. Just like Petrowskaja's work, it is written from the perspective of the victims of history, and similar to Petrowskaja, it is written from a trans-generational perspective that combines the pre- and the post-Shoah perspective on Central Europe. The well-known author dedicated the essay to Lwów—Lviv—Lemberg, to the genius of this multicultural city, whose rich past now was to be wiped out by Soviet regime. Wittlin belongs to the generation of the witnesses, whereas Petrowskaja represents the "hinge generation" which did not experience the catastrophe itself. Both authors manage to distill tradition with regard to civilization that survived the catastrophe and to instill a positive energy, connected with processes of lingual and cultural translation within Ukrainian–Russian–Jewish–German communities.

Conclusion

The decisive features of the international success of her Russian-Polish-Ukrainian family biography include the rather optimistic energy in Petrowskaja's text, as well as her fragmentary portrayal of her family and their cultural world, and their engagement beyond national affiliation, surely is one decisive feature of the international success of her Russian-Polish-Ukrainian family biography. The text manages to combine the research perspective of the searching narrator, confronted with very few readily available facts and documents with a precise self-reflection of her literary strategy. The postmemorial family constellation expands to a European perspective, as the uncertain documents and facts set free a vast spectrum of interpretation and translation. Regarding the writing process, Petrowskaja's comments on her linguistic situation as that of an "underage" German author, the fact that she planned to write the text in Russian language are noteworthy. Furthermore, there is her special fascination with the sound of the Ukrainian translation, as well as the plays with letters and words as keys to the historical unconscious, all these features together give the text a fascinating dynamic. It shows that both translation and interpretation are open and productive processes that cannot "release" the history of war and destruction but prevent them from being the main and only historical escape line. Writing, translating, and teaching the deaf-mutes is a very noble human activity as well. It is a matter of perspective to know only a few facts and see them as a flaw or to reflect on this as a literary emancipation by the means of unconscious knowledge.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the figure of Esther within the Jewish tradition. As a historical figure, Esther has not been a verified figure. However, she is an undoubted element in the Jewish tradition, the *Book Esther* undoubtedly belongs to the Jewish *Tanach*. Insofar, tradition is not identical with confirmed historical knowledge and may constitute a framework beyond historical facts. The name Esther itself is a translation, it is the Persian name of the Jewish Hadassa who is said to have saved the Jews from extermination during their Persian Exile.

Notes

- 1 Doris Bachmann-Medick mentions the "translational turn" in her book and refers to James Clifford and others (2016, 175–201).
- 2 Here the turning point characteristic of the catastrophe recedes and it is much more the presentation of a confirmation of the catastrophe as a constant state or rather normalized emergency state of history.
- 3 Many thanks to Anna Kelly, Harper Collins Publishers, for sending me a proof copy of the translation (Petrowskaja 2018).

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14 “*There’s No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye*”: Acts of Seeing and Ethical Aspects in Postmemorial Aesthetics

Magdalena Marszałek

Niewinne oko nie istnieje [*There’s No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye*] is the title of a photographic project by the Polish fine-art photographer Wojciech Wilczyk dealing with the postmemorial visuality of the Shoah.¹ From 2006 to 2009, Wilczyk photographed about three hundred and fifty architectural objects in the Polish provinces: they include former Jewish houses of worship and synagogues that have either fallen into ruin or—changed beyond recognition by modifications over the course of decades—have been used as warehouses or shopping centers, furniture stores, pubs, cinemas, supermarkets, libraries, headquarters for voluntary fire brigades, swimming pools, etc. The 2009 installation consists of a continuous loop of monotone slides and an audio track of conversations the artist held with local residents at the respective sites. The photos, along with documenting the remnants of the historic Jewish presence in Poland, also demonstrate how this heritage was treated over the past 70 years. Yet Wilczyk’s project is more than just a documentation. Its serial nature is significant, as is the bleak composition of the images: all of the objects were photographed from a central perspective, from the viewpoint of an observer standing in front of the building. It is a work about not seeing (or more precisely: about seeing nothing) and an invitation to practice seeing.

The title of Wilczyk’s work also lends itself to being a motto for discussions and polemics embedded within a broader field of the “ethics of seeing and witnessing,” which is reflected in different facets of philosophy as well as cultural anthropology, media studies, postcolonial and gender studies.² The discussions primarily focus on the interdependence of appearance and power, meaning the social constellations and hierarchies that form along cultural practices of seeing. It ultimately relates to the question of the ethical, political and legal responsibilities of the person seeing—as bystander or eyewitness.

In the context of the “postcatastrophic” culture after the Shoah, the question of the ethics of seeing has developed its own specificity and incisiveness, one that resulted from the complex distribution of the visibility and invisibility of the criminal acts themselves. On the one hand,

the perpetrators' efforts to conceal their crimes and erase their tracks stood in opposition to the desire of the same to meticulously document their crimes—also in photos. On the other hand, local communities in the “epicentre of the crime” (Grynberg 2002, 141–182) became direct eyewitnesses to the persecution and killing of Jews—in mass shootings as well as in the extermination camps, which were frequently set up close to populated areas. It is precisely these two aspects—the photographic archives of the perpetrators and the bystanders' eyewitnessing—around which heated debates unfold. They are also of primary interest to postmemorial art, which grapples with the legacy of this visibility and visibility of the Shoah. As different as these two phenomena are, there is nonetheless a common focus that connects the heterogeneous discussions: the question of witnessing that is primarily discussed under ethical premises nowadays (Margalit 2002). In what follows, both questions are briefly discussed: the critical dealing with the archive material as well as with the bystanders' acts of seeing in artistic works. Special attention is given to the processes of seeing connected to the means of reenactment and the artistic dealing with the visibility of topographies.

Perpetrators' Archives and Critical Image Analysis

It is well-known that Claude Lanzmann radically denied the archive photographs of the perpetrators the status of witnesses. His decision to renounce use of Nazi archival material in his monumental film *Shoah* established Shoah survivors as (media) witnesses and heralded the “era of testimony.”³ Georges Didi-Huberman, who took an opposing position on the testimony of archival photographs, polemicized against Lanzmann's dogma in his book about the photographs surreptitiously taken in Auschwitz by members of a *Sonderkommando* (Didi-Huberman 2008). The lively debate about the visual archive of the crimes made one thing especially clear: that a well-founded image critique is necessary instead of an “image ban.” This is essential not just to assess the intensive use of Nazi photographic archives, for instance in documentary films—something that has been going on since the war's end—but also to develop the tools needed for a critical analysis of these materials.

With the growing sensibility for the use of the perpetrators' archival material, artistic works themselves are developing practical approaches and tools for such an image critique. To name a few film examples: Dariusz Jabłoński's 1998 documentary film *Fotoamator* [*Amateur Photographer*] examined hundreds of slides of the ghetto in Lodz—shot by the Nazi hobby photographer Walter Genewein. Jabłoński combined an analysis of the archival materials using cinematic tools with testimonies of survivors of the Lodz Ghetto. On the one hand, the gulf between the experience of the survivors and that of images captured by the perpetrator's camera eye becomes apparent in this confrontation. On the other

hand, however, the photographs record "incidental" details that escape the constructed perspective of the Nazi photographs. Thus—as Ulrich Baer argues—"the photographs do appear to offer us a spectral, haunted kind of evidence of the past that we cannot gain by other means" (Baer 2005, 127–128). This kind of work with a contaminated material both explores and questions its documentary value, going far beyond the intention of the original. Harun Farocki developed another technique for cinematic image analysis. In 2007, in his film *Aufschub* [*Respite*], Farocki turned the material filmed at the Westerbork transit camp in 1944 into an object of investigation: every detail of the silent archival footage is explained, annotated, contextualized and, by way of a new edit, sounded out for its declared and hidden statements.⁴ The critical work here lies in a meticulous examination of what is—intentionally or not—captured on the film material. Yael Hersonski takes a complex analytical approach in *A Film Unfinished*, her 2010 film about the Nazi archival footage of the Warsaw Ghetto. Along with filmic image analysis and an archeological research about the genesis of the Nazi propaganda film in 1942, Hersonski also includes survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto in it: the director films the survivors watching the film produced on behalf of the Nazis. In doing so—as Sigrid Weigel noted in her analysis of Hersonski's film—she re-creates an act of witnessing by making the viewers of her film watch the survivors who are being confronted with the archival material (Weigel 2016, 177–193).

The films by Jabłoński, Farocki, and Hersonski reveal the critical potential of artistic image analysis when dealing with contaminated archive materials. The visual material of the perpetrators is the subject of intense research and investigation. As in a laboratory, the artists dissect the material, investigate its visual signs as well as the conditions under which the material was shot and thus create a distance to the contaminated archive. Their films are postmemorial artifacts that address viewers who only have access to the past through the media images. An important question that arises here is that of the seeing by the film viewers. The films make the viewers take a critical look at the original material and reflect, not least by confronting them with the survivors' testimonies. They also force the audience to face up to the ambiguities of the material. The implicit seeing of the film viewer as "secondary eye-witness" is therefore of paramount importance for the critical analysis of the archival images. This is most clearly demonstrated by Hersonski's work—by explicitly staging the act of eyewitnessing (survivors watching the ghetto film, viewers watching the survivors watching the film) and thus constructing a complex structure of reflection on images, acts of seeing and witnessing. In contrast to many documentary postwar productions that used the archive material uncommented, the films mentioned above are concerned with the material itself and its testimonial potential which can be activated in critical viewing. It can therefore be

said: it is only through the critical analysis of the images from contaminated photographic and filmic material in the Nazi archives that such images may be granted the status of visual testimony.

The Bystander's Eyewitnessing

Just as the perpetrators' photographic archive doesn't represent a source that can readily be given the status of (visual) testimony, the bystanders, as eyewitnesses, are not necessarily witnesses in an ethical sense. The collective experience of spectatorship to the systematic murder of Jews during the German occupation of East and Central Europe is associated with a whole spectrum of behaviors toward the victims—between complicity and assistance—in which grey zones of ethical uncertainties manifest themselves. Eyewitnessing thus does not directly lead to witnessing. The latter is a legally and/or ethically motivated action that is associated with the act of seeing but must by no means automatically follow this act. As Shoshana Felman observed in her study on Lanzmann's film, the film illustrates the "different performances of the act of seeing:" according to Felman, the irreconcilability of what the victims, the perpetrators, and the Polish eyewitnesses saw "dissolves the possibility of any *community of witnessing*" (Felman 1991, 42).

In Raul Hilberg's triad of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, it is the latter that form the least well-delineated category of participants in the Shoah (Hilberg 1992). In the Polish edition of Hilberg's book, the word bystanders was translated as *świadkowie* [witnesses], which meanwhile initiated a critical discussion of the term—also concerning current Holocaust research in Poland (Hilberg 2007).⁵ The question of the ethical aspects of seeing and witnessing in the context of the Shoah culminates in the figure of the bystander. Along with the question of the possible and impossible witnessing of bystanders, "being there" and "seeing" as an historical experience raises additional questions, for instance about its place in collective memory: In which way and form does a society of bystanders and their descendants, for example Polish society, "process" this historic, formative experience? How does postmemorial art deal with historic and contemporary visibility, both the visibility of violence and the visibility of the vestiges of violence?

Among the most important works pursuing these questions over the past years in Poland is a seminal monograph on Polish theater in light of the Holocaust published in 2013 by the theater scholar Grzegorz Niziołek. Taking the theatricality of the position of the bystander as his starting point, Niziołek analyzed the articulation of this experience in Polish postwar theater. The pervasive experience of being a bystander of the Holocaust—itself not lacking in the theatricality of the spectator—was quickly suppressed after the war. It reasserted itself as the return of the repressed in Polish postwar theater, including the avant-garde theater of

Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. Postwar theater was greatly influenced by the experience of excessive visibility and at the same time the erasure of all signs of the events witnessed. That does not mean that we are necessarily referring to theater that aims to further remembrance or mourning. To the contrary, Niziołek wrote about the psychological phenomenon of compulsive repetition and analyzed works in which scenes of violence, humiliation, and destruction evoke images of the Holocaust without directly referring to historical events. At the same time, the preponderance of references to the Holocaust in avant-garde theater is countered by the universalist aspirations of non-mimetic art, which prefers to metaphorize historical references or to grotesquely drain them of all meaning. Particularly symptomatic, according to Niziołek, are tense, sometimes sadomasochistic, relations between actors and spectators, as well as putting the audience into the position of voyeuristic or mocking gawkers, an element found within both Grotowski (among others *Studium o Hamlecie* from 1964 [*Study on Hamlet*]) and Kantor (among others *Kurka Wodna* from 1967 [*Gallinule*]). Empathy and with it (belated) witnessing were only able to be expressed after decades of silence. The postmemorial, affective revival of the past made it possible to thematize the ambivalence of the position of eyewitness to the Holocaust not only in public discourse after the 1980s but also in film and in the arts.

It would be interesting to search for traces of the bystander experience not just in theater but also in Polish performance art, particularly as reenactment has represented an important device for this art form since 2000. One of the most important artists of his generation, Artur Żmijewski, experimented intensively with the means of reenactment in his works in the early 2000s, including his highly controversial as well as relevant for the discussed topic 2004 video piece *80064*, in which a former Auschwitz prisoner gets his camp number re-tattooed. Żmijewski's work is not simply addressed "to" but also "against" the viewers of his artistic experiment. It places the audience into the discomforting position of eyewitnessing an extremely morally questionable act. The destabilization of the spectator role belongs to the inherent concept of artistic reenactment; Żmijewski's repetitive experiment utilizes this effect to transform watching into a shameful, "guilty-making" act of seeing, to transform viewers into bystanders.⁶

The visual aspect that is constitutive for the ambivalent position of the bystander encompasses various acts of seeing as well as non-seeing and the cognitive and ethical consequences involved as part of it. In the following, I briefly discuss three artistic projects centered on the problem of visibility and seeing that very impressively deal with the question of the possibility of the witnessing of bystanders and of future generations, who are faced with the legacy of the bystander experience. All three projects were developed during the time of intense examination—and not just artistic—of the role of direct eyewitnesses to the Shoah, examinations that were

characteristic for the public discourse in Poland after the year 2000. Firstly, they illuminated a generational gap in the approach to (still) biographical or (already) historical experience. Secondly, the works illustrate virtually opposing strategies in postmemorial visual art that are by no means exclusively based on media images—as “prostheses” of memory (Landsberg 2004)—but instead also develop their own approaches to the (in)visibility of remains and material traces.

Memory—Reenactment—Photography

Popular and artistic reenactment is based on the idea of corporeal re-creation, meaning the performative “repetition” of a past event (Schneider 2011). This specifically includes media representations of the past such as photographs or films that are reconstructed in a performance of reenactment (Otto 2012, 229–254). The critical examination of media source materials is often the focus of these repetition experiments.⁷ Notwithstanding how much consideration goes into handling the media images in the performance of the reenactment, there is a strong affective effect in these highly mimetic representations of bringing about a “presence” of that which is in the past. As briefly commented upon before, one result of this is uncertainty about the role of the spectator, who is transformed into an “eyewitness” (Sasse 2012, 85–113). Furthermore, a special effect of such performances is that they intervene in the existing cultural archive of images by experimenting with the media representations and leaving behind new images themselves. Popular and artistic reenactments are mostly meticulously documented and the photographs and video footage are intermingled with archival images on the internet.

The reenactments aim at a bodily “experience” and performative visualization of a past recorded within the cultural image archive. As a postmemorial strategy, they expand or unsettle the archive through images that they themselves produce. In a photographic installation by Polish art photographer Tadeusz Rolke, however, the reenactment is used to visualize a childhood memory instead of as a means to performatively “enliven” the media images (Figure 14.1).

The year is 1942. A hot August. I’m spending the holidays yet again at the estate of Uncle Salinger in Zacisze, located on the Warsaw–Vilnius railway connection. Every day I see passing trains. Some of them are going from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka. This morning I met three local farmers on the railway embankment. They stood, bowed low, over the tracks. I got closer to them and saw a dead person, a woman, not yet old. She lay barefoot there. Her face was covered with her hair. She died jumping out of the moving train. The men grabbed her arms and legs and carried her to the fence separating the railway embankment from a private



Figure 14.1 Tadeusz Rolke, *Zacisze*, Installation within the festival *Singer's Warsaw* 2010.

property. They dug a hole and buried her. I already know that I will never forget the place. I am thirteen years old and my name is Tadeusz Rolke. (Rolke 2010)

Rolke's photographic installation *Zacisze* was exhibited during the Jewish culture festival in Warsaw in autumn 2010. The installation consisted of a large (2.5 × 2 meter) black-and-white photograph, hung in a small room on Próżna Street. The photograph showed a scantily clad, unconscious, or dead woman, lying on a set of train tracks. A poster at the entrance included an introductory text with the above childhood memory and a small photo of Tadeusz Rolke from the year 1942. In an interview published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Rolke explains how the photograph came to be: the memory image was staged on decommissioned

tracks in Warsaw with an old 6 x 9 cm-format camera. Rolke calls his project “my testimony” and also “an attempt at reconstructing my experience” and he employs a photographic metaphor when talking about the scene he remembers from his childhood: “This photograph hasn’t faded” (Rolke 2010). The image was “developed” almost 70 years later—in a photographic reenactment.

This memory picture was reconstructed and photographically recorded as a staging. The interaction between an imaginative memory picture, its staging and technical fixation complicate the photographic act as it expands the iconic act of photography with a performative act, thereby unsettling the photographic reference; the event, recorded in memory, is replaced by a staging after the fact. Rolke’s installation is one of many artistic reenactment projects that performatively reconstruct images in order to immediately (again) cause them to become a technical image in the living embodiment: photographed, filmed, digitized. In the case of Rolke’s installation, however, it is not a re-staging of a media representation, but of an internal image that is “externalized”—that is made visible and is exhibited in a performative and photographic act. After 70 years, a (child) eyewitness becomes a witness by transferring the event from the latency of his memory into the evidence of the exhibited photographic image. And even if this is a subjective memory referring back to a singular event and his eyewitnessing of it, Rolke’s photographic image iconographically picks up on a motif that is strongly present in Polish cultural memory—particularly in literary transmission. The leap from a train heading to an extermination camp, which either saves an escapee’s life or becomes a different type of death, is a common motif both in autobiographical literature by Holocaust survivors and in testimonial literature of eyewitnesses.⁸ For the latter, Zofia Nałkowska’s story *Przy torze kolejowym* [*By the Railway Tracks*] is formative, not least because her collection of short stories, *Medaliony* (1946) [*Medallions*, 1956], has been required reading in Polish schools for decades.⁹

In a way, Rolke’s idea to photograph the childhood memory picture using a reenactment turns upside down the postmemorial logic of dealing with photographs, which are considered the most important medium for imaginative access to the past (Hirsch 1997). With Rolke, the photograph is the result of recollecting via imagination and not its starting point. The project uses the potential of visual realization of the reminiscence in the performance, yet at the same time, the illusory instants of the approach are visible. What is illusory about the photograph of the performed reminiscence stems from the fact that the photographic reference—“that’s how it was” (to quote Roland Barthes)—is a deceptive result of staging (Barthes 1981). Rolke’s photograph refers back to an imaginative image that—arranged as a *tableau vivant*—was transformed into a photograph. A *tableau vivant* is a specific image act (Bredekamp 2010, 109–121) based on the exchange of bodies and image: in the case of Rolke’s reenactment, the path leads from real

experience to photography through a living image (tableau vivant) in which the memory image is staged. Rolke's photograph has no traces of Lacanian Real to which it refers; the only thing it is indexically connected to is the reality of the staging alone. Exhibited as an artwork in a public space, the photograph bears witness to an individual memory of a dramatic event, yet at the same time inevitably evokes the motif of the corpse on a railway embankment, well known in Polish collective memory. However, the motif returns in Rolke's photographic reenactment as a postmemorial phantasm: the female "beautiful corpse"¹⁰ in the photo is both macabre and simultaneously almost erotically attractive, affording ambivalent visual pleasure. The photography becomes an aesthetic sign—particularly due to the severed connection to the Real through its mimetic illusionism—in which the uncanniness of the historic experience is sublimated in a scopophilic manner.

Topographies—Remains

A counterweight to postmemorial art that works with the medial "protheses" of memory is formed by artistic investigations of material traces of the past, such as the photo project mentioned in the title of my essay: *There Is No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye*. Wojciech Wilczyk's project is both about looking as an activity as well as about the act of seeing in the perceptive and cognitive sense. Wilczyk's project no longer focuses on the visibility of the violence itself, but instead on the visibility of its traces as well as on the ability to see and to remember. The work also questions the possibility of an uncommitted—"innocent"—eyewitness.

There Is No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye joins the ranks of contemporary artistic explorations of Polish topographies, in their present condition, as sites holding material as well as organic remains and traces of violence. The topographical explorations are not limited to—to quote Aleida Assmann—"traumatic sites," i.e. sites like Auschwitz which obstruct the formation of meaning (Assmann 1999, 328). Going back to Claude Lanzmann's insight into Polish topographies of the Shoah, many artistic practices start from the idea of "speaking landscapes."¹¹ As postmemorial projects, however, the works focus neither on the media transmission of images nor on the photo archive as a problematic legacy, which represents an important domain of postmemorial art. Instead, these topographically interested works identify a presence of the past in the present, which not least challenges sensory perception, seeing in particular. What guides these works are concepts of topographic, tangible, material, and organic remains as a repository of the past.

This also holds true for Elżbieta Janicka's photographic installation *Miejsca nieparzyste* [*The Odd Places*] from 2003 and 2004. It is composed of six square photographs with white surfaces and a black border, where the brand name AGFA as well as the number and photosensitivity



Figure 14.2 Wojciech Wilczyk, *Nowy Tomyśl, synagogue*, 11.05.2017, from the series *There's No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye*.

of the photographic plate can be seen. They are photographic images of the air, made—as one can infer from the captions—at six places in the former extermination camps Majdanek, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Chełmno, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. In an interview, Janicka comments on this work: “The ashes circulated in the air. We breathe this air. And the wind, the clouds, the rain? The ashes are in the earth, in the streams, on the meadows, in the forests—and it succumbs to an uninterrupted recycling” (Janicka 2016).

Janicka’s work, which takes up the austere forms of modern, avant-garde art, does not target anti-referential abstraction with its minimalistic gesture. Nor does the topos of unrepresentability apply, even if it is evoked by the emptiness of the photographic images. The photographs capture something that can no longer be seen by the naked eye: the air and the airborne dust, which the work refers to in a conceptional manner; airborne dust as a minimal, circulating organic trace mirrored indexically in the photographic image. Janicka’s work is situated at the outermost margin of photographic visualization, and indeed in a paradoxical mode, because it shows something that cannot be seen, but for which the photographic image vouches through the physical connection with the referent. This photographic project—in contrast to Wilczyk’s—is not about

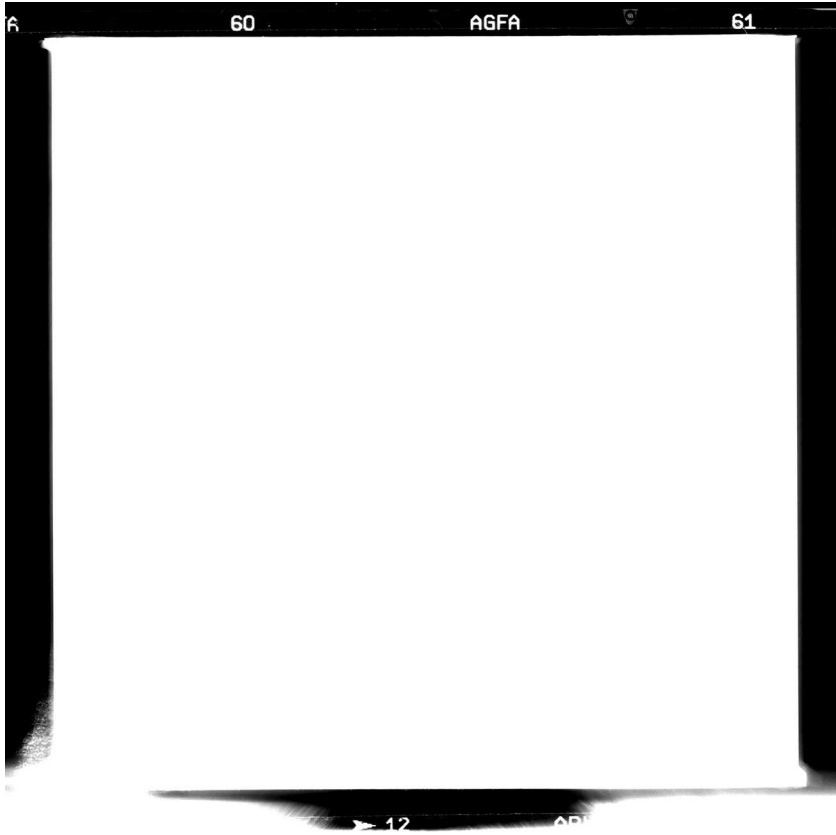


Figure 14.3 Elżbieta Janicka, *Bełżec*, 03.07.2003, from the series *Miejsce nieparzyste*.

the practice of seeing: a recognizing and knowing seeing that works against everyday overlooking and forgetting. There is nothing that you can physically overlook in Janicka’s photographs—the air particles cannot be seen. But what you can overlook is the moral or political responsibility that results solely from the fact of living close to the locations of catastrophe. With her work, Janicka likewise metaphorically references the ubiquity of catastrophe in the postcatastrophic cultural imagination.

Topographic-photographic works like those by Wilczyk and Janicka address the act of seeing as an ethic act in the service of a human memory, which is bound to the residual visibility or even invisibility of material traces. It is anything but incidental that the artistic insistence on looking and seeing is directed at a society that has only recently begun to grapple intensely with its historic experience of the forced eyewitnessing of mass extermination and its not-only-forced complicity.

Notes

- 1 See exhibition catalog: Wilczyk (2009).
- 2 Jean-Paul Sartre provided a crucial impulse for discussions about the power of seeing with his phenomenology of seeing in *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (1943) [*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1956]. Drawing on the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey, and John Berger (amongst others) introduced the issue of seeing and witnessing into media and art analysis. For recent contributions from the perspective of postcolonial critique, see Mirzoeff (2011).
- 3 This terminology stems from Felman (1991, 39–81) See also Wieviorka (1998).
- 4 For Farocki's work with images, see amongst others Pantenburg (2001, 13–41).
- 5 For criticism of the translation of the word *bystanders* as witnesses (*świadkowie*), see amongst others: Gross (2014, 885–889) and Janicka (2014/2015, 148–226).
- 6 I thoroughly commented on this work as well as on the wave of popular and artistic reenactments in Poland as a postmemorial strategy in Marszałek (2016, 127–144).
- 7 Regarding artistic reenactments see amongst others Lütticken (2005); Blackson (2007, 28–40); Arns and Horn (2007).
- 8 The motif can be found in the prose of Adolf Rudnicki, Stanisław Wygodzki, Józef Hen, and Hanna Krall amongst others.
- 9 For an in-depth analysis of Rolke's installation in the context of Nałkowska's story as well as a later film of the story by Andrzej Brzozowski see Marszałek (2018, 251–265).
- 10 Inquiries into the female corpse as both morbid and aesthetically appealing representation see Bronfen (1987).
- 11 Amongst others, Elżbieta Janicka's, Rafał Jakubowicz's, and Mirosław Bałka's topographic-photographic works as well as Joanna Rajkowska's room interventions in Warsaw.

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15 Who's Afraid of Walter Benjamin? Dealing with the Problem of "Universalization" of Shoah Narration in Czech Literature

Agata Firlej

Introduction

First of all, the "postcatastrophic" approach could be observed long before the catastrophe of the Shoah. In the following, it shall be argued that the recognition of the Holocaust as one of the many genocides that have happened, happen, and inevitably will happen in the history of the mankind is a sign of a "postcatastrophic" attitude and it has accompanied humanity since time immemorial (let us say: since the very first genocide). The practice of describing the Holocaust as a unique event can be considered an attempt to save faith in the moral progress of mankind—a progress whose existence was questioned by Walter Benjamin. The second attitude is often connected to a vulnerability of illusion of retrotopia, which will be subsequently demonstrated.

At this point three concepts converge: universalization, post-catastrophe, and nostalgia. The loss of illusions about the possibility of moral improvement of humanity means at the same time that utopia is becoming excluded—and the denial of utopia is nostalgia, the conviction that what is good has already been and has passed.

Crucial here is the term "universalization"—as found in the title—used in relation to the Shoah should be clarified, as it has many various meanings. In conjunction with the word "trivialization" it is generally considered a pejorative term, a way of "diluting" the essence of the Nazi crimes. In practice this implies the use of formulations such as "Rwanda Holocaust," "Romani Holocaust," or "Animal Holocaust." Noteworthy book titles that can be mentioned here, are for example *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (2010) by David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, or *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation* (1986) by Richard C. Lukas. Critics of this kind of extension of the original meaning of the Shoah—like Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989)—claim, that this "dejudaization" of the term "Holocaust" leads to the neglect of the antisemitic ideology that preceded and prepared the very event. On the other hand, several other

researchers—such as Timothy Snyder in his book *The Black Earth: Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015)—prove that every ideology only provides the arguments for the decisions previously made by perpetrators. However, their true motivation lies elsewhere—for instance in economical or as Snyder defines it: “ecological” reasons. In fact, these reasons are universal can be used elsewhere and in every time.

Another model—in some ways a similar—of the universalization of the Shoah, without using the word Shoah or Holocaust, was applied in postwar education. In the Soviet Union (SU) and in the East and Central European, countries dependent on the SU, which were politically supporting the Palestinian side in the Suez Crisis of 1956 as well as the Six-Day War in 1967. The narration of the historical events in school completely ignored the Shoah in its meaning as a crime against the Jewish nation—for example in communist Poland and Czechoslovakia the pupils were taught, that millions of “Poles/Czech/Slovaks” died in concentration camps. As Catherine Chatterley describes it, the universalization of the Shoah in western postwar education was motivated differently, but the result was, paradoxically, similar to a certain degree:

The primary approach of Holocaust education has been to universalize (and, in some cases, to Christianize) the experience of Jewish suffering in an attempt to make the subject matter accessible and meaningful to non-Jews. This was perceived as necessary after the war due to the antisemitic nature of postwar Western culture. There was a general hope that non-Jews would somehow imbibe that antisemitism was wrong from reading these stories and eventually from a curriculum that focused on the general evils of discrimination and racism and that promoted a doctrine of universal human rights. (Chatterley 2012)

In a review of the various models of universalization of the Holocaust research works that locate the Shoah in one row with different genocides of 20th century (e.g. Armenian genocide in Turkey, Algerian massacres, genocides in Africa, and in the former Yugoslavia) should not be missing, especially considered from the perspective of collective memory and narrativization. This is the case of Polish researcher Arkadiusz Morawiec, who wrote the book *Literatura polska wobec ludobójstwa* (2018) [*Polish Literature and Genocide*] or conference volume *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord* (2002) [*Remembered Crimes. Confronting the Holocaust and Genocide*] edited by Norbert Frei and Volkhard Knigge. The researchers indicate a sort of memory community of the nations that became victims, bystanders, or perpetrators of genocides. Many ways of remembering historical events of Holocaust by traumatized victims or witnesses inspired some researchers, like Anka Grupińska, to proclaim

the need of plurality in historical narration what also in fact implicitly points out universalization. She wrote about the confessions of Shoah bystanders: "Each was bringing its own truth and it was full-fledged" (Grupińska 2014, 12). The approaches described above will be increasingly frequent due to the generational change and time distance between us and these events.

The focus on individual fates and suffering of the victims of the Shoah, and paying no special attention to their Jewish origins can be considered as yet another model of universalization. Frank Ankersmit's remarks concerning the Yad Vashem memorial—which also can act as an example of such a type of the Shoah universalization—are very useful in this context (Ankersmit 2002). The researcher describes the special experience of a visitor who can feel lost and disorientated between many different memorials which create the labyrinth of Yad Vashem memorial place. According to his interpretation, such accumulation of various and equivalent memorials encourages to concentrate on victims as individual human beings. This is a way to oppose dehumanization.

However, this chapter analyzes yet a different meaning of the term "universalization," which can be also be expressed by the terms "parabolization" or "metaphorization" of the Shoah. Hanna Krall, a Jewish-Polish writer and one of the survivors of the Shoah, defined and commented this kind of universalization:

The stories from the Holocaust time have a great power of universalization like the Bible or the Greek myths. People through such stories will talk about love, betrayal, cowardice, heroism. Maybe comic books, films, opera or ballet will appear? That's good. This should be told in many different ways. (Wodecka 2013, 14)

This model of the universalization can be considered a manifestation of an anti-positivistic¹ approach to the history of humanity as well as counter-Enlightenment. It means that the unique event of the Shoah—or, more broadly, all Nazi crimes against the Jews—is engraved into the historical and philosophical image of mankind, in which there is no place for continuous moral progress.

Within the context of Czech culture, such an approach to the problem of the Shoah commemoration was present in the poetic volumes *Prometheova játra* (1955) [*Prometheus' Liver*] and *Černá lýra* (1966) [*The Black Lyre*] by Jiří Kolář², and in the same author's only two plays *Mor v Athenách* (1958) [*Pest in Athens*] and *Chléb náš vezdejší* (1958) [*Our Daily Bread*]. In these works, the author—amongst other things—juxtaposes quotations from the testimonies of the Shoah survivors, entering the Shoah into the narration about different genocides and this way writing down the history of the human wickedness.³ The

thematization of the Jewish fates that occurred during the war, especially in Theresienstadt ghetto, is also a main part of Arnošt Goldflam's dramaturgy. Researching Goldflam, who is a representative of the Second Generation, Zuzana Augustová describes its specific duality, which can be interpreted as a method of metaphorization of the Shoah:

Goldflam connects his longing for relief, for changing the social atmosphere and gaining the freedom in life with some deeper layers of the work. In these layers the author's awareness of being a member of the [Jewish—AF] nation experienced with the worst persecutions in the history appears. The social critics transforms into the existential matters in the deepest stratum of the work. (Augustová 2010, 477)

As previously noted, the understanding of the universalization as parabolization or metaphorization of the Shoah has its roots in prewar philosophy—represented by the name of Walter Benjamin, who inspired Theodor Adorno, and other representatives of the Frankfurt School, who could be referred to here as well, for example Max Horkheimer. In the first part of this essay, I refer to Walter Benjamin and to Bauman's reception of his philosophy, juxtaposing this approach with the theater plays written in Theresienstadt ghetto by the Czech-Jewish authors, who—still mid-catastrophe—did not have full knowledge of the essence and scale of the Shoah, but parabolized the experience of Nazi crimes in the same spirit as the indicated philosophers did—as well as a post-catastrophic spirit.

Against the Idea of the Permanent Progress of Humanity

"There are no periods of decline," writes Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* (Benjamin 1999, 458). And in another place the same author wrote:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "emergency situation" in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency; and our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve. (Benjamin and Zohn 2003, 392)

The same idea can be found in Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), one of the widely discussed contributions to a critique of modern Enlightenment legacy and in consequence the specific way of perception of the Shoah. In the ongoing discussion between supporters and opponents of the idea of the Shoah as an "extraordinary" phenomenon in

the history of humanity, Bauman definitely takes a stand on the side of the “opponents” (against, for example, Jean Améry). The “enthronement” of nature, the conceit of scientists convinced by the possibility of gaining the objective knowledge regarding all spheres of human existence was intertwined, as argues the sociologist, with moral categories of worthless/worthlessness of some individuals and nations—and finally opened the door to phrenological and physiological interventions, to racism and all discriminatory philosophies. Programming, repairing, and transforming of mankind has been camouflaged with the postreligious ideal of striving for perfection. Later Bauman’s theses became for many different reasons the subject of criticism uttered by Yehuda Bauer, Henryk Grynberg, Jerzy Szacki. However, they also became an important reference point in all discussions about the Shoah. When demanding to put the legacy of the Enlightenment and the Holocaust in the center of humanistic research, Bauman was indirectly led by Benjamin’s train of thought, expressing the conviction that the only progress in history is the development of skills and wisdom—but not the development of humanity itself. That means it cannot be said that there exists any moral progress of the mankind. Instead, there is a civilizational progress that is neither to be irreversible nor essential. Bauman’s diagnostic text, fed by the previously presented conceptions of Benjamin, was to show the Shoah as a consequence of an uneven “progress”—that is characterized by the growing gap between the moral and civilizational level.⁴ It may be assumed that if Benjamin had survived the war and had had an opportunity to interpret the later texts of culture, he would have used the same method. His perception of history was closely connected with interpreting the cultural phenomena.

Researchers studying the events of the Shoah are divided into two main groups: supporters and opponents of depicting the Holocaust as a manifestation of the timeless human ability to commit crimes against rejected groups or societies. The first group (naming only representatives with a Polish and a Czech background)—include Marek Zaleski, Hanna Krall, Arkadiusz Morawiec, Jan Čulík, and Petr Málek, for example—present a way of thinking similar to the Polish sociologist’s and also to Benjamin’s. The second group—consisting of Henryk Grynberg, Michał Głowiński, Henryk Markiewicz, Maria Janion, Jiří Holý or Štěpán Balík in the Czech Republic—reject it or in some way, metaphorically “is afraid” of said way of thinking. Amongst other things, the reasoning of the group opposing the perception of the Shoah as one of the events in the long row of precedential phenomena is based on a kind of pragmatism. They claim any positive social change to be impossible, without accepting the uniqueness of Holocaust. In her book *Hero, Conspiracy, and Death: The Jewish Lectures* (2014), Maria Janion proves that the uniqueness of Shoah forces us to revise many beliefs, and she gives as examples the cultural patterns of “dignified death” versus “undignified death.” Almost 30 years after the publication of Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, much has changed:

in Western social studies the Holocaust became a central topic of the social and artistic discourse. In East and Central Europe the process of its reception has been going on since and is still far from completion. In Poland or in Czech Republic the presence of the Jews in history and culture could be described by using the metaphor of “the internal ghetto” (Holý and Balík 2016, 7). Such a “state” affects the reflection on the Shoah, which is still limited to a rather narrow circle of researchers. In the book *Cizí i blízcí* (2016) [*Close Strangers*], edited by Jiří Holý, the aforementioned phrase is related to Czech society, or as the editor summarizes:

Czech historical memory is petrified in an onomastic material. Almost every major city in Czech has a Lidice street, however a Terezín street appears rarely. In the big cities, such as Brno, Ostrava, Plzeň, Ceske Budejovice—unlike the Lidice street—Terezín street does not appear at all. (Holý and Balík 2016, 432)

Despite some delay, a strong presence of the Holocaust matters can be observed in East and Central European discourses since the late 1980s. For social reasons, it underwent processes similar to the ones previously in the Western countries (such as discussions about the way of mourning, status of witness’ testimonies, category of truth, etc.).

The Escape into the Illusion of Golden Age

Zygmunt Bauman’s last book, *Retrotopia* (2017), shows that the criticism of the Enlightenment and the centralization of the Shoah in the social discourse are the consequences of postcatastrophic trauma, which engulfed the societies and influenced the career of the retrotopical concepts.

[...] retrotopia derives its attraction, among other factors, from the “never again” sense that the future may, and is likely to, “[...] do it again [...]” Centrality of the Holocaust to contemporary political and historical discourse, which has really come to the fore over the past 20 years, [...], wouldn’t otherwise happen. It testifies to the collapse of confidence in the future’s ability to raise moral standards [...]. (Bauman 2017)

A point of view similar to Bauman’s is expressed by the authors of the volume *Po Zagładzie. Narracje postkatastroficzne w literaturze polskiej* (2015) [*After the Shoah. Postcatastrophic Narrations in Polish Literature*]:

If we recognize the call “Never again Auschwitz!” as the basis of preventative and corrective narration, its alternative will be the narrations which show an incurable world. In such narrations the life after catastrophe doesn’t come back to the rule and the

rule doesn't come back to life—the death prevails so strongly that the rebuilding of life [...] is impossible. (Artwińska et al. 2015, 10)

Living in an incurable world means turning towards the idealized past. Living in an “unrepairable” world implies the will of its inhabitants to return to a fake, idealized past, preceded by the retroaction of the creators of the retrotopic narration who ex post establish teleological connections between various past events. In this context it is worth to recall Hayden White's observations made in the 1980s: that history is governed by the same laws as narration—selection, dramaturgy, authorship, etc.—and that its understanding is in some way imposed and emotional and ideological created (White 1987). These findings also correspond with Aleida Assmann's remarks that images and other forms of representation replace memory and create a new way of remembering, and therefore influence the collective sense of identity. Culture is, after all, not just a product but also a producer. Such a conclusion could also be drawn from Ernst van Alphen's interpretations of the second and third generation of survivors' creative activities. Examining the notion of “obscenity” in Roe Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995–1997)⁵ prompts the recipient to immorally identification with a character belonging to the circle of perpetrators. Van Alphen commented it:

We are taught how to mourn as we are taught how to paint. There is nothing ‘real’ or ‘natural’ about it. The language of our lament is not ours, it is given to us. [...] It's a game. A game we can play well now. We are good at this and we know that. We teach others to be good at it as well. (van Alphen 2005, 195)

The realization that mourning as well as the ethical traditions of Shoah thematization are “clichés” and “given languages,” brings van Alphen close to Jacques Lacan.

Wartime Czech-Jewish Theater Plays Facing Catastrophe

Let us examine some Czech plays in which Jewish suffering during the war is parabolized with regard to the moral development of the society. The first one, *Hledáme strašidlo* (1943) [*Looking for a Monster*, 2001], is comprised of 12 pages and was written for a puppet show in Theresienstadt ghetto by the 14-year-old Hanuš Hachenburg who was murdered in Auschwitz one year later. The play was never performed in the ghetto theater, but there probably were public readings. After the war, the text was buried in Terezín and Jerusalem archives, until the late 1990s, when it was re-discovered by Gary Friedman, who performed it in his Cape Town puppet theater under its translated title in 2001. Later he also made a documentary film about the history of the play and the fate of its young author. American Slavic scholar

Lisa Peschel included the play in her bilingual, Czech-German anthology *Divadelní texty z terezínské ghetto 1941–1945/Theatertexte aus dem Ghetto Theresienstadt 1941–1945* (2008) [Theatre Plays from Theresienstadt Ghetto] and thus the text symbolically returned to the Czech culture. In Hachenburg's allegoric story, the King—a tyrant—wants to subdue his subjects' revolutionary tendencies and propensities to independent thinking once and for all. To achieve this, he imprisons Death and presents himself as the one and only savior of mankind. Fear of the future—caused and symbolized by the Bogeyman called “Death”—is to induce people to glorify the past, but not just any version of the past, only the one retroactively constructed by the ruler. In short, in the play the Death serves the King in helping to put his retrotopia—a utopia located in the past—into practice. Nostalgia, as the main component of retrotopia, usually preceded the revolutions, as remarks an American Slavic scholar Svetlana Boym (Bauman 2017, 2). Read in such a way, Hachenburg's drama tells about the Nazism, which founded and at the same time was founded by the following image of the past: the unjustly crushed Reich that must be restored. The initials of his name and his temperament are not the only things the king, Analfabet Huba, shares with Adolf Hitler but also his retrotopic strategy. Retrotopia is stuck between utopia and dystopia: on the one hand it refers to a retroactive manipulated and relaunched past as an utopian vision, on the other hand its driving force is—unlike in an utopia—the absolute rejection of the possibility of moral progress and the conviction that the future will be even worse than both past and present. The future is seen as a Dantean Hell behind a gate bearing the inscription: “abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Benjamin's *Angelus novus*—or more precisely: the angel from Paul Klee's drawing interpreted by Benjamin—turns back and, looking at the terrifying future, that cannot be improved, he escapes into the past. Hachenburg's play was charged with allusions to the Nazi system and at the same time it showed universal mechanisms of social interactions. In a condensed and carnival-like manner, the author pointed out the human susceptibility to manipulation conducted by a so-called authority with retrotopic vision. The artistic convention of the puppet show, strongly present in the Czech theater tradition, used here offered the moving contrast between the monstrous reality of the ghetto and the children's carnival setting. It was the only one puppet show about death and cruelty of the war written in Theresienstadt.

Remaining in the circle of the wartime Theresienstadt writers, the drama *Dým domova* (1943, 2008) [*The Smoke of Home*, 2013], written by Zdeňek Eliáš and Jiří Stein in the same ghetto and in the same year as Hachenburg's play, should also be mentioned. The work is a historical allegory, set in the Thirty Years' War. The characters of the play replicate the universal experiences of the prisoners of all times: they recall lost homes, loved ones, freedom. They perceive the reality as a “frozen time” which will start to flow again just after their return. One morning

it appears that two out of four could escape. Thus, they are forced to make a decision: Who gets the chance to flee and why that specific person? Who deserves to be saved? A conflict and a complicated psychological game begins, culminating in Casselius' painful, yet mercilessly rational exclamation:

There is another world outside these walls! Do you hear me? Another world! Your comfort, your journeys and joyful feasts in Waldau are gone! There will be no time for the pious meditations in quiet church garden in Rain, father Anselm! Your romantic affair, Christian, will have no final... There will be no time! Do you understand? No time!⁶ (Eliáš/Stein in Peschel 2008, 211)

The play incorporates the constant conversation between the ghetto prisoners of the time and memories, in which they sought consolation. Those memories, however, were marred with the unconcealed fear that this time was utterly gone and there was no way to return to those experiences and long-lost places. Was the historical mask an attempt to camouflage the current meaning of the work? This is doubtful: the authors probably had no illusions about the possibility of its staging. The described artistic solution can probably be considered as a way to inscribe the work into a broader cultural context, to show that events as described in this story are constantly repeating themselves throughout the history of mankind.

Images, Not Events of the Past. A Glimpse at Postwar Plays

Turning to postwar Czech dramas, which could also be included into the output universalizing the Shoah subject in the postcatastrophic spirit, it will be useful to indicate not an obvious example of Arnošt Lustig, who is known as a prosaic, not playwright, and who is the representative of the second generation of survivors, or to put it differently: "the generation 1.5." His famous novella *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* (1964) [*A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*, 1973], was staged by Ladislav Stýblo and Petr Kracik under the same title, and—since 2011—has been performed in a special theater train traveling through the several countries of East and Central Europe every summer. Lustig's story talks about the events that took place in 1943: the Nazis captured a group of 20 wealthy Jews—largely from Czechoslovakia and Poland and each in possession of an American passport—who came back to Europe in order to close their businesses. To persuade them to cede their fortunes to Germany they were told that they would take part in an exchange of important German prisoners of war. For several days they were traveling by a special train, where they had to sign cheques to cover ostensible

expenses of the exchange. The train trip is revealed to be a demonic deception that does not end until the train arrived in Auschwitz all were killed in the gas chambers. Lustig combined this story with the fate of the Polish-Jewish stage dancer Franciszka Mann⁷ who, took advantage of a German guard being distracted by her beauty while undressing before entering a gas chamber, snatched his pistol, killed him, and wounded a few others. The Czech writer renames her Kateřina and places her in the train with captured wealthy men and the German director of this demonic spectacle named Friedrich Brensky. So, in the “theatrical” framework of the death camp—following the rule of *mise en abyme*—SS man Brensky’s play is inscribed as well. The performance, whose director, and main actor is the SS man, giving sophisticated and eristically perfect speeches, is an in all details well-thought-out diabolic plan. While the Jews think they can pay for their survival, they are in fact frozen by a subtle psychological game. Lustig’s characters are unable to reject paying money despite their growing doubt. Almost all avoid confrontation with the unavoidable—and foreknown—truth, dutifully playing their part. This way the Czech-Jewish author organizes a kind of psychoanalytic session for European societies, which gave up the hypnotic power of “symbolic order” (in Lacanians sense). The train in his story, which is slipping through the night on a circular trajectory, and in which a group of people obediently follows the instructions of a uniformed manipulator, creates an unsettling image through its metaphorical power and the implied probability of a repetition of the situation happening there: the circular trajectory has no beginning and end.

Vulnerability to illusion, which should be distinguished from lie, is also one of the favorite topics in Arnošt Goldflam’s dramas. Born in 1946, he is another representative of the Second Generation in Czech literature and theater. As he belongs to the “generation without grandparents and cousins,” (Lužný and Ander 2020) according to his own definition, his output should be interpreted using the category of post-memory, described by Marianne Hirsch (Hirsch 2012): the category, let us add, similar to the Jewish image of “dybbuk.” It would be unreasonable to read Goldflam’s plays isolated from his parent’s trauma which he “inherited” to some extent, although the biographical perspective cannot reduce the multidimensional significance of this output. Arnošt Goldflam should be considered as a representative of the generation struggling with the consequences of the experience that affected the generation of its parents. The playwright himself talks about the “stigma of the Holocaust” that his life was branded with (Goldflam 2010, 549).

In Goldflam’s plays, especially in *Doma u Hitlerů. Hitlerovic kuchýň* (2006) [*At Home with the Hitlers’. Hitlers’ Kitchen*] but also in *Sládký Theresienstadt* (1996) [*Sweet Theresienstadt*] or *Budou vývolani jménem* (1998) [*They Will be Called by Names*] the Shoah is only shown

indirectly, the attention shifted from the victims and events to the audience, assigning them the roles of the former by-standers and forcing them to introspection by unconventional aesthetic means. This way Raul Hilberg's well-known trias "bystanders—victims—perpetrators" (Hilberg 1992) is transformed. The Czech author reverses the trias of hiding the victims and emphasizing the perpetrators and—primarily—the "witnesses" who, this time, are the readers and the spectators. The ironic structure of the work—which is based on a constant exchange or even a clash between what the audience knows and what is shown to him—forms a stage for verbal and situational humor. At this point it is worth mentioning that while in Polish theater the thematization of the Holocaust (represented, for example, by Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski), the collective "amnesia" and the suppression of the memories of the true events form the main platform of theatrical experiment, in Czech theater collective memory and established images are the main topic of artistic activity. This is very close to Benjamin's observation that history consists of images rather than of events. The existence of one dominant "vocabulary"—pathos—is what Elaine Scarry described as a narration imposed by "the priests of angry God" (Scarry 1985, 45). Arnošt Goldflam, taking advantage of the fact that he belongs to the Jewish community and to the second generation of victims, uses the satirical devices as well as Jewish humor and breaks with convention—he leaves the "inner ghetto" and forces the audience to leave the old paths. This way he also fights against the inherited ways of expressing the pain. In his play, Goldflam organizes a revolt against generational burdens and inherited trauma through the utilization of a specific humor and irony, but he still clearly refers to postmodern theatrical practice, for example by using the method of bricolage. Showing the perpetrators in a satiric mirror, putting them in a row with similar characters that emerged throughout the long history of that kind of theater, the author also universalizes the Shoah in some way.

The output described above was created without exception by authors with Jewish roots, but in the Czech theater there was also the author who dealt with the Shoah theme in a much different way: presenting the experience from the perspective of a bystander observing the deserted streets and the equally empty neighbors' houses. Jiří Kolář (b. 1914) is the only non-Jew among the authors discussed. From the very beginning, the reception of the Holocaust in his works had a universalizing dimension; Kolář tied its mechanisms to the Stalinist terror, which he experienced. In 1949 he began to write a kind of lyrical diary significantly entitled *Očítý svědek. Deník 1949* (1955) [*The Eye Witness. The Diary from 1949*]. It was dedicated to a Holocaust survivor, the Czech Jew, and author Jiří Weil. Memory—as Kolář suggests—is a phenomenon that should be understood as a way of communication, it strives for the full narration, which is partially falsified. This is connected with the impossibility of full

understanding in the very moment when events take place. Valued reflection comes later; before there is only chaos and the tangle of items that are arranged in a seemingly coherent sequences, but they contain the seeds of non-obvious inconsistencies. From the perspective of an eyewitness Jiří Kolář sought an adequate language⁸ that relates to the imperative rejection of aesthetics preached by the creators of the “Holocaust decorum.” At the beginning of Kolář’s postwar activity his reflections go in one specific direction: he recognizes the Holocaust as a manifestation of a widely understood human evil and uses it as the main topic for his dramas. To a certain degree, such a conceptualization allows the disarming of the contradiction between the “ethic” and the “aesthetic.” Though it seems the artist’s interest is focused on more than just the mentioned opposition, namely on the language of art, the search for a form adequate for the subject and most of all—what Kolář was aware of—for a new epoch. At the turn of the fifties and sixties the author wrote his only two plays, *Chléb náš vezdejší* (1959) [*Our Daily Bread*] and *Mor v Athénách* (1961) [*Plague in Athens*], of which he only managed to publish only the second one in 1965. The second play had to wait 32 years for its premiere, which occurred in Czech Republic in 1991.⁹ *Plague in Athens*, like *Our Daily Bread*, is reminiscent of a collage.¹⁰ It consists of quotations from *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843) by William H. Prescott, war memories collected by Otto Kraus and Erich Kulka in *Továrna na smrt* (1959) [*The Death Factory*, 1966]¹¹ reports from the colonization of South America, fragments of the 16th-century treatise *La Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552) [*A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, 1620] by the Spanish friar Bartolomeo de las Casas, some texts from ancient Egypt, the book *Lidice: dějiny a poslední dnové vsi* (1946) [*Lidice: the History and the Last Days of the Cottage*] by Václav Kočka, the history of Ruthenian sects, pieces of the biography of the writer Ladislav Klíma, the ending of *De rerum natura* (c. 99–55 BC) [*On the Nature of Things*] by Lucretius, and last but not least, the testimonies of Shoah survivors. This assemblage shows that Kolář set himself the goal to create a journey through the history of human cruelty. As was mentioned, this theater collage contains some motifs characteristic for the testimonies of the bystanders and survivors of Nazi crimes like loud music, shooting at the common graves, the layers of buried victims in mass graves. Those testimonies are woven in with the reports about the crimes and manipulations committed in different times and places. The author activates the memory or cultural connotations of a reader and eliminates a factual layer that could become a psychological safety valve for him. This way the author forces the viewer (reader) to focus on the most important but also the most difficult thing to bear: on the event itself. Through the use of the both discursive and ethical artistic method of the collage in different shapes and variants, Kolář’s output is close to the literary and theatrical activity of Tadeusz Różewicz.¹² Both searched for a way of creating of

literature in non-literary times: non-literary in the sense of the previous understanding of literature. The decontextualization is a method used in *Plague in Athens*, and in the part of *Our Daily Bread*, which causes the exposure of the universal meaning of the dramas through the elements derived from their previous textual or historical context. Collage-like, linked elements, derived from the original textual or historical context, bring out the universal message of the dramas.

Conclusion

All of the examples of Czech plays presented here were written during and after the war. They force us to ask whether the arguments of the supporters and opponents of the Shoah universalization exhaust all possibilities to understand these horrifying events. As shown above, the fear against repetition of the genocide like Holocaust in the social discourse coexists with retrotopical tendencies of the contemporary societies, although it shows that the past is treated by “retrotopists” selectively (as Holocaust is the part of this past). The idea of a terrifying future causes anxiety and forces people to the turn into the direction of a retroactively created past which is falsified, or naming it more neutral, utopian. The same reaction is depicted in part of the presented plays, while all of them show that past becomes the interpreted, reinterpreted, and transformed set of images. Thus, the postcatastrophic attitude of their authors can be perceived as a warning against the creators of the illusion of the happy past and possible happy future. On the other hand, those works show also mechanisms which under modern conditions could turn into death machines. In fact, the supporters and opponents of the universalization of the Shoah fight for the same reason: they want to avoid a repetition of the dreaded events. In this sense, both sides are afraid that Walter Benjamin was right in claiming that “there are no periods of decline.” He just suggested that we all exist in the “permanent decline.” And that is why we are all afraid of Walter Benjamin.

Notes

- 1 In philosophical sense, connected with the critic of the possibility of moral progress of society which was the central idea e.g. for August Comte, a positivistic philosopher.
- 2 Primarily only a part of the second volume was printed in the anthology *Vršovický Ezop* (1966) [Aesop from Vršovice]. The whole of the volume appeared in Czech in 1993, after the collapse of communist system.
- 3 Kolář's approach is described with details by Štěpán Balík and Jiří Holý (Holý and Balík, 2016, 486); earlier this output was analyzed also by Michal Bauer, Vladimír Karfík, Zdeněk Pešát, and Václav Černý.
- 4 One glance at Walter Benjamin's methodology used in his lecture about Kafka—like for example focusing on the parabolic dimension of this output—or Baudelaire—where the philosopher found various “figures:” the

- bohemian, the flaneur, the prostitute, the gambler, the rag-picker—shows, that he consistently follows the universalizing methods while analyzing the literary texts. According to some researchers, he derived them from the messianic way of interpreting and valuing the quotation as the most perfect incarnation of the language, calling it even “the angels’ speech.”
- 5 The same could be said about some provocative works of Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, for example his *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (1996) or *Pozytywy* (2002–2003) [Positives].
 - 6 In the Czech original: “Je jiný svět venku, za těmi zdmi! Slyšíte? Jiný svět! Nebude pohodlí, zahálky a veselých pitek na Waldau, nebude času k zbožnému rozjímání v klidném zákoutí vaší farské zahrádky v Rainu, otče Anselme! Vaše milostná idylka, Christiane, zůstane nedohrána... Nebude času! Slyšíte? Nebude času!” English translation by AF for the purpose of this essay.
 - 7 In the story she was named Katerina Horovitzova, her real name was Franciszka Rosenberg-Manheimer (1917–1943). In pre-war Warsaw she was one of the most popular stage dancers but also worked as an actress and starred in the short movie *Polki słyną* (1937) [*Polish Women Are Famous*].
 - 8 He admitted the possibility that it would be a language without words, which led him to the concept of poetry composed of objects.
 - 9 It was translated earlier into German by Konrad Balder Schöffelen and published in 1966 as *Unser tägliches Brot*—and into French in 1986 by Erika Abrams as *Notre pain Quotidien*.
 - 10 Due to its form it can be associated with the lyrical volume *The Black Lyre* but contrary to the second, it has—to a degree—a traditional dramatic axis.
 - 11 These were also used by Arnošt Lustig in his *Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*.
 - 12 Tadeusz Różewicz’s innovative theater plays consist quotations, “recycled” motifs and pictures. This strategy, which could be associated with the technique of collage or with theater of absurd, is the author’s way of rejecting traditional theater and can be considered as his answer to Adorno’s statement, that writing poetry after the Holocaust is immoral. The most important Różewicz’s plays are *Kartoteka* (1960) [*The Card Index*, 1968], and *Kartoteka rozrzucona* (1997) [*The Card Index Scattered*, 2006].

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16 Postcatastrophic Approaches to the Shoah in Contemporary Czech Poetry: Radek Malý's Collection *Little Darkness*

Reinhard Ibler

Introduction

Since the 1940s, the Shoah has been a relatively constant subject within Czech literature.¹ There are, however, periods characterized by a particularly high productivity, when literature about the Shoah gained a special importance within the cultural process. Except for the years immediately after the Second World War, this is, above all, true for the 1960s, when the Shoah became one of the main topics in the literature of the “thaw” and of the “Prague Spring.” But there has also been a considerable number of works about the Shoah since the 1990s, i.e. from the period following the Velvet Revolution up to the present day. In comparison with the older works predominantly written by authors who were eyewitnesses of the events, be it as victims, perpetrators, or “by-standers,” the writers of the texts published in the last decades belong to a new generation. It is a generation the members of which have no memory of their own of the occurrences that happened during the Second World War: the generation of the children, grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren. In Marianne Hirsch’s terminology, this is the generation of “postmemory:”

[P]ostmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. (Hirsch 2008, 106)

If we examine more closely some prominent examples from recent Czech literature with Shoah references, we see that commemorating the events is only one of many functions these works fulfill—and perhaps not the most important one. For example, Arnošt Goldflam’s drama *Sladký Theresienstadt* (1996) [*Sweet Theresienstadt*] indeed refers to real events that took place in the North Bohemian fortress town and uses authentic documentary materials. The work, however, not only aims at exposing

the illusions of two detainees at Theresienstadt who believe they have a chance to survive the Holocaust. Moreover, it generally criticizes the human inclination to naiveté and self-deceit in situations when freedom and dignity of man are threatened. Here, the Shoah is set as an extreme case in the never-ending history of human oppression and humiliation (cf. Holý 2014, Ibler 2014). Violence and the incapacity for reconciliation are the main features of the story told by Radka Denemarková in her novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (2006) [*Money from Hitler*, 2009] set both in the postwar years and in the present. As it becomes apparent, the wounds caused by the Shoah on the one hand, and by the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans on the other hand, have not healed after many decades (cf. Tomášová 2014). A third example is Jáchym Topol's novel *Chladnou zemí* (2009) [*The Devil's Workshop*, 2013]. This witty, vicious story deals with the problem of memory culture in connection with the Shoah, criticizing the danger of dilution and abasement that spring from the growing commercialization of memory (cf. Kaptayn 2014).

All three works touch the historic events of the Second World War and the Shoah in some form or other, but none of them is limited to the function of commemorating these events. The authors of these works were born after the war (Goldflam 1946, Topol 1962, Denemarková 1968) and thus belong to the generation of postmemory. But these works, as well as many other works addressing the Shoah, can only be insufficiently grasped by the concept of postmemory, because there is no remembrance of a unique, unparalleled, and past event from the perspective of a better time. On the contrary, in these texts we are confronted with the idea that the Shoah is situated in a long history of catastrophes mankind had to go through, a history which has not come to an end down to the present day. Here, the concept of “post-catastrophic” comes into play (see esp. Artwińska and Tippner 2017, Artwińska and Tippner 2017).

This concept refers in many respects to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history understanding the catastrophe as “the continuum of history” (Lucero-Montano 2010, 130) and connecting it with the idea of progress: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given” (Benjamin 1999, 473 [N9a, 1]). Based on Benjamin's notion of the catastrophe, Luisa Banki develops the concept of a postcatastrophic poetics, which she defines in her study of W.G. Sebald's prose works as follows:

This poetics is *postcatastrophic* because it is located both in a paradigm of catastrophe—its continuity or permanence—and *after* the (variously datable) catastrophe which makes the effectivity of this very paradigm apparent and in its significance for the presence

recognizable.”—All translations from German and Czech by R.I., unless otherwise specified. (Banki 2016, 10)

In the case of literature about the Shoah, the consequence of such an approach is that the loss of the exclusivity of the memory function comes along with gaining new functions. In the works mentioned, this functional extension can be recognized in the clear tendency making the Shoah into a metaphor.

Radek Malý's Poetry and the Concept of Postcatastrophe

In the following, I want to concentrate on a young Czech author's work in which the concept of postcatastrophe plays an important role and from which we can learn a lot about the new functions the motif of the Shoah can gain within this concept. In contrast to the above-named well-known and broadly discussed works, which have a strong narrative base, the texts by Radek Malý belong to the genre of lyrical poetry, a genre to which little attention has been paid yet in the context of studying the literature about the Shoah. One reason for this may be, among others, that the lyric genre with its main features such as situativeness, mood, reflection, abstraction, etc. generally has a relatively great distance towards the requirements of an artistic approach to the Shoah with its clear focus upon things that happened, i.e. events, occurrences, action, in short: narrative plots which are realized in genres such as novels, stories, dramas, but also films, theater, comics, etc. I argue that this position of lyrical poetry about the Shoah has become even more difficult under the conditions of postcatastrophe and of the functional change of the Shoah motif, as mentioned above. In my paper, I try to touch upon some select aspects of this problem.²

Radek Malý is a young author whose biography indicates he is a member of the generation of “grand-children,” i.e. has a great distance to the events of the Second World War. He was born in 1977 in the Moravian city of Olomouc. He studied German and Czech Philology at the University of Olomouc, where he teaches Czech literature and comparative literature as an associate professor. In addition, he is an editor and translates German literature. One of his main fields of interest as a scholar and translator is the poetry of German expressionism, particularly that of Georg Trakl. As an author, Malý has published two dramas and six poetry collections since the beginning of the 2000s: *Lunovis* (2001), *Vraní zpěvy* (2002) [*Crow Songs*], *Větrní* (2005) [*Windy*], *Malá tma* (2008) [*Little Darkness*], *Světloplaši* (2012) [*Photophobes*] and *Všehomír* (2015) [*Allpeace*]. Moreover, he is a well-recognized author of children's books.³

Although Malý has acquired a high reputation as one of the most promising poets in Czech contemporary literature and has won several

prizes for his works (including such prestigious awards like the Jiří Orten prize or the Magnesia litera prize—twice) there has only been little response in literary studies to date. Each of Malý's collections has, indeed, been accompanied by a considerable number of reviews, but there is, so far only one article about his poetry. An article by Štěpán Balík deals with the Shoah references in Malý's poetry, a subject adjacent to our focus. Balík gives a short, summarizing characterization of the poet's approach to the Shoah:

[H]is [i.e. Malý's] attitude towards this sensitive topic is very innovative. He leaves the stereotypical manner of depicting the Shoah and finds new ways of speaking about it, so the reader's imagination is affected anew. As a result, he often uses taboo breaking means. (Balík 2015, 234–235)

Furthermore, Balík lists some of these “taboo breaking” devices. For example, the combining of Shoah motifs with inappropriate meters or rhymes (such as from folk songs or nursery rhymes) or with macaronic verses causes punning or grotesque effects. The same holds true for the so-called “heretic metaphors,” i.e. the improper use of poetic images (Balík 2015, 536–538). A striking example for such devices is the poem *Podzim jak doktor Mengele* [*An Autumn like Doctor Mengele*] from Malý's first collection *Lunovis*:

[...]
 An autumn like doctor Mengele
 is already looking forward to the transport
 It grasped a white coat made of fog
 It is cowardly to go into the gas
 Those who survive will sin
 Hey!
 Gestapo lad...
 Shoot!

(Malý 2001, 35)⁴

As we can see from this short passage, Malý aims at achieving a maximum effect by bringing together two semantic fields in a poetic comparison that belong to absolutely different spheres of thinking, spheres which are normally not comparable. On the one hand, there is the sphere of nature, in this specific case autumn and the images and ideas being associated with it. The other sphere is that of the Shoah, which is evoked by typical motifs such as doctor Mengele, the transports of Jews, and Gestapo henchmen. Balík points out that Radek Malý

[...] uses the provocative grotesque not only to speak about the Shoah, but also to perceive the existence of God, death [...], German-Jewish-Czech historical and cultural relations and national identities in Central Europe. (Balík 2015, 242–243)

The question is whether Malý really intends “to speak about the Shoah” using this grotesque imagery. In the example quoted above, the tragic events during the Second World War do not stand for themselves but are functionalized for different purposes. In this specific case, they are used to create a poetic image of an autumn atmosphere that shocks by its radicalism. The shocking effect is primarily caused by the fact that the Shoah imagery is here only the point of reference within the poetic comparison. In this way it loses its “normal” significance as a unique, incomparable event, i.e. its status within the value system the reader is accustomed to. If this holds true for other texts written by Radek Malý, we should ask for the general position of the Shoah imagery in the author’s poetic world. As Malý’s poetry is very complex and many-faceted, such a question can hardly be answered within the scope of a short paper. However, first there will be an attempted initial approximation of the problem at hand, using some selected texts from Malý’s hitherto most successful poetry collection, *Malá tma*, where in my opinion postcatastrophe has found one of its most striking expressions in contemporary Czech poetry.

The collection was published in 2008. It contains 55 shorter poems, the vast majority of them comprising between 8 and 14 stanzas. The book’s title, which actually is an oxymoron, refers to two central spheres dominating the lyrical cosmos of the work. On the one hand, “darkness” indicates the sphere of obscurity, vagueness, lack of enlightenment, but also the dark sides of life, of history as well as the present age including all the tragic developments and catastrophes. “Littleness,” on the other hand, is also an ambiguous category which can be related to the private, individual dimension of existence, to the specifics of Czech thinking (“little nation,” “little culture,” “little language,” etc.), to the child (hood) motif and the like. The poet Radek Malý (“malý” means “little” in English) plays an ironic, self-referential game with his own name, demonstrating how far-reaching the semantic interweaving within this work is, also including the book’s external appearance: The volume’s cover design has the form of an exercise book for pupils. Beyond that, the book contains two illustrations by Tomáš Kopřiva, each covering two pages and showing a little boy in the light-dark contrast of different spaces. In the first illustration of the book, the little boy is placed within the darkness of a cosmic space. The only light sources are myriads of stars as well as the fragments of an illuminated room surrounding the boy. The second illustration can be found at the end of the book. Here, the little boy is standing in a dark room that is slightly illuminated by

light penetrating from the outside through a door. The obvious contrast of these drawings (light vs. darkness, little boy vs. extent of space, playfulness of the pictures remembering cartoons or illustrations of a children's book vs. dignity and transcendence of their message) was pointed out by Jiří Holý in his laudatory speech on the occasion of Malý receiving for *Malá tma* in 2009 the prize of the foundation Český literární fond [Czech literary fund]. As Holý demonstrates, the book's imagery is closely related to the general principle of contrast that, for example, rules the relationship between the conventionality of form (traditional meters, particularly dactyl and trochee, rhymes and poetic forms, such as sonnets) and an absolute non-conventionality in the thematic sphere.⁵ For this reason, Radek Malý can be situated between the two main poles of modern Czech poetry. On the one hand, there are "poets of the light, the stream of life, of divine playfulness, sweet and bitter nostalgia," and on the other "poets of the darkness, of a tragic sense of life who write with the awareness of finitude and death" (Holý 2009).

Such an antagonistic cosmos represents a world in which much of the sense for the important things has been lost and which is in danger to remain in superficiality, volatility, and utilitarian thinking; a world being threatened by the loss of all forms of community spirit and giving rise to isolation; and, after all, a world which is increasingly getting accustomed to its cataclysms and stands at the brink of destruction. In such a perception of the world, it is hardly surprising that references to catastrophes such as the Shoah and the Second World War play such an enormous role in Malý's work. The first poem of *Malá tma* already introduces motifs connected with this subject:

Street Ballad

I expelled my Germans from my little Sudetes.
 Then I wanted to celebrate this with a drink.
 They closed my shop.
 I raised a flag. Now, it will come out all right.
 I expelled my Germans. My god, I'm o.K.
 Kicks and cudgels, insults and bitchslaps.
 It was not easy, but they are there.
 Finally, I'm clean. I expelled my Nazis!
 I expelled my Germans. I've been left alone, here.

(Malý 2008, 9) ⁶

With the topic appearing in the significant position of the collection's beginning, we are put in the mood for what is going to follow. However, it is not only the topic of the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans after the Second World War that is striking, a topic which, at least since the publication of Radka Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera*, has been discussed in a close

connection with the Shoah problem and is of great importance for the self-conception of the Czech people, both in its national and European dimension. The fact that this serious topic is referred to in a poem the title of which is associated with trivial folk culture is extremely unsettling. The somewhat monotonous, stereotyped trochaic meter and the colloquial style (“svý Němce,” “hergot,” “facky,” “nácky”) are fitting within this context. It might also be surprising to see a distinctly collective phenomenon being transferred into an individual sphere. This clearly refers to the collection’s title: World War, expulsion, the Shoah and other catastrophes are “dark” chapters of the national as well as European history and have besides their big, collective dimension also a “little,” individual one. In addition, the poem’s end links the individual and the collective—mainly “European”—level, when attention is drawn to the danger of isolation caused by the supposedly legitimate and historically justified act of expulsion.

The following poems in the collection present a lyrical subject dominated by the feelings of uncertainty, homelessness, and compulsion, as can be seen from the Ahasver motif in the second poem:

[...]

To feel Paris. To kiss hornbeams in Graz.

To grasp the world and keep the direction for a while.

I am at home and lost as well.

I am who I am. I am Ahasver.

[...].

(Malý 2008, 10)⁷

The motif of the “Wandering Jew” not only refers to the lyrical subject’s identity crisis (“I am Ahasver”) but also introduces the subjects of Jewishness and antisemitism which could be an anticipation of the following Shoah topic. Maybe, the choice of the German language in these verses can (beyond the possibility of creating a paronomasia: “Ich bin, wer ich bin. Ich bin Ahasver”) give a subtle hint to this association. This semantic field could, moreover, give a first idea of Malý’s postcatastrophic view, the fate of the Jewish people being understood as a history of cataclysms or a permanent catastrophe. The alternative designation for Ahasver is “Eternal Jew” [“Ewiger Jude”], which also coincides with the idea of an enduring antisemitism and of a never-ending catastrophe.

The following texts show a great variety of motifs and topics, such as alcohol, blasphemy, decay (image of autumn), vagueness (image of mist), and others, the poems continuously throwing light on the complexity of a fragile subject characterized by uncertainty and unsteadiness. This attitude was described as “the perspective of a poet who staggers at the limits of sobriety and drunkenness. [...] It is interesting to see how Malý manages to elaborate this perspective of a drunken, ironically roaring, lonely person, steadily circling around it, and slog along” (Košínská 2009).

Beginning with the poem *Všude jsou Lourdy Jen někde Dachau* ...—the 15th in the collection—there is a small cycle of texts in various ways referring to the problem of the Shoah. Or more precisely: The Shoah imagery is used to find still another, extreme expression for the feelings of a poetic subject, “who cries about this ugly world” (Hanus 2009).

The aforementioned poem belongs to those texts from *Malá tma* that have a clear reference to Europe, its history, its culture, its thinking. The text is based on the confrontation of two towns representing two different ways of intellectual life typical of Europe. On the one hand, Lourdes stands for spirituality, mystics, and (original, naïve) faith, whereas Dachau, one of the symbols of the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust, represents (cold) rationality, the absence of God and destruction, among other things.

Everywhere is Lourdes only someplace Dachau
 for example within myself What shall be
 There are furnaces within myself and hunger watch out
 Demigod Pole half-Jew
 Everywhere is Lourdes Only someplace Dachau
 and Mary survives there
 at the price that every guard
 relieves himself enjoys himself
 Josef looks and keeps silent and you
 sheared and all skin and bones
 Everywhere is Lourdes Only within myself wires
 a Punch Puppet for fun.

(Malý 2008, 24)⁸

Again, we see that the collective as well as individual aspects of the topic are in the same way merged as the perspectives of the perpetrator and the victim (for example “There are furnaces within myself and hunger watch out.”) A climax of this complex semantic interplay is the—untranslatable—paronomasia “Polobůh Polák Položid.” A drastic effect results from the polysemous use of the image “dráty” [wires] both referring to the wired fences of concentration and death camps and to the interior of a Punch puppet, the latter associating happiness or playfulness and bondage at the same time.

The three following poems are linked to each other by the motif of the train, a motif that can stand for dynamics, locomotion, compulsion but also collective fate. Especially the association with the transports to the East during the Shoah is evident. The range of meanings can for example be seen in the poem *Všichni už sedíme v lokálce na Beroun...* [We all are already sitting in the local train to Beroun...] where everyday scenes of people gathered in trains merge into images with a clear Shoah reference: “We all

are already sitting in the transport to the East / [...] A plank bed and wire” (Malý 2008, 25).⁹

In another poem of this group, *Za Těšínem se rozpojujou vlaky* [Behind Těšín the trains are uncoupled...], with mention of a train going to Warsaw (“There is only a couchette coach going to Warsaw,” Malý 2008, 27)¹⁰ and a reminiscence of prewar Warsaw, there is again an individualization and diminution of a collective phenomenon with far-reaching historical consequences:

[...]

To have within oneself one little Warsaw
as it was here before the war with its ghetto
and a sleeping draught, the sweater under the head
would you fear for me?

(Malý 2008, 27)¹¹

This poetical treatment of a typical Shoah emblem not only gives an idea of the social as well as personal dimension of the catastrophe but also of Malý’s special view on the meaning of such catastrophes.

Conclusion

Although not constant, the Shoah references in *Malá tma* nonetheless represent an important part of Malý’s poetic cosmos. If we take the collection as a whole, this cosmos is almost invariably characterized by a deep despair regarding the state of the world as it is and a significant skepticism toward life in the future. There is much fear, uncertainty, and fragility finding expression in the poems, and it is surely no simplification to speak of a dominantly pessimistic work. Characterizations of *Malá tma* as “pocket apocalypse” (Hanus 2009) or “private apocalypse” (Košínská 2020) are appropriate, and they are to a great extent in keeping with a postcatastrophic approach showing the catastrophe as an infinite and universal phenomenon. This is true, even if one must admit that we can also find factors within the collection working in an opposite direction. This was emphasized by Jiří Holý in the aforementioned laudatory speech, pointing out that Malý’s representation of a world in which numerous values are threatened by loss is in many cases combined with poetic devices creating distance by (self-)irony and an innovative imagery.

Radek Malý’s book of poems is definitively not only a work of carefree and playful harmony. Neither is it poetry of apocalypse. The author perceives the gloomy vanity and the consumerism, a world from which dignity and sacredness are vanishing, but he does so with the creative gesture of irony, self-irony and an original imagination. (Holý 2011)

From Holý's viewpoint, first and foremost, it is the work's poetic or artistic sphere creating distance and thus avoiding the reader's total plunging into Malý's dark image of the world. But there is an expression of hope on the thematic level of the work, too. As Miroslav Chocholatý reveals in his review of *Malá tma*, an important role within the work is taken by the child motif that appears cumulatively towards the end of the collection. Furthermore, the last poem of the work, *Nostalgie*, which is also about children, is the only text of the collection without irony and contrasts, thereby causing a conciliatory conclusion of the work (cf. Chocholatý 2009).

As we have seen, the Shoah motifs have a special function in *Malá tma*, the situation being similar in most of Radek Malý's other poetry collections. In *Malá tma*, references to the Shoah and other events connected with the Second World War can be found in several of the poems. These texts are partly situated close to one another within the collection. The motifs in question do not convey the impression that they were selected for the purpose of stimulating the reader's engagement with the events having taken place more than half a century ago and having entailed far-reaching consequences for the history and culture of Europe. Rather, they blend the general atmosphere of catastrophes created in the texts of the collection with its omnipresent concern about the state of the world, its feeling of disorientation, and of fear. These emotions are much more directed to the present day than to past times. Even more than in the aforementioned prose works and dramas with reference to the Shoah, here the memorial function in the traditional sense has lost its meaning so that neither a memory nor a postmemory approach would be very productive in dealing with this and similar works. As I have tried to show, the immanent sense of crisis reflecting, in a way, Benjamin's idea of the permanence of catastrophe brings *Malá tma* into line with those works of contemporary literature aiming at a new artistic engagement with the awareness that catastrophes are no past phenomenon, but have always been part of human history, down to the present day. Such a treatment corresponds with the concept of "postcatastrophe." The postcatastrophic approach chosen by Malý in his collection becomes evident primarily in two spheres: the poetic and the thematic.

The poetic sphere is, for instance, characterized by sequences of images, statements, questions, and so forth, the semantic connection between these textual constituents often being hardly recognizable. The sense of these texts discloses itself rather associatively by linking the various semantic units to each other. Thus, the reader generates a certain distance toward the poems, the emotional and identificatory potential of which being rather small. The terseness of the lyrical speech repeatedly provokes an ironic effect forming a relativizing counterbalance to the serious, often tragic subjects being dealt with in the poems. Another device for creating distance is the obvious contrast between the innovative treatment of the

lyrical topics and the traditional form of the poems. Thus, in traditional literature this identificatory approach to subjects such as the Shoah, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, and other events of a catastrophic scope tends to be replaced by a new approach generating distance and in this way enabling a different—"postcatastrophic"—view of the problem.

With regard to the thematic sphere, the lyric imagery projects, as stated above, a feeling of uncertainty, decline, and menace. Throughout the collection, we are confronted with a lyrical subject which is ridden by the consciousness of living in a permanent state of being threatened—both in the "big," historic and cultural dimension, as well as in the "little" sphere of privacy. The notion of the apocalyptic as a basic feature of the work is, to my mind, definitely appropriate, regardless of whether we recognize in *Malá tma* signals of hope or not, inasmuch as the apocalypse covers the concepts of destruction (of the old world) and of hope (for a new, ideal world). The "postcatastrophic" approach here consists in the projection of the past cataclysms into the present, or, in other words, in the recognition of the catastrophic state of the world through the prism of the past events.

It is very difficult to identify semantic hierarchies within the poetic system of *Malá tma* considering the plethora of new and surprising images that we are faced with. Motifs referring to the Shoah play an important role in the collection. Their significance and function have, however, changed in comparison with traditional memory literature. In the works of the latter, the cataclysms of the mid-20th century had the status of singular happenings where any equating with other historic or contemporary events was out of the question. Such hierarchies of catastrophes have vanished under the banner of "postcatastrophe." Every catastrophe that happened in the world can represent other catastrophes. On the other hand, images of death camps, transports, gas chambers, etc. have not lost their terrifying, alarming, and even traumatizing effect until today. However, they no longer function only as a cautionary tale warning of a repetition of the unparalleled events, but, first of all, as symbols of the permanent catastrophe.

Notes

- 1 A good introduction into Czech literature about the Shoah is Jiří Holý's synoptic article: Holý (2011) (English version: Holý 2015).
- 2 Regarding Czech literature, there is in comparison to former periods a considerable decrease in the number of lyrical poems with a focus on the Shoah, and one can suppose that this situation is similar to that in other literatures. In their recently published, extensive article on Czech poetry about the Shoah, Štěpán Balík and Jiří Holý note that only few writers after 1989 have written poems with Shoah references. For example, such texts can be found in the poetry of Jáchym Topol, Václav Burian, and Irena Dousková, although rather occasionally (Balík and Holý 2016, 502–503). There is actually only one exception: Radek Malý, whose poetry collections from the

outset are characterized by a relatively constant presence of texts addressing the Shoah (Balík and Holý 2016, 503–505).

- 3 For further details about Radek Malý and his works see among others the respective contributions at CzechLit (<http://www.czechlit.cz/cz/autor/radek-maly-cz/> resp. <http://www.czechlit.cz/en/author/radek-maly-en/> [last accessed 1, August 2020] or Košínská (2009).

- 4 [...] Podzim jak doktor Mengele
už na transport se těší
Plášť z mlhy vzal si bílej
Jít do plynu je zbabělé
Kdo přežije, ten zhřeší
Hej!
Gestápu...
stříle!

All translations from German and Czech by R.I., unless otherwise specified.

- 5 A similar view is taken by Karel Piorecký in his profound review of *Malá tma*, For him “the contrast is [...] Malý’s most effective weapon, and that on all levels of the text” (Piorecký 2009, 21).

- 6 Odrhovačka
Vyhнал jsem své Němce ze svých malých Sudet.
Pak jsem to chtěl zapít. Zavřeli mi krám.
Vyvěsil jsem vlajku. Teď už dobře bude.
Vyhнал jsem své Němce. Hergot, to se mám.
Kopance a klacky, nadávky a facky.
Nebylo to snadný, ale jsou ti tam.
Konečně jsem čistej. Vyhнал jsem své nácky!
Vyhнал jsem své Němce. Zůstal jsem tu sám.

- 7 [...] Pročítit Paříž. Líbat habry v Grazu.
Uchopit svět a chvíli držet směr.
Ich bin zu Hause und verloren dazu.
Ich bin, wer ich bin. Ich bin Ahasver.
[...]

- 8 Všude jsou Lourdy Jen někde Dachau
například ve mně Co má být
Jsou ve mně pece a hlad tak bacha
Polobůh Polák Položid
Všude jsou Lourdy Jen někde Dachau
a Marie v něm přežívá
za cenu toho, že každéj bachař
si uleví si užívá
Josef se dívá a mlčí a ty
ostříhaný a samá kost
Všude jsou Lourdy Jen ve mně dráty
Kašpárek Loutka pro radost.

- 9 Všichni už sedíme v transportu na východ / [...] Pryčna a drat.

- 10 Na Varšavu míří jenom lehátkový vůz.

11 [...]

Mít v sobě jednu malou Varšavu
jak před válkou tu s ghettem stála
a šláfrunk, svetr pod hlavuty by ses o mě bála?

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Part IV

Re-Mediating Catastrophes in Contemporary (Pop-)Culture



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17 Holocaust Topoi, or “How Long Can We Punish Ourselves for a Grandfather Holding a Match?”: Jedwabne and the Pop-Cultural Afterlife of the Catastrophe

Marta Tomczok and Paweł Wolski

Holocaust Topoi: Rules of the Game

Imagine a child; any child—all children all cute. Give the imaginary child a toy to play with, let's say: a miniature roller-coaster with a set of marbles to roll from its spiky top through various cleverly designed gates, tunnels, traps, and curves—all the way down to the bottom. Once you have created the scene and its little actor, you are trapped. You have to take responsibility for your creation. You have to make sure the play is educational and that your imaginary offspring does not content him- or herself with sheer excitement of watching the balls speed down. And that he or she won't exhaust its whole intellectual energy at the very tip of the maze thus leaving some of it to not only watch but also to reflect upon the route in the middle. In other words: that the child will ask questions and learn how the game is made, what are the rules and laws making the ball go down and which miraculous force makes it pass through the seemingly impassable gates, curves, and traps. Try to keep working on the kid like that for a while, then pause and look back. The image you are looking at is what the pop-cultural representation of the Holocaust might look like. And the effort you made while making sure the child learns by asking and answering all the uneasy and sometimes uncomfortable questions is what we should be doing as responsible guardians of the experience entrusted to us by the victims.

It is easy for a child—as well as for adults, for that matter—to lose her- or himself in a game. Especially, if the game is designed to incite basic and intense emotions. If the coaster was high enough, if the ball could go really fast—with all the traps, gates and curves designed only to appear as real obstacles—it would be hard for the child (as well as for an adult) not to allow the mind get entirely invested in the top of the maze as the source of the excitation and let it the balls start rushing down the track and the fun begins. Your educational duty to make the child focus on the “whys” and the “hows” of the game will have to compete with the odd

mixture of enthusiasm and anxiety one feels while unreflexively rolling one marble after another. It is equally hard to ask questions, to doubt, and analyze the source of the overwhelming fear and compassion when one reads a well-written pulp-fiction novel. The genre is able to transform any multi-dimensional reality into a flat horizon established by sharp binary oppositions (here-there, us-them, good-bad, etc.). With not a single reflexive “trap” blocking the view a well-crafted production of that sort exposes the reader to a wide range of emotions—a landscape undistorted by facts or doubts.

At the other hand, a badly fabricated narrative of that sort carries a risk. A writer making an attempt at pulp or pop novel never starts with a clean slate—the writerly act is suspect of non-artistic, low motives by default. In most cases, this means that the author will be constantly balancing on the verge of kitsch. In some cases, the stakes will be even higher. Holocaust pop-literature, for instance, is very likely to slide down the slippery slope of disrespect or abuse (such as “Nazisploitation,” Bridges et al. 2012). Although the risk must appear extremely high by any informed judgment, considered the discourse’s moral imperatives and its ethical sensitivity, as well as and potentially grave in consequences (ranging from public ostracism to persecution under the law against Holocaust denial introduced by many a country), there is no shortage of new titles in this literary field. If anything, it seems to be one of the most dynamic branches of the publishing business—so far as to be dubbed a veritable “pop-style invasion” (Buryła 2016, 107–113). We are literally flooded with books, which do an equally good work in giving simple answers and universal truths—no matter if well-crafted or kitschy. When the natural process of de-contextualization of popular classics is added (almost everybody, at least in Italy, can tell what *If this is a man* is about; nearly everyone, not only in Poland, has heard of Borowski—so why waste time reading?), it is not at all unwise to expect the future the collective memory of the Holocaust to rely almost entirely on narratives designed to please and excite—not to let any “whys” and “hows” slow the ride.

Another case in point (and a justification for the unsettling analogy engaging a child-figure in the discourse of the Holocaust) is children’s literature. The main difference however is that this particular kind of writing, by reducing a complexity of factors to an easily transmissible, unequivocal message—or “clearly established binary oppositions” (Nodelman 2008, 80)—instead of balancing on a verge of an aesthetical or moral transgression, aptly fulfils its communicative duties. Both types of Holocaust literature, while varied regarding aesthetic and ethical judgment of their “simplifying” techniques (for even though children’s books are also prone to be counted among “lesser genres,” the opinion has long been discredited by critics (see O’Sullivan 2010, 2) far more vividly than in the case of pulp-fiction), have one feature in common. Almost all fictional narratives of these kinds are fashioned as “texts from back then,” usually mimicking a memoir

or a diary. As such, they rarely add to or transform the historical facts or nature of the experience. Notable pop-cultural exceptions such as *Maus* (1980) by Art Spiegelman or *Noc żywych Żydów* (2012) [*Night of the Living Jews*] by Igor Ostachowicz do exist. However, they are relatively rare and, more importantly, they intertextually negotiate or transgress the boundaries of a given pop-cultural form rather than operate affirmatively within their limits (it is much harder—or virtually impossible—to find similar cases among children's books). But even then, they remain in sync with the technique of focusing the whole narrative energy on a singular aspect or fact of the Shoah—either historically confirmed or sublimated by the mechanism of communal memory and shaped by the public discourse into a form loosely connected to the actual (insofar confirmed) state of the matters. Which is, in most cases—most surprisingly also in the latter—rather warmly welcomed by the conservative Holocaust discourse, otherwise extremely sensitive to any transforming attempts—substitution, permutation, addition or a (simplifying) subtraction likewise—at the canonical narrative form of the experience established as its original, archetypal model.

This may be because the very original often has been subject to similar modifications. It was not uncommon for the writers to adjust their narratives to the expectations of the public, the critics, or a more abstract discourse institution of the Holocaust. For example, Zofia Kossak changed the second edition of her *Z otchłani* [From the Abyss] in reonse to an aggressively critical article by Tadeusz Borowski (Kulesza 2006). Primo Levi, as argued in (Wolski 2013), modified the second version of his *Se questo é un uomo* in reaction to the evolved canonic form of a Holocaust testimony. On not a rare occasion—the aforementioned low tolerance of the discourse for any manipulation on the original text notwithstanding—this has been done to them by others. The fate of Anne Frank's diary is a perfect example, and it connects all the hitherto aspects addressed briefly. Firstly, just as in the case of Levi, the author herself was introducing crucial modifications to the original, which contradicts a fundamental Holocaust topos of a text as an eye-witness, or an artifact-evidence, deemed unauthentic or falsified as soon as it shows any traced of being tampered with. Secondly, after having been found by her father, the diary—in a form censored by him—has become part of pop-culture at its best: a Broadway play (Hungerford 2003). Thirdly, it is now one of the best-known Holocaust children's books. All three versions introduced various modifications, the last two being most obvious reasons for the fact that the complex story of a Jewish girl maturing in the stuffy, condensed hiding space during the Holocaust, has been reduced to the rather simplifying quote. "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

No wonder that young-adult books (e.g. a fictional *Pamiętnik Blumki* (2011) [*Blumka's memoir*—authored by Iwona Chmielewska) as well as "adult" pop-novels (*Byłam sekretarką Chaima Rumkowskiego. Dzienniki*

Etki Daum (2008) [*I was the secretary of Chain Rumkowski. Etki Daum's Memoir*] by Elżbieta Cherezińska), inherit all the aforementioned characteristics of both the genres they belong to and the “archetype” they imitate. The fusion of the two assumes the shape of “authenticity markers”—notions such as “Aryan side,” “Auschwitz,” etc.—which are designed to confirm common beliefs rather than reveal any unknown, complex, or uneasy aspects of the Holocaust. Not only are these “markers of authenticity” abstracted from the original complexity—they outgrew their own historical meaning. For example, the toponymy “Auschwitz,” although not unknown as the site of a death camp in 1940s occupied Poland, did not come to the position of a symbol it undoubtedly has today until several years after the war (Morawiec 2009). Within Holocaust popular literature, however, “Auschwitz” stands for a self-evident definition of German atrocities during Second World War. It contains no room for a doubt, a hesitation whether the now dreaded name always stood for an almost certain death or has it been, to some (or to most), a prison—a harsh a dangerous one, for sure, but not unlike any other facilities of that kind—“made for people, too.”

Such apparently inevitable primordial nature of the discourse, while rendering it prone to uses and (sometimes) abuses of pop-culture, also offers a chance to become part of an informed approach in the face of the ongoing “invasion” and conquest by one-sided representations of the Holocaust. The proper tool is to apply a device quite unjustly suspect of an anachronistic approach to contemporary issues and judged unfit for modern literary criticism: the topo

Ernst Robert Curtius: Making Sense of Catastrophe

The modern concept of *loci communes* has been (re)introduced only about a century ago. Carl Gustav Jung’s archetypes or Gilbert Murray’s cultural images (Murray 1914) were sort of a prefiguration to what Leo Spitzer, Ernst Robert Curtius and—in a different way—Northrop Frye re-introduced to literary criticism in more theoretically and philosophically oriented terms (Frye 1951). As a result, however, the humanities inherited an equivocal notion of this concept, including a blurry divide between archetype and topos, propelled by Curtius himself, as his critics maintained (Rymkiewicz 1968). According to Curtius, a topos can be considered an archetype if it appears in several various cultural milieus. If *puer senex*, the topos of the “elderly boy,” can be observed in so many various religions, e.g. in the figure of an exceptionally wise young savior, it can be considered an archetype. This is why Marek Rymkiewicz in his well-known book on the topos of a garden prefers to trust Leo Spitzer (Rymkiewicz 1968, 25), who seems to be aware of the fact that you can never pin down any set of topoi to a list ready to define any period of time, any era or any civilization.

Curtius wrote *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948) [*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 1973] during the war and published it only three years after in order to provide the world fragmented by the shattering experience of the Holocaust with a firm point of reference¹ and thus help Europe cope with the loss of firm sense of reality. This might be why his topoi are so dangerously close to archetypes. However, it is also why his obvious knowledge of the fact that rhetorical commonplaces are not notions which simply froze in time and persisted up to this day was intentionally ignored in his book. His response to the Holocaust—as part of the global experience of war—was to simply attempt not to see that topoi change. In the aftermath of the Shoah, one can no longer hope to establish the European culture on Aristotle or—even more so—on Plato and his concept of the state.

Reinhart Koselleck: Finding Sense in Postcatastrophe

What in Curtius' case was a semi-intended act of an “intentional fallacy,” became a central idea for the humanities—even if the term “topos” is rarely used. Reinhart Koselleck's *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1992–1997) [*Conceptual History*], attempts to create a monumental dictionary of basic notions, such as ideology, revolution, etc., organizing historical development. This project, effecting a glossary of 119 entries on 6800 pages, involved several other historians² and spanned over decades. The difference between this and any other historical dictionary is that it does not include definitions as such, but notions organizing our image of history—throughout the history. It shows, for example, how the opposition Romans/Greeks versus the barbarians in its various incarnations worked throughout ages, or how the concept of “manhood” organized historical events from ancient slavery, through the creation of nobility as a separate class, to a division between Aryans and non-Aryans—as opposed to categories such as “slave,” “*Untermensch*,” and other such terms appearing in glossaries as separate notions. Koselleck's historiography is based on rhetoric—but in a very specific sense:

Any everyday story in daily performance is oriented by language in execution, by talking and speaking, just as no love story is thinkable without at least three words—you, I, we. Any social event in its manifold connections is based on preparatory communicative acts and achievements of linguistic mediation. (Koselleck 1989, 312)

According to this argument, quite oddly shifting from linguistics to love, language is neither a firm set of meaningful enunciations capsuled within a rigid structure of linguistic signs, nor a solely performative act of speech, nor a construct limited only by arbitrarily chosen contexts (social, physical, etc.). Koselleck aims to establish a kind of somato-linguistic trope not only

guiding our historical knowledge but also influencing our everyday way of coping with the past:

As obvious as this is, it is just as obvious that this observation must be limited. What actually occurs is evidently more than the linguistic articulation which has led to it or interprets it. The command or the collegial resolution or the elementary cry to kill are not identical with the act of killing itself. The expressions of lovers are not merged in the love which the two individuals experience. (Koselleck 1989, 312)

Mieke Bal: Explaining Postcatastrophic Epistemology

A very interesting version of rhetorical topoi on the meta-interpretative level can be found in Mieke Bal's theory of "travelling concepts" (Bal 2002). At a first glance her idea appears to be more of a flip-side to the rhetorical tradition than its continuation: according to Mieke Bal "travelling concepts"—terms such as "intention," "experience," and many other notions basic for virtually all human studies' discourses—never mean the same to all of them. They are metaphors, their meaning is fluid and their sense has to be negotiated each time within various disciplines. On the surface, it seems very distant from the traditional idea of topoi, but only because our image of this rhetorical concept has been shaped by Curtius' aforementioned will to establish a cultural reality able to fight against the shattered ontology left by the Second World War. It is for this reason that Curtius was stressing the form of a topos, while others, like Spitzer, focus on the ideas evoked by it (Rymkiewicz 1968, 21). Topoi—even in the traditional sense—were therefore supposed to be an evolving content shaped by a presumably invariable form. Accidentally, within Polish cultural tradition this image has its own topos of lava ("You know, our nation is like living volcano: the top is hard and cold, worthless and dried, but boiling, fiery lava seethes inside," Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' Eve*, part III, 1101/1719). And this is precisely how Bal's "travelling concepts" work: they constitute a *lingua franca* for various disciplines, allowing them to interact, while in fact they mean something slightly different within each field of study.

Michał Głowiński: Different Topoi for Different Catastrophes

The bodily nature of topoi, which slightly changes their meaning from field to field, can be observed in one telling example—or one body, so to speak, Michał Głowiński's. His approach to the issues of topos and topoi links Bal's argument to the case of Holocaust studies, and in particular the fact that the discourse of the Shoah operates within its own

terminology, even though it preserves the somewhat fictitious coherence with methods and means of expression employed by other disciplines. When we use literary terms while talking about the Holocaust, they almost always have the traits of a “travelling concept,” or rather, of a peculiar combination of “travelling concepts,” and “anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973). Holocaust studies’ scholars when reading Holocaust literary texts are obviously forced to use the tools proper for the discipline of literary criticism. They feel compelled, however, to draw a distinct line between their (our) field of studies and “ordinary” literature. There are many examples: Michael André Bernstein’s “backshadowing,” (Bernstein 1994) designed to differ from “foreshadowing” in order to depict a tragic irony inscribed in Holocaust testimonies, Robert Eaglestone’s “histories in reverse” as a Holocaust-specific narrative phenomenon, (Eaglestone 2009) or Barbara Engelking’s “abyssal situation” in the ghetto (Engelking 1996; Wolski 2013 and 2014). Such concepts, however, not only travel between disciplines and scholars but also within one thread of thought—one scholarly body. In the article *Cztery typy fikcji narracyjnej* (1986) [*Four types of narrative fiction*], a fundamental text of the Polish structuralist school, Michał Głowiński employs the speech act theory as a literary critic in order to present fiction as a mode of everyday communication, including literature, political propaganda and everyday situations, whereas as a Holocaust literary scholar in his introduction to *Stosowność i forma* (2005) [*Adequacy and Form*] he claims that: “documentary writing has no right to become fictional writing; when it does so, in less dramatic cases we face a slight aberration, in more drastic ones—a fraud” (Głowiński 2005, 10). The obvious discrepancy between the two approaches results from everything but inconsequence. Quite the opposite: it marks Głowiński’s deep understanding of the way the discipline works, namely: that it is driven by a strong ethical imperative founded on the hypothesis of uniqueness of the event, which demands a separate means of representation and therefore generates its own language. That is where Mickiewicz is once again quite useful: he provides a metaphor for the core somatic aspect of Holocaust memory in Poland which is buried under a seemingly cold, rigid layer of ready-made concepts—or topoi if you will—such as “the transport,” “the ramp,” “selection,” “gas,” etc., which we are able to use as if they were notions referring to a distant past with minimal influence on our present life, but in fact they reek of hot, fluid, disgusting associations. The only twist to the image borrowed from Mickiewicz is that this disgust does not constitute a rigid and superfluous cover, but the very core of the phenomenon. In fact, contemporary communal memory of the Holocaust in Poland, as diagnosed by Grzegorz Niziołek, might be illustrated by reactions such as “We’ve had enough of it already,” or “it’s there, it’s been done, we know, but what can you do, don’t torment us with it anymore” (Paraphrases from

Niziołek 2013, 125–137). Roma Sendyka calls these reactions by their proper name: “disgust” (Sendyka 2015, 502).

The Living Body of Holocaust Topoi

The Holocaust topos understood as a *locus communis* is open to interpretations, just as topoi themselves sometimes allegedly resemble a historically established factoid ready to be picked up as if in a historical supermarket. This may be why professional readers of Holocaust literature feel compelled to set a language of their own—going against, so to speak, Bal’s idea of traveling concepts and discern themselves from the “common” uses of the critical jargon. But eventually the drive to set a different language goes hand in hand with the actual immanence of the language already petrified by existing topoi (“the ramp,” “*Arbeit macht frei*,” etc.). Therefore, it is so important to investigate how this banalization of the Holocaust as a “petrified cliché” works in us.

A precedent for this has been already set by Anna Artwińska. While analyzing the narratives by Anna Janko and Sergey Lebedev (Artwińska 2016) she borrowed the notion of epigenetics mentioned at a certain point by Janko in order to confirm the psychosomatic reactions to the Holocaust as an experience not only inherited but epigenetically acquired and as such transferred to the offspring—or rather for all of us who inherit the memory as a society.³ Both epigenetic discourse as used by Artwińska and Holocaust studies scholars’ search for a unique methodological language express the same need to find something real within the contemporary discourse of the Shoah “invaded by pop culture,” something that will not dissolve in the liquid modernity or get lost among various postfactual truths; i.e. this was precisely the aim of Curtius. Moreover, something that will help us transgress the remorseless rules of the cruel field we operate within: the human studies not letting us confront abstract concepts with reality, instead forcing us to compare abstract concepts with other abstract concepts—texts with texts.

Topoi: How to Uncover the Disgusting Truth

This is precisely where the concept of topos can come in handy. Especially if we keep in mind its somatic aspect marked by the feeling of disgust. Disgust, according to the well-known theory by Aurel Kolnai (Kolnai 1929), modified by Winfried Menninghaus (Menninghaus 2009) and to some extent by Mary Douglas (Douglas 1966), differs from many other affects such as fear or hate on two levels. First, it always refers to physiology—greasy, sweaty, smelly substances. It is maybe the only affective reaction to a transgression of the bodily barrier between the internal and the external based entirely on physiological matter: we can feel fear from within, we can hate ourselves, but we do not—save mental

disabilities—feel disgusted by the content of our own stomach, until it crosses the boundary of our body. It is disgusting only when it crosses it—when it becomes vomit, spit, excrement, or numerous other fluids or substances. Second, the common reaction to it is not an escape or withdrawal, i.e. displacing ourselves, but an attempt to remove the disgusting substance—or a person—while remaining at the same spot. The somatic aspect of Holocaust topoi works in a very similar way. As long as the experience is hidden underneath a clean layer of ready-made commonplaces, it remains virtually unnoticed, even though spoken of. Once it crosses the barrier of accepted modes of expression, it becomes disgusting and provokes reactions of horror and disgust described by Niziołek and Sendyka combined with an instinct to bury it under the safe cover again or to eliminate it.

Jedwabne: “How Long Can We Punish Ourselves for a Grandfather Holding a Match”

Jedwabne has generated many post-Holocaust topoi, in particular the barn, aptly analyzed in this context by Piotr Dobrosielski. His analysis of that topos—*trace*, as it is called in the book—opens with a quotation from Janusz Wojciechowski’s anti-Gross and anti-Pasikowski article published in a Catholic journal *Niedziela* [Sunday]. In an obvious reference to the burning of the barn with the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne or Wąsosz inside, oddly combining the feeling of disgust as defined by Kolnai and Menninghaus with the epigenetic discourse as described by Artwińska: “How long can we punish ourselves for a grandfather holding a match” (Dobrosielski 2017, 366). *Łąka umarłych* (2010) [*Meadow of the Dead*], a popular novel by Marcin Pilis also tackles the issue of intergenerational responsibility and the way it becomes inscribed into both communal and individual DNA. It tells the story of Andrzej Hołotyński, who in communist-era Poland visits the secluded village where his father spent the war and witnessed a Jedwabne-like massacre of the local Jewish community executed by the Polish inhabitants. Even if the barn itself is absent—the killing takes place around the town and monastery⁴—the novel reaches deep into a topical position of Jedwabne in the Polish communal images.

The village is separated from the outer reality as a form of a penance, forced upon it not only by the spiritual leader but also because the culprits who are now low-level communist officials treat the complicated local situation like an unwanted, yet still acute, disgusting problem. Andrzej, who is forced to enter the town on foot because the bus driver refuses to go near the cursed place:

[...] follows an empty path. He felt surrounded by the dense silence. High trees circling the village created an icy barrier, separating it

from what might be the outside world. He looked up and imagined an impassable line drawn there to protect and to warn. The overwhelming emptiness was intensified by the drowsy deadliness of the homes, motionless equipment covered by a thick layer of stale water. (Pilis 2012, 325)

The scene ends with an image of smoke rising from the chimneys of the “drowsy,” “dead” houses. Once inside, Hołotyński continues moving in circles and lives in an observatory covered by a sphere-shaped roof, where he finds evidence of the massacre. The time in Great Linden is also circular: the quarterly bodily self-affliction is a penance every villager participates in. It becomes the only rhythm of their social life, more important than any religious festivity, and the only thing their particular lives will always be based on. Time is no longer linear, no one can escape from Great Linden, where the only sense of life is based on cheap wine and the ritual.

Pilis’ novel occupies a very peculiar spot in terms of readers’ response: judging by commentaries on the Internet, it appears to be accepted by both right- and left-wing readers. Despite deviating from the desired version of the event in which the Germans, not the Poles initiate and execute the massacre, *Łąka umarłych* does not leave any doubt: “The Germans don’t even have to make an effort. [...] They have the whole village to do the dirty job for them” (Pilis 2012, 512). One of the reasons may be the fact that it offers a cathartic point in the topography of this locus communis, balancing the “epigenetic” guilt, by introducing the monastery, i.e. an institution deeply rooted in the Polish tradition and trusted socially. This fact, however, explains why the conservative readers identify with the narrative. But why do those who do not seek conciliatory half-truths follow suit?

It would be useful to start answering this question by presenting a narrative accepted only by one side of the politically polarized group of unprofessional readers. Marcin Wolski’s *Wallenrod* (2012) seems to be a perfect example. This piece of political fiction tells the story of Poland not losing the war. It does not focus on Jedwabne per se, but offers a very telling scene engaging the communal topos of the Polish innocence during the Second World War:

The flames reached the straw ceiling which immediately turned into one giant torch. An unholy scream was heard from within. A scream which all of those who gathered around will remember until the Judgment Day. Franek ran to the door. It was closed. He and Kolp pushed frantically [...] The lock finally let go.

—Out, get out, people, get out!—he yelled. (Wolski 2012, 211)

This example constitutes a very intriguing example of a “double phantasm.” Not only is the story—to say the least—doubtful, according to

the facts reported by Szmul Wasersztajn and many others (Gross 2003; Tomczok 2016), but it has been inscribed into a narrative a priori creating a world in which Jedwabne or Wąsosz could not have happened. As Paweł Tomczok states: “Since there has been no September [i.e. the Polish defeat at the beginning of the Second World War, which in the book did not happen], there could not have been the Russian and German invasions. Hence: there could not have been a Polish Holocaust bystander, let alone a culprit” (Tomczok, forthcoming). Wolski therefore de-somatizes his Jedwabne by placing nonexistent people in an impossible world. By that logic, his use of the topos is flawed not because it represents an alternative (i.e. historically unconfirmed) view of the events, but because he is trying to construct a decontextualized topos,⁵ detached from the Holocaust discourse (which is not a mistake *per se* but proves his total obstruction toward non-conservative historians of the Shoah—not to mention lack of sensitivity propelled by Głowiński and theorized by Bal)⁶ in an attempt to impose a fixed idea on an otherwise complicated reality. What in Curtius’ case has become a point of an academic debate, in the case of Wolski can result only in an act of false belief. Or, to put it differently: Curtius’ topoi may have been accused of being no more than rigid archetypes—and Jung’s archetypes of being no more than psychoanalytic phantasies—Wolski’s vision of Jedwabne can only result in an a priori refutation.

(Everlasting) Closure (of the Postcatastrophe)

Piotr Dobrosielski wrote in his aforementioned description of the post-Holocaust trace/topos of the Jedwabne barn: “Our contemporary notions of the center and periphery as related to the Holocaust experience have little to do with their understanding during the war, when the relation between them was quite different” (Dobrosielski 2017, 377). Though he meant the epistemological hierarchy of events⁷ and not the construction of post-Holocaust narratives, his observation relates to the main topos, which, as we will now argue, makes Pilis’ novel so appealing to the wide public. Pilis inscribes his Jedwabne in a sphere with a reversed relation between the inside and the outside. On basic topographical levels his villagers are simply closed within geographical, mental, etc. spheres—they cannot escape the place where they committed a sin. However, the sin has been so dreadful as to become part of their existence—the sphere they are imprisoned in are deeply inscribed in their own bodies. For them, the sphere they live in is no longer Parmenides’ ideal form of being, Pemberton’s perfect shape of a town, or even Bachelard’s model of being as such.⁸ It is more of a “*Blase*” (Sloterdijk 2011), Sloterdijk’s sphere as a model for the lost boundary between the inside and the outside, as symbolized by the model of a globe. The perfect sphere of the globe, says Sloterdijk, is horrifying precisely because it is perfect. We can only see

what is outside and it scares us because we have lost the cozy feeling of not knowing that the outside is overwhelmingly huge and unpredictable. Once Hołotyński enters Great Linden he begins to embody the sphere, he becomes part of the disgusting secret that can no longer be used as a topos of a burning barn, but a terrifying globe which he cannot escape from (Sloterdijk 2015). The sphere becomes a proprioceptive quality of his being—he follows the line of a circle or a sphere. The horror of Jedwabne-generated topoi is thus not that it has been done some time ago; the real problem is not that we do not want to take responsibility for our grandfathers holding the match. The main issue is that we cannot erase him from our DNA—we will forever bear him inside. Once he comes out, he will provoke disgust—hence Wolski’s “double effacement” not only aiming to efface his “communal grandfather” but to cancel the possibility that he existed at all; to erase his whole past and present.

The topos, however, persists. The fact that Pilis’ novel, not at all a masterpiece, is recognized by virtually any reader (including the professional one). This stems from the fact that just as Wolski—and Curtius, *toutes proportions gardées*—it is trying to make sense of the catastrophe. Albeit not by imposing a rigid structure on a made-belief, but by negotiating both its historical reference and contemporary political, ideological, etc. contexts (hence the penance, the monastery). When Hołotyński enters Great Linden, he does not even have to notice the thick atmosphere of being forever locked in the sphere—he already carries it with him. He moves about in circles as if his proprioceptive abilities were limited to this motion. Proprioception means using the space as if it was an extension of one’s body: our movement in space to an extent reflects the way we move our bodies as such. We do not think about moving an arm—we just do it as a reflex, (Danto 2001) just as in most cases we do not think whether we should go around a building or pass it in another way—we just go along the most natural path (Shusterman 2012). In Hołotyński’s case, the movement includes the communal memory of the events which took place in Great Linden/Jedwabne. As a matter of fact, Wolski is not the only author to utilize this approach. For example, Józef Hen’s *Pingpongista* (2008) [*The Ping-pong Player*] presents a narrator who returns to his hometown Cheremiec, where Jews were also burned to death in a barn. He recalls his youth and his friends burnt in the barn by means of a song sung by women by the river—a very telling symbol of the everlasting return. Then he meets a lunatic who murders cats around the town and who serves as a constant symbol of the murderous instincts of the villagers.⁹ The name of the town itself is a reference to “herem,” a rabbinic curse of exclusion from the Jewish community creating a four-cubit circle of void around the cursed one. All these circumstances constitute an image of a sphere, of a spatially or temporarily closed circle.

Living in postcatastrophic times, as results from the aforementioned explanation offered by Tippner, means constantly re-living the past. The

concept of topos, as we tried to argue, is anything but a skeleton left in the corner of a dusty laboratory—a rigid structure containing a once-and-for-all fixed meaning; it changes from discipline to discipline (Bal), from one epoch to another (Koselleck) or even from one polycontextural role to another (Głowiński). Yet, most of all, it reflects not only a representation of an experience excavated from the past but also the emotions as well as political, historical, and other attitudes growing around it. Lastly, it makes it possible to immediately mark an attempt to influence the whole structure. Even if one does not merely try to make the grandfather holding the match disappear but erase the whole world (globe, sphere) he lived in.

Notes

- 1 *Europäische Literatur und lateinische Literatur* meant a literature that can be linked directly to the preceding 20-something centuries of its history.
- 2 Koselleck was the only one living to see the last volume of the dictionary published.
- 3 Epigenetics is a complicated and often criticized concept—see e.g. Richards 2006; we reference this theory/hypothesis as one of many symptoms of the contemporary will to establish a firm, individual influence on the chaotic human existence.
- 4 The point of this example being also that the barn, although central, cannot be considered the only topos of Jedwabne.
- 5 I.e. he does precisely opposite of what Koselleck and his colleagues did in their academic project.
- 6 That is not a mistake *per se* but proves his total obstruction toward non-conservative historians of the Shoah—not to mention lack of sensitivity propelled by Głowiński and theorized by Bal.
- 7 For example, for non-Jews the death camps were a relatively marginal experience compared to “everyday” killing, hiding, help or lack thereof for the persecuted, etc.
- 8 “Jedes Dasein scheint in sich rund” [Every being seems perfect in itself] as he famously said referring to Karl Jaspers (Bachelard 1994, 232).
- 9 The figure of a cat can be understood as lesser known Holocaust topos of Jewish fate (Jarzyna 2016; Krupiński 2016), “animal studies” issue of the journal *Narracje o Zagładzie* (2017) and novels such as *Ocalił mnie kowal* (1956) [*The blacksmith saved me*] by Izabela Gelbard-Czajka.

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18 The Visuality of the Holocaust in the Digital Environment: Examining the Case of Pinterest

Kamil Činátl and Čeněk Pýcha

Introduction

The afterlife of the Holocaust has always been connected with visibility. When the first information about concentration camps was spread among the public in 1945, it was mainly mediated visually. The photographs taken at the liberation of the camps became a fixed part of Holocaust commemoration as they are used for educational purposes in museums, exhibitions, and History textbooks (Brink 1998). This visual code was stabilized through frequent repetition and various remediations. The cultural memory of the Holocaust embedded photographs, such as of liberated prisoners in Buchenwald, the gate to Auschwitz I, the main rail entrance of Auschwitz-Birkenau or of innumerable dead bodies, into fixed and closed historical contexts. Initially the semantics of the pictures was subordinate to narrative forms, which were the fundamental frames of commemoration. Images supplemented narrations about historical guilt and punishment. The meaning of atrocity was communicated by means of cause and consequence. The photographs could be understood as evidence that transparently referred to the historical reality (Zelizer 2001). However, the dominance of narration has been weakening over the last two decades and the pictures have been released from the initially fundamental frames. Several possible reasons may be traced: the impact of new media based on visibility (Ernst 2013), shifts in time perception (Assmann 2013, Hartog 2016), and remembering from “generation after” perspective, the so-called post-memory (Hirsch 2001).

The following text will discuss issues and ways of commemoration in the era of digitalization. The large amount of social media content related to the past is surprising since users spend there their free time voluntarily. In some ways, this allows us access to authentic relationships that agents have to the past, which are difficult to document in certain environments (for example, within families, schools, or other institutions). The chapter aims to present our experience by using these digital applications in case studies. The digital environment of Pinterest is taken as a model of

contemporary memory practices. Our observations can be read along with the contemporary developments in media studies. A thesis of memory theories is presented as the basis of the additional research. Pinterest was chosen because of the complexity of its system and the number of possible interactions and usage practices. Some observations, phenomena, and especially the general conclusions are also valid for other image-based social networks (Instagram, for example).

This chapter focuses the key concept of this book—postcatastrophe—from the perspective of circulation of images in the new media ecologies. Postcatastrophe can be understood in this sense as a media process, where the images of disasters and atrocities play an important role and shape the general feelings of agents and recipients. The visual images of Holocaust were decisive element in the forming postcatastrophe visibility (see the introduction of this book). Authors of this chapter examine the connections and entanglements surrounding the images of the Holocaust in the ecologies of digital social media. Visuality of postcatastrophe becomes part of the consumption of images and new cultural practices in these ecologies. Documents of the Holocaust (especially photos) gain in this process new content and new meanings.

Pinterest as Media Memory Ecology

Before the case studies are discussed, it is necessary to explain the approaches to the research. It combines different methodologies, with interest in both memory studies and media theory. The key methodological approaches, sometimes defined as the third phase of memory studies, emphasize performative and dynamic aspects of remembering (Tilmans et al. 2010). Astrid Erll's concept of traveling memory (Erll 2011) is one of these approaches as well as the concept of entangled memory (Feindt et al. 2014). The relation of new media and memory defined by Andrew Hoskins as new media ecology is also relevant (Hoskins 2011). The focus on memory practices from below in order to describe how individual agents use the past is the key starting point for the research of Pinterest.

For the analytical section, the authors of this chapter used their experience of browsing and surfing the image-based social medium Pinterest. While it does not primarily serve as a tool for interpreting or narrating history, its users visit it for keeping the inspiring images from the internet—the most common topics of “pins” are cooking, weddings, design, etc. According to the content and some research, it seems that the majority of users are women (Simpson and Mazzeo 2017). Nevertheless, Pinterest can be seen as a space, where people are remembering. Remembering on Pinterest has two levels. Firstly, users are utilizing Pinterest as an extension of memory—they are saving some ideas that could be useful later for them. Secondly, some users are creating content that directly relates to history and to concrete historical topics.

This chapter is focusing on this second aspect of remembering on Pinterest, but it will be productive to keep in mind the first perspective of everyday memorizing of ideas on Pinterest during analyzing the content and formulating the thesis.

As with any digital service, the interface of Pinterest is very fluid. During the research, carried out in 2017, the environment of Pinterest was changing, with new functions appearing and others, especially some of those most important for our research, going missing. However, this is the reality of the unstable space of the internet. That is one of the reasons why we are not trying to quantify some of Pinterest's phenomena. We prefer to use Pinterest over a longer time period and search for common user practices rather than use it to provide the exact data analysis in our approach.

As previously mentioned, throughout our preparatory phase we made numerous observations leading to unanswered questions—especially how actual people authentically relate to the past—that motivated us to research this topic. This text however is more focused on a description of some of the practices and the environment from the user's point of view, rather than on exact research. We would like to offer Pinterest as a model of a system, where memory is given a specific form and a relationship to the past is created. Pinterest offers the model of contemporary communication. In addition, the fact that Pinterest was not designed as a tool for interpreting history, furthers our understanding of Pinterest within the frame of media ecology as a medium where different topics are discussed and negotiated. Media ecology is understood here as “a complex set of interrelationships within a specific balanced environment” (Hoskins 2011, 24). This chapter is using Pinterest as a window that shows the stream and entanglements of images of the past (specifically the Holocaust) in contemporary society.

The grand narratives that were important for the formation of collective memories (like national, regional, or religious memory) have been corroding. This does not mean that they are not important anymore. However, the structure of memory has changed; it is no longer shaped in clear lines, but rather in entanglements. Different factors play an important role in creating the memory of a subject. This trend is stronger in the digital environment, where different and alternative contents are easily available and where everyone can produce texts, photographs, emotions, and narratives. Andrew Hoskins speaks about new media ecologies, where media and memory interact (Hoskins 2011).

Pinterest and other social media definitely affect the shape of collective memory. But one can also be sure that the users' practices are shaped by collective memory and other cultural phenomena. One of the key observations is that it is not possible to separate form from content in the environment of Pinterest. Thus, from our perspective, the interface and social practices of Pinterest can serve as an ideal example of a memory media ecology.

Pinterest as Archive

The user interface on Pinterest leads its users to save some ideas for the future. Not only can users create their personal archives of photographs and organize them into thematic boards, but they can also note that they already tried out something from their stored ideas. An observer can then recognize an interesting shift of the concept of time in this act. Thus, without doubt, the use of Pinterest can be classified as an “archival practice.” According to Aleida Assmann, there is something called “archival memory” (*Speichergedächtnis*) stored in classical archives, which is not used in contemporary memory practices and not a living part of the canon. So far archival memory was left aside, waiting for the re-framing of the canon in the archive (compared to working memory (*Funktionsgedächtnis*)) (Assmann 2003, 14–16). Archival memory can be seen as the potentiality of memory. But the concept of archival memory has been changing, with the digitalization and other developments in the archives. In a digital archive, the artifacts are not hidden as deeply as in non-digital ones. Therefore, the reframing and re-contextualization can take place much faster (Ernst 2013, 87). This is the reason why Andrew Hoskins uses a new metaphor regarding the relationship of memory and media. Hoskins operates with the term *connective turn*, which is defined as “a paradigmatic shift in the treatment and comprehension of memory and its functions and dysfunctions” (Hoskins 2011, 20). According to Hoskins, the connective turn is the moment in time when the communication networks saturate the demand for information in the given society (the transition from scarcity to postscarcity culture). Hoskins is looking for a metaphor of memory practices that could describe the complicated situation of memory after the connective turn in the postscarcity culture. Hoskins suggests the term (media) ecology. “Media ecology is then the idea that media technologies can be understood and studied like organic life-forms, as existing in a complex set of interrelationships within a specific balanced environment” (Hoskins 2011, 24). Furthermore, Hoskins uses the term “ecology” in conjunction with the past, especially when referring to archival spaces after digitalization. “But today the archive itself is transformed, mediatized, networked and part of the newly accessible and highly connected new memory ecology” (Hoskins 2011, 25).

From our point of view, Pinterest can be seen as the system closest to Hoskins’ conception. Pinterest has the qualities of an autonomous and complex system that works with data from the real world. Real people join the system with their own interests and values (including their relationships to the past). But the system itself co-creates the content. The borders separating from media and content are no longer visible, and we find ourselves in the middle of Pinterest’s media memory ecology.

Entangled Memory

However, the ecosystem is not fully isolated. If we are looking for traces of Holocaust memory in the digital environment, we should ask what kind of memory we are confronted within this space. Just as the authorities of the third phase of memory studies have done, we could call it entangled memory (Feindt et al. 2014).

Here, the focus has shifted to individual subjects and their acts of remembering. “Every act of remembering inscribes an individual in plural social frames. This polyphony entails, furthermore, the simultaneous existence of concurrent interpretations of the past” (Feindt et al. 2014, 43). For the research of Holocaust representations in a social media network this is also an important assumption. Individuals (users) interact with changing social frames in a changing and liquid environment. Old social frames like nation or religion are still visible, but new, unusual and surprising lines of interpretation interrupt them. It is possible to understand these lines as entanglements and describe them in some cases. It helps to comprehend the entangled character of memory in the media memory ecology.

Structure of Pinterest

Pinterest is an image-based social network, which was launched in March 2010. The key user practice of Pinterest is pinning images and creating boards:

Pins could be virtually anything, but typical examples include images of modern kitchens, snapshots of toddlers creating crafts, and photos of common household items captioned with “genius” uses for those items. Boards, which categorize the pins, might be conceived narrowly or broadly: “Beautify Nails,” “Elf on a Shelf,” “Cleaning and Organization,” and “Words to Live By” are just a few examples. (Wilson and Yochim 2015, 233)

However, browsing Pinterest, it is possible to find many images and boards relating to the past. History is one of the selectable tags for the search in the basic menu of the Pinterest environment and our attention was drawn by the unusual combination of photographs in history-themed boards. It was necessary for the analysis to comprehend some basic mechanisms how the representation of the Holocaust on Pinterest works.

Image and Pin

Images (especially photographs) form the core of the Pinterest environment. Users’ interaction with Pinterest is based on viewing images that

were pinned to Pinterest from the whole digital world on the internet. We can imagine Pinterest as a store of photographs that the user can browse. Compared to a brick-and-mortar store, Pinterest provides more ways to search for the content and enables the user to see links between images (for example, by visual similarity or thematic proximity). Photographs on Pinterest also serve as links to the original context (the website) in which the photographs were published. Thanks to this function, we can also consider Pinterest as a “bookmarking service” that helps users search the internet.

Boards

Users can create their own boards where they can pin photographs and thus co-create Pinterest’s content. Users can pin photographs either chosen directly from Pinterest or, thanks to a browser extension, from anywhere on the internet. Boards create the core of our analysis. We believe that the boards on Pinterest can help us see some social practices that relate to history in the digital environment. The people using Pinterest create boards that are traces of their perception of history. A board is shaped by its title, its description, and the pins (images and photographs) it contains. In our analysis, we have focused specifically on the titles and images. The fact that people have created their own archives of photographs (boards) connected to the past (most often by titling something with something like *Holocaust*, etc.) was the deciding factor for our interest in the environment of Pinterest. The immediate vicinity of different photographs in one board shows how the users construct their knowledge and the image they have of the past; we are thus facing some interpretations of history that we cannot find in textbooks. The contextual relationship between the images varied and we found a few surprises in some cases. Firstly, boards can be divided according to their thematic keys (“The Holocaust,” “WWII,” “History”). In some cases, however, the titles provide additional information, telling us something about the values of the board’s creator (“Holocaust Remembrance,” “Things I don’t like,” “WWII Heroes,” etc.). They can also be connected to places (“Places I’ve been:”) or to the personal perspective (“My Style,” “Quotes”).

Related Pins

Pinterest has different levels and users can use it with increasing depth. This means that it is possible to follow some lines and search for new content. We can describe this process as image consumption based on the semiosis of specific topics or icons. We included a few examples of these cases of utilization in the text below. One of the tools that can catch the user in a trap of semiosis is the “related pins” function. On the screen detail of the pin (the photograph), the user can not only find information

about the pin itself, but also other photographs that relate to the pin.¹ The choice of photographs is governed by a specific algorithm—artificial intelligence based on a combination of the co-occurrence of images on the boards, co-occurrence of pins in one user session, text-based description of photos, visual similarity of images, and segmentation according to regional or thematic criteria (Liu et al. 2017). The system and the artificial intelligence can influence the practice of looking at images and, in the material that we focused on, the perception of history. The significant thing is that it is impossible to define the author of interpretation. The system of Pinterest interacts with the practices and customs of users, so it is representative in that specific way. From this point of view, we can say that the artificial intelligence can learn some regularities of perception of history and historical memory but also it can influence them at the same time and contribute to the interpretation in various ways. In the present interface of Pinterest (2020) this function is called “More like this.”

Visually Similar Results

A tool similar to “related pins” is the image search based on visual similarity. Through a technical analysis of an image, this system can recognize similar motifs. This tool shows that we are just operating with digital reflections of photographs on Pinterest. Every photograph can be split into pixels; every image in the digital environment has a numeric representation. This fact allows us to operate with visual similarity. However, depending on the amount of existing data, the meaning of “similarity” may differ. We used this tool for diagnosing how fixed some visual icons are. Our hypothesis is that the system is more successful in linking visual icons representing the Holocaust, because on Pinterest there is large amount of these motifs (like the gate to Auschwitz) and thus the system is provided with more data for the analysis. They link unusual images of the Holocaust to pictures that are visually similar but that have no connection to the topic. In the present interface of Pinterest (2020), this function is called “More ideas.” It can be seen as a form of entanglement and reflects the complicated nature of the digital environment. Entanglements represent some sets of user’s practices in relation to the images of the Holocaust in the internet (Pinterest) and mirror some shifts in making sense of the past in conditions of media ecologies.²

Cases—Entanglements

Traveling

Pinterest users create boards that function as archives of travel experiences. These travel diaries and photo albums help users to present their social status and share experiences with other users. Pinterest also

provides inspiration for traveling, since it offers pins of places worth visiting and it shows users recent trends. There are lots of pins on Pinterest that, by showing one iconic picture with a short text like “The Top 10 Best Places to Visit in...” or “The Best Places to Eat and See in,” or “20 Reasons You Need to Visit,” or “Things to Do and See in,” point users to travel blogs and websites with more detailed itineraries. It is obvious that the Holocaust belongs to the established topics of global tourism. For example, the board “Travelling!” which summarizes emblematic places of global tourism in 68 pins, presents the Holocaust with a picture of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. There is another place connected with a similarly traumatic event on this board—Ground Zero in New York. User behavior in connection with tourism is quite easy to understand. For this reason, we would like to examine it from the perspective of the aforementioned questions, questions on the representations of the Holocaust in digital environments such as Instagram or Pinterest and on the change of memory practices connected to remembering the Holocaust caused by new media. We want to describe the linkage of particular practices in order to catch hold of concrete memory entanglement.

There are different levels of pin lamination. In the list of globally important tourist destinations, the places, which refer to the catastrophe of the Holocaust, appear as a separate entity, most often in form of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin or as pictures from Auschwitz-Birkenau. The topic emerges further in detailed descriptions of towns, countries, or wider regions. More pins including the Holocaust topic can be found in varying amounts on boards used as travel diaries and photo albums of individual users. This shift can be illustrated with cities such as Berlin, Budapest, and Krakow. For example, Krakow tourist pins refer to the website truenomads.com, where tourists can share experiences and recommendations. The third instruction of a pin “10 Things to Do in Cracow” tells us to visit the Auschwitz Concentration Camp:

50 km west of the beautiful Cracow lies an ominous reminder of the area’s grim past—the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Auschwitz, which saw the mass murder of 1.3 million Jews between 1942 and 1944, under the rule of the Nazi Third Reich, was made into a museum in ’49. It’s something you really don’t want to see, but shouldn’t miss at the same time.³

The top ten places to see also include Oskar Schindler’s enamelware factory, which refers to the famous film *Schindler’s List* by Steven Spielberg. Thanks to a pin of “Things to see and do in Berlin,” users can find a website recommending the Holocaust Memorial. The Holocaust Memorial works as an extremely popular Instagram place in the context of other tourist attractions in the city. The Danube river memorial plays a similar role in Budapest.

Individual users' boards show how the Holocaust topic is proportionally represented in the register of tourist sights and stereotyped pictures. They help us observe the way in which the tourist experience of the Holocaust is expressed. The individual tourist boards of Prague, Vienna, and Budapest present the Holocaust in the context of other sights and monuments.⁴ The author added the following commentary to the pictures: "Holocaust Memorial in Budapest Hungary. That was a terrible time in world history. Never forget the evil man can create, be ever aware of the happenings of the world, do not let history repeat itself,"⁵ and "Very sad. The Memorial to the Jewish people after WWII. Beautiful memorial but tragic just the same."⁶

More complex travel diaries called, for example, "Places I've been,"⁷ report on personal travel experiences without focusing on particular regions. They show individualized tourist trajectories that indicate the proportional representation of the Holocaust in a wider scale (among 174 pins, Auschwitz is represented three times, the Berlin monument twice, the Anne Frank Haus in Amsterdam once). Personal comments are often added to the photographs, for example: "Auschwitz—Poland. This will be an experience we will never forget..."⁸

Let us attempt to describe the model memory practices of Pinterest. A Pinterest user is looking for some inspiration for a tourist trip. He or she finds a list of must-see places. In some areas—Europe in general, Poland more specifically, other particular towns and places—the Holocaust topic is thus predetermined. The user learns that they should visit these places in order to follow recent trends. On their board, they then describe an individual trajectory, choose places that grabbed his attention, and add his personal comments. Pinterest provides space to present travel experiences and to reproduce the importance of the tourist locations. Through the personal archive (the board) the user appropriates content that otherwise freely circulates on the internet and makes it personal. Such appropriation in the case of travel diaries does not bring diversity to the individual trajectories but rather confirms the predetermined trends that Pinterest offers. In this practice, the Holocaust is not defined as causally organized historical knowledge but rather as a place of commemoration connected with a catastrophe. In their comments, users concentrate on their emotional reactions to the historic places or declare their consent to certain values. The feeling of space and the visibility of the places are enhanced, and historical knowledge is often reduced to very schematic information.

Visual Similarity vs. Fixed Visuality

Historical pictures on Pinterest are organized not only according to correlation (related pins) emphasizing topical connection but also according to the principle of visual similarity. Both ways are derived from



Figure 18.1 Shoes on the Danube River Memorial, Budapest.

criteria given by artificial intelligence. The principle of visual similarity can be demonstrated using objects connected to remembering the Holocaust. They are subjects of frequent photographic reproduction, such as in the case of a train placed on the track at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.⁹

The placement and the context of this picture that was on the main page of the application is mainly given by semantic references which work with historical connections. However, if the user's attention is drawn to a particular scene, she or he can follow tracks determined by visual similarity. If the user opens a pin separately by pressing the icon in the bottom right corner of the picture, she or he can go to “visually



Figure 18.2 Auschwitz II-Birkenau Death Camp, Railway Carriage on Siding.

similar results.” In the case of the photograph of the train, sorting takes the object into account in terms of its profile, structure, age, colors, and the vertical composition underlined by the presence of the rails. Consequently, Pinterest offers pictures of other trains and locomotives but also of lighthouses and mills. The selection can be traced in the selection of the tags offered by the application for further viewing (barn, lighthouse, red barns, caboose, railroad, abandoned, training, red).¹⁰

It is interesting to observe the principle of visual similarity in connection with the conventionalized pictures of the Holocaust that are reproduced on a mass scale. These include pictures of barbed wires, guardian towers, and the brick houses of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Visually similar results found and offered by Pinterest are pictures of gardens, garden architecture (walls, railings, stairs), and Victorian houses. In the case of these Auschwitz pictures, Pinterest offers visually similar tags of castles, England, Scotland, and abandoned buildings.

However, some frequently reproduced pictures/images work in a different way. The image of the Auschwitz gate with its iconic sign saying “Arbeit macht frei” has a fixed composition, and thus visually similar results offer only the tag “Auschwitz” and pictures that are nearly identical. Rather exceptionally, there is a picture of brick architecture with a different sign. Artificial intelligence brings visually similar results

in the case of the railroad tracks in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp or the Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

The three aforementioned images with a strongly fixed visual identity can help us reflect upon users' behavior within the application as well as in real places of memory. The stability of these images has a quantitative aspect. There are so many photographs of these places on Pinterest that they simply fill up the field for visually similar results. Through similarity, Pinterest shows us sights that are reproduced by photographing the Holocaust most often. The application influences its users' behavior in the real space since it sets places and sights in advance which should be photographed. The qualitative aspect of the pictures is given by their composition and fixed visual structure.

The photographs of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin look alike thanks to the distinctive architecture of the site and the size of its ground. Pictures of the Auschwitz gate and pictures of the railroad tracks in Auschwitz-Birkenau (all taken vertically to follow the tracks leading to the main gate of the camp) are similar as well. The extent of the scene's fixation is related to how emotionally impressive the pictures are and to their semantic coherence. The picture is complete, there is no disturbing place, there is no need to add anything else. No recipients' interpretation activity is needed. Users' orientation on fixed types of pictures is typical for the way users relate to the Holocaust on Pinterest. Such behavior in the new media and ecological system reveals more general evidence of remembering in the regime of entangled memory.

Decontextualization

Some photographs appear repeatedly on Pinterest; we find them in new and unexpected contexts again and again. That is the case with some monuments, like those in Berlin or Budapest. Several photographs of Anne Frank and her family are pinned in thousands of new variations on various Pinterest boards. We also find unusual and rare photographs. Hereafter, we will describe the instance of decontextualization, which is quite common for Pinterest photographs.

One board from user named "kikimokid," called *Last second*, consists of photographs of executions, especially from the Second World War. This user is not well-connected to the structure of Pinterest, as only a few other users follow his/her boards.¹¹ Eighty-seven photographs are pinned on the board *Last Seconds*, and four users follow it. We find quite iconic photos on this board, like the photograph usually called "The last Jew in Vinnitsa,"¹² which was taken during the massacre led by the SS against the Jewish population in the Ukrainian city of Vinnitsa in 1941. Besides photographs of executions, we also find the photograph of the memorial on the banks of the Danube in Budapest.

Among other images, our attention was drawn to a photograph that, at second glance, appears bizarre to an attentive observer. This photo shows a naked woman holding her child in her arms. A soldier in what is probably an SS-Uniform stands over the woman, pointing his gun at her head. One other soldier is standing by, and the sitting woman is surrounded by naked and probably dead bodies. The picture is of low quality, and the owner of the board commented on it as follows: “Babi Yar. A naked woman cuddles her terrified naked child as the soldiers round them up to be murdered. Do we have the right to consider ourselves the most evolved species on earth? Sometimes I doubt it.”¹³ The user links to the results of a Google search (“Babi Yar” in Images) by clicking on the detail of the photograph, which means that the photograph was pinned to the board from this search. When the observer concentrates on the photograph, though, some questions arise. How could the photographer take this photograph and not be threatened by the soldier holding the gun? Was it even possible, to take a photograph from this particular perspective? What are the strange dark lines on the corners of the photograph?

It is possible to find this photograph pinned to other boards on Pinterest (like the board “Epic history” from user Game of Thrones,¹⁴ or the board “Things I DO NOT like” from user Christos Piperis.¹⁵) Some of these pins link to a strange blog, gordi-zionelder.blogspot.cz, where “Gordi—according to the header of the blog—has been saving some documents to the category of “antisem-holo-jew issues.” On this blog, we learn the source of the photo: it is a picture from the TV series “War and Remembrance,” which aired in 1988. This explains not only the strange position of the photographer but also the dark lines, which are parts of a television frame.

Decontextualization is one of the key principles of Pinterest, as the system is based on new recontextualizations of the content on new boards. This process of creativity has some consequences that influence the informational value of photographs. The original context, which we can imagine as a classical canon or lexicon, is not so important for Pinterest users. The informational value of the photographs lies in their visuality. Reading means looking into the environment of Pinterest. A visual reading of the photographs is based on emotionality; the important elements are not the details—such as who is in the photograph, where was it taken, etc.—but rather the message that is connected with general information about the Holocaust. Some photographs that are suitable for this statement are useless from a classical archival point of view.

The materiality of the archive and sources is blurred in this environment. In fact, there is no technical difference between a scanned archival photograph and one taken of a TV screen; both are codes in .jpg format. We consider these observations crucial for the remembrance of the

Holocaust. In the liquid, digital environment, there are more factors and contexts that create the relationships to the past than in the holistic space of the classical archive. However, there are also tools that could be very helpful for learning how to think critically. We described the case above, where some irrelevant content from the depths of the internet co-created a message about the Holocaust. Still, the system itself also offers some tools that can help the user to differentiate. Using the tool “Visually similar results,” the user can find other versions of the photograph where the source the TV series—is quoted. It is also possible to use other open-access services for visual analysis, like Google Images, that quote the original source. Nevertheless, this requires that the user have some experience with the critical approach to internet. Here, we see a great challenge and opportunity for educators. In this way, we can also consider Pinterest as a model of an environment, where our memory is created.

Conclusion

Within the research on the Holocaust as a part of global memory, Aleida Assmann emphasized that “[...] the quality and extension of the memory of the Holocaust will differ greatly, depending on whether it is framed as a historical trauma, as part of a political agenda, as a cosmopolitan reference, a universal norm or a global icon” (Assmann 2010, 112). Pinterest treats images of atrocity in the way similar to the concept of the Holocaust framed as a global icon. Using this term, Assmann describes the trend of breaking down history into images and reducing historical embeddedness of the Holocaust into stories. The shift toward the concept of the Holocaust as a global icon Assmann defines in several phrases—decontextualization, symbolic extension, emotional identification, analogy, and model (Assmann 2010, 109–111). Our empiric research on Pinterest bears out these theses by showing particular practices leading to decontextualization of Holocaust images. Free circulation of images on Pinterest causes a great extension of symbolic meanings. The description of users’ behavior bears out the shift to emotional identification, thanks to Pinterest the users can re-experience events without indebtedness to historical context and relation to cognitive function. Global icons of the Holocaust have freely traveled across national and cultural borders since the 1990s. According to Assmann, the Holocaust as a global icon frees itself from the institutional infrastructure and expert supervision. The free circulation of pictures in the media context shifts the memory of the Holocaust to decontextualization, symbolic extension, and emotional identification (Assmann 2010, 109). Our survey of Pinterest as a new media model of memory is based on these premises. Our aim was to describe these changes in detail. The inner architecture of the application forms users’ behavior and thus enables us

to describe memory practices. These entanglements make general trends in the commemoration of the Holocaust in the digital era more concrete.

Studying Pinterest, we tried to define trends traceable in the Holocaust photographs. Most of the trends mirror popularity of photographs capturing particular faces. Users' treatment of images reveals a strong position of photographs showing a face. Pinterest presents faces of famous historical figures (Hitler is one of the most popular ones). However, there is a strong trend to present faces of common people as well, of people who did not play any important role in history and did not leave any trace in historiography. The users do not even mind if there is no identification of particular faces of the unknown participants of Holocaust. The absence of information opens space for reinterpretation and new perception of (global) images and visualization of the Holocaust.

We would like to clarify how the popularity of individual faces of the Holocaust is connected to the new visibility. Users of Pinterest can make comments on photographs, which shows how they perceive the narrative nature of photographs. Sometimes users of Pinterest supplement photos with historical context, but such practice is not predominant. The same conclusion may be derived from the way the Pinterest users place pins to their boards. Photographs of faces arouse affective reactions. These photographs motivate the users to express their personal and emotional history experience. Viewers consider their subjective point of view important. Perception of photographs is based on the tension between the viewer's subjective emotion and the participant's remote subjectivity that is symbolized by the mere surface of their personality, by their face. Photographs of faces work on this level as evidence—this particular person was a victim of the Holocaust. These photographs do not refer to the traditional understanding of history, to the framed narrative of the Holocaust and its historical context. When the Pinterest users concentrate on faces, they may feel history as existentially alarming absence: these people lived in the past, they went through terrible events, but we know nothing about their feelings and responses to these events. This process can be as one of the symptoms of the general trend for individualizing victims in Holocaust commemoration. Particularly human faces work on Pinterest as an important metaphor of the past. History is shown as a multiplicity of subjects, as a moving mosaic of faces which a user looks into and can eventually transfer into his/her personal archive. The survey of Pinterest as a media ecology (Hoskins 2011) framing interaction between media and memory confirms more general conclusions about the character of commemoration in postcatastrophic societies.

Remembering the Holocaust frees it from the fixed historic context. Ahistoric temporality predominates. It emphasizes affective experience and empathy of history participants. History is shown from the postcatastrophic (retro)perspective. The digital medium represents the dynamics of history as a motion of pictures within the application. History outside the application

stopped, whereas inside the application it is kept in motion. Historic catastrophes occurred, the past has lost a clear connection to future, and thus cannot be narrated easily. The dynamic temporality of Pinterest, which is changing all the time, forms temporality of represented history. Memory in the digital era is not necessarily related to linear time and historic causality. Memory works as a circulating collection of global icons that are entangled with various memory practices.

Notes

- 1 Like the user who pinned it, the board that it was originally pinned to, the original website where the photo was published.
- 2 The authors of this chapter used Pinterest for several months and searched for the pins and boards interpreting the Holocaust. Their observations are concluded in several case studies called entanglements.
- 3 See <https://truenomads.com/2013/10/things-to-do-in-krakow> [last accessed 14, December 2017]. The link is no longer active. The research was undertaken in 2017. Because of the fluidity of social media, some links are not available.
- 4 The Danube river monument is shown twice among 93 pins.
- 5 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/269230883949982167/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 6 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/269230883949982173/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 7 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/kyliem82/places-ive-been/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 8 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/378443174923660123/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 9 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/702631979336196121/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 10 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/702631979336196121/visual-search/?x=16&y=21&w=530&h=662> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 11 Other topics of boards collected by this user: James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren, Respect America, Nine Eleven, or The Holocaust of Humanity.
- 12 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_last_Jew_in_Vinnitsa [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 13 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/727401777285778260> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 14 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/blue3115/epic-history/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 15 See <https://cz.pinterest.com/pin/539869074062236457/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].

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19 Art, Trauma, and the Shoah: Postcatastrophic Narration and Contemporary Art from Hungary

Jan Elantkowski

Introduction

Art is a special idea. Its specific nature, its non-verbal tools allow it to communicate on a different level than language does. This special status of art seems to be particularly helpful when dealing with topics marked by a great tragedy, such as a borderline experience. In the context of the remembrance of the Shoah Theodor Adorno wrote “[...] it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (Adorno 1982, 312).

I would like to embrace the concept of the catastrophe in a similar way to how the authors of the issue *Narracje postkatastroficzne* [Postcatastrophic narrations] define it: as a process, an ongoing state, “[...] a situation after the catastrophe, a postcatastrophiness as a space-time marked with an extreme experience” (Artwińska et al. 2015, 11). As Dominick LaCapra wrote: “[...] there is an important sense in which the after effects—the hauntingly possessive ghosts—of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone” (LaCapra 2001, x–xi). Precisely this effect can also be discerned in contemporary art. Three works by contemporary Hungarian artists will be discussed with regard to postcatastrophic narration. They are *Niemals vergessen!* (2016) [*Never forget!*] by the artistic duo Lőrinc Borsos (Lilla Lőrinc and János Borsos), *A büszkeség hal meg utoljára* (2014) [*Pride dies last*] by Hajnalka Tulisz, and Marcell Esterházy’s *On the same Day* (2013). This aims to paint a picture of a specific, namely Hungarian, national culture of remembrance. Here I have no intention to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire contemporary Hungarian art scene, but rather an attempt to apply the concept of postcatastrophic narration on the given works, to treat them as examples signifying important issues, and to outline problems and questions I have found relevant in the context of the postcatastrophic. It is not by accident that I have chosen works by artists representing the younger generation. What interests me is the way they operate as “social agents” (András 2008/2009) of the here and now, with means of commenting on a political situation, reflecting on problems and traumas occurring in Hungarian society. For Lőrinc Borsos,

Hajnalka Tulis, and Marcell Esterházy, their postmemory of the war becomes a trigger for their works. They all use the posttrauma of Shoah to play with images. As an art historian, the image is of crucial importance to me and thus will constitute the starting point in my analysis. I will focus on an aesthetic of the postcatastrophic narration with regard to the works mentioned above.

Clearly, art production, especially if it addresses social and political issues, is entangled with the politics of memory. The Hungarian specificity of the politics of memory relies largely on the trauma of the Trianon treaty of 1920 (Kovács 2016). This is yet another layer of complicated and constantly changing remembrance discourse and the politics of memory in Hungary (Pataki 2010; Gyáni 2016; György 2011; Rényi 2020). In the context of the postcatastrophic narration within the cultural sphere in Hungary—and in all other countries of Central and Eastern Europe—it is important to take the burden of its Socialist/Soviet past into account (Erjavec 2014; Mälksoo 2009; Sztompka 2004). The political transition around the year 1989¹ was a turning point for the discourse of remembrance and trauma of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. To define this process, scholars use the term “postsocialist condition,” which in its nature is suspended in a present process, and in its space-time dimension is working similarly to the postcatastrophic (see Fraser 1997; Gille 2010; Erjavec 2003). Thus, it needs to be mentioned that these two concepts work parallelly and hence might be simultaneously inherent both in a discourse and in matter of fact. The legacy of communist past generates a special situation in this part of Europe, which has a distinct effect on the Shoah-related discourse.

Recent years brought progress into the artistic confrontations of the Holocaust remembrance in Hungary. Surprisingly, one of the indicators, bringing substantial quantity to the topic (and sadly often with a lack of quality) was officially appointed by Viktor Orbán’s conservative Fidesz government. Following its directive, the year 2014 in Hungary has been announced as the commemoration year of the Holocaust on its 70th anniversary,² which then divided the cultural scene in Hungary and raised serious ethical questions. A few independent organizations refused to accept funds for their projects from the state that commissioned and executed a highly controversial and problematic Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation.³ The monument is based on a nation-centered perspective, suggesting the victimization of Hungary during the Second World War and thus completely omitting the role the Hungarians played and their responsibility for collaboration with the Nazi regime at that time. Moreover, it was erected secretly—without consultation and against strong disapproval from a number of both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, historians, citizens, etc. This revisionist undertaking remains the most remembered event of the commemoration year, turning it *de facto* into the symbol of its fiasco.

The controversial monument provoked artistic reactions, some of them immediately (like the performance *Universal Anthem* of the Société Réaliste group performed at the independent OFF-Biennale in front of the monument on 25th April 2015), others a little delayed, but still under the influence of current political occurrences, as they are located in the present situation, reflecting on political and social aspects of here-and-now (Elantkowski 2015). The works of the artists discussed here are searching for the traces of the Shoah and for the echo of its traumatic occurrences. The starting point of the works, different means of artistic expression notwithstanding, is a process-centered perspective of what once was the Shoah, and what is now constantly mutating as its trace, as a postcatastrophic narration. I would like to indicate the aesthetic of the postcatastrophic narration in chosen works, visualization of what is perceptible by the means of contemporary art. In other words, the subject here is constituted by the afterimages of the postcatastrophic.

Postcatastrophic Aesthetics in Art: Lőrinc Borsos,⁴ Tulisz and Esterházy

Writing about the aesthetic, however, meets many obstacles since the “Shoah” as an experience burden with a mental and physical hardship boundary simply lacks an appropriate iconography and a visual broadcast medium/visual media (Wolff 2016, 58–59). The absence of a suitable language and symbols, as well as the inability to put oneself in the position of the persecuted: all of those factors make it impossible to find an adequate expression. Art production devoted to the Shoah faces the problem of representation of the unrepresentable (Śpiewak 2013) and a question of the fate of postcatastrophic images (Tippner 2015). Postcatastrophic aesthetic, however, is not—and should not be—about the image as a representation. Trauma is a void, it is the opposite of representation, it stands for something negative, something which is missing, something non-present and impalpable (Libeskind 2003). Since postcatastrophic focuses on the effect, on the afterlife of the event (thus, not on the event itself), the contemporary art’s task is not to explore the question “how to represent.” Rather, it relies on the question of how to find adequate discursive ways about the conditions after the catastrophe. Which is why crucial becomes what the trauma of the Shoah means for modern-day society, and not the question of how to represent the event itself.

I would like to focus on the traces of the postcatastrophic inherent in contemporary art from Hungary. The art allows to continue the discourse, to impose the issues present in society and reflect upon them; it also projects certain problems sending them back as impulses for the collective. Art’s role in shaping the collective mind and remembrance is being a medium, a carrier. Consequently, the artist becomes a “social agent:” enforcing, influencing, and provoking a reaction to the catastrophe as in the here-and-now.



Figure 19.1 Lőrinc Borsos, *Niemals vergessen!*, 2016.

Lőrinc Borsos—*Niemals vergessen!* (2016)

Lőrinc Borsos's work was commissioned for the exhibition +45+55+95+ organized by the Austrian Cultural Forum in Budapest in 2015, a show aiming to problematize national identity in Austria at its "turning points" in the 20th-century history. Robert Menasse's book *Das war Österreich: Gesammelte Essays zum Land ohne Eigenschaften* (2005) [That was Austria. Collected essays on the country without qualities] served as an inspiration for the artist. The starting point of this work is a historic artifact—a series of post stamps from Austria released in 1946. These were first presented in Vienna on the exhibition that was part of the antifascist campaign entitled *Niemals vergessen!* [Never forget] Thus, Lőrinc Borsos named his/her work from 2016 after the 1946 show.

Only eight stamps from the initial series of ten were ultimately published and circulated. The two remaining stamps—depicting a lightning in the shape of the letters "SS" striking the map of Austria and a skeleton with an Adolf Hitler mask—were censored because of their strongly agitating content. The 1946 exhibition came as a quick reaction to the war that had just ended and revealed sudden and radical turn in the Austrian government's propaganda enabling the victim narrative: while looking for a new identity Austria suddenly has found itself a victim of the war.

With the help of a collector, Lőrinc Borsos was able to obtain the entire original series including the two aforementioned unpublished stamps, then he/she covered the insides of the stamps—the image part—with black not transparent enamel paint.

This way an odd group of ten black post stamps was created.

The artist already used this kind of method in previous works (e.g. in the series *Paradise lost* (2014)) when erasing certain motives with the help of black paint. By erasing parts of the respective painting (or in the case of

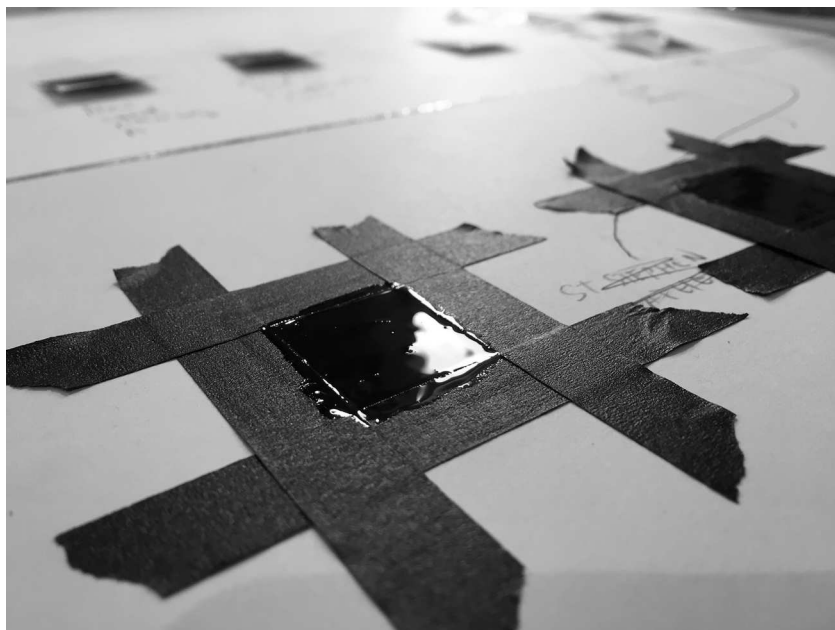


Figure 19.2 Lőrinc Borsos, *Niemals vergessen!*, 2016.

Niemals vergessen!—the whole picture) the artist creates a void, a negative form. The usage of black enamel paint is a characteristic element of Lőrinc Borsos's works and belongs to the artist's mythology. Those black voids "[...] are capable of being charged with censorial, destructive, alienating, appropriating or self-reflexive narratives, depending on the context" (Lőrinc Borsos 2016). Just as with the artist's other work, *Censored Imre Bak* (2015), in which the artist painted over the central section of an original work by Imre Bak, a significant Hungarian abstract painter, the problem of censorship appears again here.

There is an interesting aesthetic aspect connected to it. The gesture of painting over—erasing—is both destroying and reenacting. By creating a void, a denial takes place as well. Lőrinc Borsos seem to imply the aforementioned Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation from 2015 could certainly serve as an adequate motif for a post stamp series. Both Austrian post stamp series and the Budapest monument present a distorted image of history, denying the responsibility for the dark past. They explicitly communicate "It wasn't us, it was them." In those two tools of propaganda the Holocaust appears as a ghost, still present and still haunting. The postcatastrophic narrative of Lőrinc Borsos's work is represented by the trauma of collaboration with the Nazis—here being omitted, hidden, and neglected.

The painting material used in this work is of great importance. The black enamel paint lends a crucial visual quality to the considerations of the aesthetic aspects of the postcatastrophic. Its characteristic feature does not only lie in its opacity but also in its ability to reflect light and shapes. The specificity of the material enables the artist to generate the void: its thick and non-transparent structure may destroy the image, demolish it, create something negative. At the same time, however, the black surface of the dried paint is also shining, reflecting light and mirroring shapes. The black surface thus has an ability to “echo” an image—one can almost see oneself in it. Black enamel can appear both dark (as the darkness, void) and light (as luminosity, flash), depending on the context. Under such circumstances, the opposite features come together since the enamel paint can be both at the same time.

Austrians censored history by appropriating the victim narrative with regard to the Second World War. They censored it and distorted it, thus refusing to take responsibility for the war. Now Lőrinc Borsos—with his/her “black material”—is pointing out historical censorship by means of another (material/physical) censorship. He/she illustrates it and exposes it with the blackness of this expansive material. Painting over, as an act of destruction and demolition, becomes something that paradoxically uncovers and exposes. The very simple act of painting over—like painting over politician’s face on a campaign poster or an unwanted graffiti—turns out to carry a powerful meaning.

For *Niemals vergessen!*, Lőrinc Borsos chose to use an Austrian example but the message of this work seems to be universal. The feeling of guilt while working through the dark past and the dark events of one’s nation’s history, being a clear allusion to recent, still ongoing events in Hungary (2014–2015), joins the debates around the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation, even if the artwork was not a direct reaction to it (as mentioned before, it was anticipated for the exhibition +45+55+95+ in the Austrian Cultural Forum). The indication of the Budapest monument as a counterpart of the *Niemals vergessen!* stamp series clearly aims at a self-reflective attitude: “we are not looking for guilt somewhere else, we are aware of our own dark past.” At the same time—regardless the subject matter being Austria or Hungary—it seems to criticize any form of historical revisionism and the falsification of the catastrophic past by means of using false historical narratives.

Hajnalka Tulisz—*A büszkeség hal meg utoljára* (2014)

A büszkeség hal meg utoljára (2014) by Hajnalka Tulisz is the first artistic work in Hungarian contemporary art addressing the nation’s dark past and its historical responsibility to include personal attitude and to incorporate one’s own family history. The artist uses three family photographs, one of which she slightly edits, and combines them with handwritten excerpt of an

interview made with her grandmother. Thus, *A büszkeség hal meg utoljára* becomes a mixture of oral history and a family archive.

The work was made and exhibited for the first time during the aforementioned show *A mi holokausztunk* [Our Holocaust] in the Stúdió Galéria of the Studio of Young Artists' Association in Budapest and curated by Zsuzsi Flohr (Oct 8–Nov 14, 2014).⁵ The exhibition was preceded by a workshop for participating artists initiated by the curator, during which Tulisz realized that she was unique in the group of artists for not being the descendant of victims of the Holocaust. Instead, her great grandfather was a representative of the *Nyilaskeresztes Párt* [Arrow Cross Party], the Hungarian far-right nationalist party. This situation later became the general idea of *A büszkeség hal meg utoljára*.

All three photographs included in the work were taken in 1938 in Csetény in the Bakony region of Hungary. This was the year of the parliamentary elections in Hungary and the artist's great grandfather was running for election. The first two pictures depict Tulisz's grandmother as a little girl with Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the fascist *Nyilaskeresztes Párt* [Arrow Cross Party] and *de facto* the leader of the whole country in the last stages of the Second World War. On the first picture, the little girl, holding a bouquet of flowers, is welcoming Szálasi who came to support her father in the election campaign (this picture has



Figure 19.3 Hajnalka Tulisz, *Pride dies last*, 2014.

not been edited). On the other one, taken on the same occasion, she is seen reciting a poem for Szálasi.

This picture was slightly edited by the artist with the black marker. The editing harmonizes with the postures of two protagonists seen on the photograph. It foreshadows future events and is a visualization of the protagonists' future fates. The vertical line starting from the upper edge of the photograph and ending at the neck of Szálasi evokes a rope. His posture on the photograph is leaning as if he was already hanged—which actually happened in 1946 when he was convicted for war crimes. Whereas the girl stays straight, proudly reciting a poem, an intervention made by the artist suggests her head to be tilted down—as if she already knew back then how bad a man Szálasi was so that she could not possibly look into his eyes. The symbolic act of “looking down” also refers to the feeling of guilt that she will feel years later.

The third picture completes this group and refers to the girl's posture on the previous photograph.

It was taken after the election in 1938 and depicts a group of people—among them the artist's great grandfather—proudly posing with two large flags. The badge in the center of one of those flags is blurred with a pen. The photograph was already in this state when Tulisz has found it: somebody from the family, already after the war, wanted to hide the badge of the Arrow Cross Party. Here, the symbolic act of



Figure 19.4 Hajnalka Tulisz, *Pride dies last*, 2014.

“looking down” has found its realization in erasing (blurring by means of a pen) the family’s dark past. The same person we see as a small girl on two photographs from 1938 reappears as the interviewee to her granddaughter, artist Hajnalka Tulisz. Grandmother’s statement is filled with excuses, ambiguity, and contradictions.⁶ The artist writes it by hand, and with this simple act she identifies herself with her grandmother, whose narrative she opposes (Turai 2016, 46).

The final element of the work is a short statement of the artist, quasi a commentary:⁷ it is indeed a critique aimed at her own family concerning the indulgence for the relatives. The subject of the critique is thus the acquiescence for immoral choices and the defense of such choices; remembering only good things and omitting those that one would rather like to forget. Tulisz exposes the inconsequence in the behavior of the members of her family. This is visualized in the photograph with the flags—first, posing proudly in front of it; then trying to erase it; and finally following the path of so-called selective memory, tabooing the unwanted part.

The title of the work, *A büszkeség hal meg utoljára* is a paraphrase of a well-known saying “Hope dies last.” Hajnalka Tulisz does not identify herself with her family—instead, she opposes and challenges them. The title contains a judgment, as the artist adopts an attitude of distance and while it is a personal, familiar dimension that stirs the basis of the story, it turns out to actually be more than that. As the first example of an artwork in contemporary Hungarian art that would address one’s family’s dark past in such a direct way, *A büszkeség hal meg utoljára* is an absolute taboo-breaker. In this work the past of Tulisz’s family becomes political. In Hungary, where in recent years the victim narrative is being sold in the context of the war crimes, where revisionist monuments are being erected by Viktor Orbán’s government, the question regarding one’s responsibility for the catastrophe, the process of the working through the trauma connected to the Shoah becomes even more urgent. Hajnalka Tulisz manages to do what her government is not capable of: to face the difficult past and to address the trauma. Furthermore, she does it in a very humble, archival way.

Marcell Esterházy—*On the same Day* (2013)

Two black and white photographs taken on the same day in May 1937 are the starting point of the video work *On the same Day* (2013) by Marcell Esterházy. One of them shows the nine-year-old Mónika Esterházy, the artist’s aunt, in front of the family residence, the Esterházy castle in Majk. The other depicts a 17-year-old Roma girl from a small village Szentgotthárd, Erzsébet Horváth. First picture was taken on the occasion of Mónika’s first communion, the second one was Erzsébet’s proof of identity picture. As the video-loop starts we see the photograph



Figure 19.5 Marcell Esterházy, *On the same day* (2013), video-loop.

of Mónika Esterházy. Slowly, the rectangle containing the cropped face of Erzsébet Horváth is moving in front of Mónika's face until we do not see her again.

Then, the image of the Roma girl slowly starts to fade. The video—accessible on the artist's website—is accompanied by a text (Esterházy 2020).⁸



Figure 19.6 Marcell Esterházy, *On the same day* (2013), video-loop.

The artist's family is very often a starting point for his works. The life of the members of his family intertwine with the events of *la grande histoire*. Esterházy examines the past, history, trauma, and their impact on the present. In the work *On the Same Day* we get to know destiny of the protagonists, two different trajectories of human fates that are assembled together. Both of the girls—although one of them comes from the highest and another from the lowest social class—are “connected” by

the same powerlessness toward fate, toward fortune, toward events that are happening against their will.

Erzsébet Horváth never returned from the concentration camp, where she was deported in 1944, a few years after the photograph was taken. Six years later, already during the communist era, before vanishing without a trail, Mónika Esterházy was imprisoned in the forced labor camp, but at the end she managed to stay alive. This coincidence—one of the girls surviving, another being persecuted—is perceptible in its visual layer. The pictures of two girls are fading into each other, Erzsébet Horváth in a way replaces Mónika's appearance as if they were switching their fates. They did not know each other, they lived in different places and "were not connected" as we learn from the text—although they could have been. The last sentence of the text accompanying the video installation, "We are, we must be, connected," appears almost as an imperative. Esterházy crosses the boundaries of the past and targets straight into the viewer's perception, suggesting timeliness of his work, proposing the reincarnation of the past in the present, the here and now. For what connects "us" is the presence of the postcatastrophic narration, being involved in the visible traces of the afterlife of the catastrophe.

Esterházy's work is interesting for one more reason. The Roma Holocaust, *porrajmos*, is still being omitted and marginalized from the "mainstream" discourse in Hungary—both in historiography and artistic confrontations regarding the Shoah. Like Hajnalka Tulis's work also *On the same Day* is filling empty spaces in the art discourse devoted to the topic. Esterházy's work, a result of the collaboration with the Budapest-based Gallery 8—the first Roma art gallery in Europe—shows that the process of working through the trauma is still ongoing, still changing.

Conclusion

"The traumatic event has its greatest and most clearly unjustifiable effect on the victim, but in different ways it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it: perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, those born later," says Dominick LaCapra (LaCapra 1998, 9). Lőrinc Borsos, Hajnalka Tulis, and Marcell Esterházy represent the latter. The young generation of Hungarian artists joins the discourse, bearing new quality, touching upon new topics, and showing a fresh perspective. The common denominator for their works is a play that they undertake, the intervention with original image. It is in the act of painting over, in covering the existing image, where the postcatastrophic unveils.

The above-discussed works play a crucial role in processing the trauma and exposing the taboos inherent in Hungarian society. Even if their starting point is personal, it is easily transferable onto a collective level. The art works as a mediator, revealing issues that need to become

the subject of collective concern and public debate. Works of art become perceptible sensors of the collective. These postcatastrophic transmissions of the Shoah's afterlife work as a barometer, a tool, instrumental for commenting on the aesthetics of postcatastrophic narration in contemporary art from Hungary. Thus, the afterimages of the postcatastrophic endure in the collective mind.

Notes

- 1 There is a significant amount of relevant literature on the meaning of the political transition in Central and Eastern Europe and contemporary art. I would like to mention some of them: Piotrowski (2012); Erjavec (2014); Bishop and Dziewańska (2009); Hlavajova and Winder (2004); András (2008/2009).
- 2 Of the many exhibitions and projects, it is worth mentioning the exhibitions *A mi holokausztunk* (October 8–November 14, 2014) [*Our Holocaust*] in Stúdió Galéria by the Studio of Young Artists' Association in Budapest and [*csend*] *Egy holokauszt-kiállítás* (July 11–September 28, 2014) [*Silence*] A Holocaust Exhibition] in Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest. For an overview of Holocaust anniversary-related events see Véri (2015).
- 3 For more English information see Hegyi et al. (2015).
- 4 I call the artist Lőrinc Borsos—without shortening to a surname since it is an artist name (in Hungarian “Borsos Lőrinc” because of the Hungarian name order) used by artistic duo Lilla Lőrinc and János Borsos. They use the “he/she” in English referring to their artistic creation (Hungarian language does not distinguish the gender in personal pronouns), thus I will follow this form and use a singular and “he/she” following the official website of the artist: <http://borsoslorinc.com/about> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 5 For more information see <http://studio.c3.hu/en/arch/our-holocaust/> [last accessed 28, April 2020].
- 6 The interview with artist's grandmother included in the work: “My father was not the member of the Arrow Cross Party. He was in the Hungarian National Socialist Party because it set the objective to help the poor. He was told to run for an MP position. The Nation. Villagers. He had no funds...no funds to finance this all...no single penny...just as the Nation supported him because he had no financial grounds.

And also, this was the only party. The Hungarian National Socialist Party, not the Arrow Cross one. He was not in the Arrow Cross one, the one with Szálasi. Pálffy Fidél was his what's it...Count Pálffy Fidél. That Count lived in Dunakiliti. He came here for a gathering to support your great-granddad. And then your great-grandma cooked such good lil lunch that the Count remembered even after many years that he had never eaten such a good meat soup. [...]

We had to flea because we did not know what the consequences of this would be in this...Communism. Otherwise, no harm was caused to him; he was not tried...he had no such cases. But the one I am talking about, this Count Pálffy Fidél, he was executed and then there was this Baký László, he was the colonel in the gendarmerie, and he did this what so-called...the anti-Jewish measures. They lived here when they escaped from the front. He had two daughters.

And then they had this big sin, these anti-Jewish measures...This party had this big sin. But your great-grandfather did not fancy this...he helped those...

those Jews... Because that Holitscher asked him to tell when he would be deported and he did, always.

So, then these anti-Jewish measures happened...because the party did what this goddam Hitler wanted. He told us many times that it was a mistake, a mistake to accept these anti-Jewish measures. That Baky was there: those gendarmes arranged the Jews. What a handsome guy he was. He was executed. I knew all these who were executed. I knew Pálffy and then there was one called Hubay he was also some kind of Minister. I knew all these. And I knew Szálasi, too, once I told him some kind of poem. Your great-granddad went with him to Csernye and then your great-grandma was standing there beside the road and then they stopped for him and he introduced his mother to Szálasi. What a nice man was that so-called Szálasi. His wife still feels sorry for him; she must be still living.

Well this politics is no good...no good if somebody messes up with it. No good this politics. Because in fact, what can I say, these took away the lands too, these communists, well, these anti-Jew measures were not that good, and otherwise they had the same goal. [...] These communist leaders would tell your great-grandmother to come back home [from California] since this also wanted what we did. [...]"

- 7 The work's third element exhibited with the photographs and the interview—artist's personal statement: "I want to break away from the false and meaningless feeling of unity within my family. I believe and try to convince them of my skepticism towards this feeling using myself as an example, since they prefer to identify themselves with dead family members."
- 8 "On the very same day in May 1937 there were two photographs taken of two girls. / One is called Erzsébet Horváth, a 17-year-old Roma girl from Szentgotthárd, the other is the 9-year-old Mónika Esterházy at the courtyard of the Esterházy castle in Majk. / On the same day, they were approximately 160 km away from each other. / They were not, they could not have been, connected. / One is a day-laborer who belongs to the lowest strata of the society, the other just had her first communion and is the fourth child and the only daughter of Count Móric Esterházy. / In 1944 the 24-year-old Erzsébet Horváth was deported to Germany due to her Roma origin. / In 1950 the 22-year-old Mónika Esterházy was interned in Kistarcsa without trial and was the prisoner of the forced labor camp for three years. / Erzsébet Horváth never returns from the German concentration camp. / Mónika Esterházy lives in Vienna. She is 85 years old. / They were not, they could not have been, connected. / We are, we must be, connected." From the website of the artist: <http://www.esterhazymarcell.net/index.php?/projets/on-the-same-day/>, [last accessed 28, April 2020].

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20 The Image of People Jumping from Windows in the Warsaw Ghetto: Photographs from the *Stroop Report* in the Context of Polish Holocaust Remembrance

Ariko Kato

Introduction: Iconic Image of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

German troops faced unexpected counterattacks by the Jewish resistance when the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto had begun at the command of *SS-Brigadeführer* [SS brigade leader] Jürgen Stroop on 19 April 1943. These counterattacks were the beginning of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and its suppression, which was led by Stroop and ended with destruction of the Great Synagogue on 16 May 1943. Stroop had the liquidation operation documented during the course of the events. This became the so-called *Stroop Report*, originally titled *Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!* [There is no longer a Jewish residential district in Warsaw!], prepared by Stroop for *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler on the initiative of Friedrich Wilhelm Krüger, the supreme commander of SS and police in the General Government. The *Stroop Report* consists of a list of injured and dead during the operation, a list of military units participating in it, an introduction signed by Stroop, a daily report prepared and countersigned by *Sturmabführer* Max Jesuiter, and a collection of photographs.¹ The report served as evidence in three courts after the war, documenting crimes committed by SS officers including Stroop.²

The *Stroop Report* has been an important source from the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Particularly, the 53 photographs included in each of the two existing copies, respectively (the selections and size of photographs differ slightly; 37 of each are same in both versions),³ have played an important role in postcatastrophic representations of the Warsaw ghetto after the war. The most widely recognized photograph in the *Stroop Report* is often referred to as “Ghetto Boy,” a photograph of a boy with his hands up marching with other people, mostly women and children, surrounded by German male soldiers.⁴ This image presents a clear contrast between the persecutor (male) and the victim (women and children) in the gender framework, and thus impresses upon viewers the helplessness of the victims as well as the power and cruelty of the persecutor

who shows no mercy to women or even children. This photograph has become a symbolic image of the Holocaust, although it is often taken out of its original context of the Warsaw ghetto uprising—Jewish women and men fighting against the Nazis.

In Poland, a different photograph seems to be the most iconic image of the Warsaw ghetto uprising—that of a person jumping from the window of a burning building. During the liquidation, Stroop ordered his troops to burn buildings in the ghetto to force out the remaining survivors, many of whom, without any other possibility for escape, chose to jump from the windows of the higher floors onto the street rather than be caught by German soldiers. This sight of people jumping from buildings was witnessed by residents of Warsaw standing outside the ghetto wall, and was frequently replicated in literature and art in postwar Poland.

The iconic image is a photograph of a man jumping from a building on Niska Street 25,⁵ which is also included in the *Stroop Report* (Figure 20.1).

Compared to the photograph of the “Ghetto Boy,” this photograph is blurred and out of focus. The viewer barely recognizes a person falling and black smoke pouring out of a window of the topmost story of the building. This picture requires prior knowledge or a caption to understand the scene. However, the fact that this is the only existing picture



Figure 20.1 The *Stroop Report*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 26568, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

that captured the moment of the man jumping while still alive and suspended in the air has made the photograph an icon in Polish postwar culture.⁶

Since the 1990s, this image has circulated not only in Poland but also internationally due to its remediation in films. As Struk noted (2004, 186), Roman Polanski (b. 1933) used photographs of the *Stroop Report* in his Cannes-winning film *The Pianist* (2002) as a reference in visualizing the Warsaw ghetto scenes. In these scenes, the Polish-born director of Jewish origin featured the people jumping from windows while German troops observed their jumping. Polish film director Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016) also focused on the same image of Jewish people jumping from buildings in the film *Wielki tydzień* (1995) [*The Holy Week*], based on the eponymous short story by Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909–1983) and published in *Noc* (1945) [*Night*], which was also grounded on the writer's experience in occupied Warsaw. Thus, the image of the jumping man has become an integral part of Polish memory of the Warsaw ghetto and the experience of the Holocaust. However, in comparison to the photo of the "Ghetto Boy," the image of people jumping is still less known outside of Poland.

Why was this image of the jumping man chosen as a symbol of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and why is its cultural presence limited to Poland? Furthermore, what does the image represent today? By way of analyzing the "jumping/falling persons" motifs appearing in literary texts and artworks, these types of critical questions help to explore the problem of the adoption of the iconic image in collective memory and its semantic changes in postcatastrophic conditions. The concept of post-catastrophe, which allows us to assess the collective memory of traumatic events as ongoing cultural dynamics, gives a theoretical basis to this analysis.

There are few articles on the reception of images of falling persons.⁷ Therefore, this article first gives a chronological outline of the reception of these images by focusing on the *Stroop Report*'s photographs. Then, it will analyze works of literature and art in Poland made by the first generation that witnessed the Warsaw ghetto uprising and used images of people jumping from buildings—namely, Zofia Nałkowska's short story *Kobieta cmentarna* [*The Cemetery Lady*] included in *Medalliony* (1946) [*Medallions*] and Mieczysław Wejman's graphic series *Tańczący* (1946) [*Dancers*]—to discuss the aesthetic aspects that likely influenced the process of such images becoming iconic. Finally, this article examines the use of the motif of falling persons in literature with respect to the September 11 attacks in New York City and attempts to provide a case of how iconic images of the Second World War could be transplanted and revived in narratives of other catastrophes, thus universalizing experiences of witnessing extreme human terror. Through this analysis of images of people jumping, we again recognize the specific *topos* of the

Warsaw ghetto as it emerged in the Polish memory of the Holocaust represented in Polish culture.

The *Stroop Report* in Poland: Encounter with the Persecutor's Eyes

First, we examine the chronology of the publication of the photograph of the jumping man in Poland. The two known existing copies of the *Stroop Report* include the photograph, which is captioned in handwriting as “Die Banditen entziehen sich der Festnahme durch Absprung” [The bandits try to escape arrest by jumping]. Further, the copy possessed by the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [the Institute of National Remembrance] (IPN) in Warsaw includes, on the next page, a photograph of the scene “after” the man’s jump, captioned as “Abgesprungene Banditen” [Bandits who jumped]: human bodies are piled on the street in front of the building and German soldiers gaze at them from a distance (Figure 20.2).

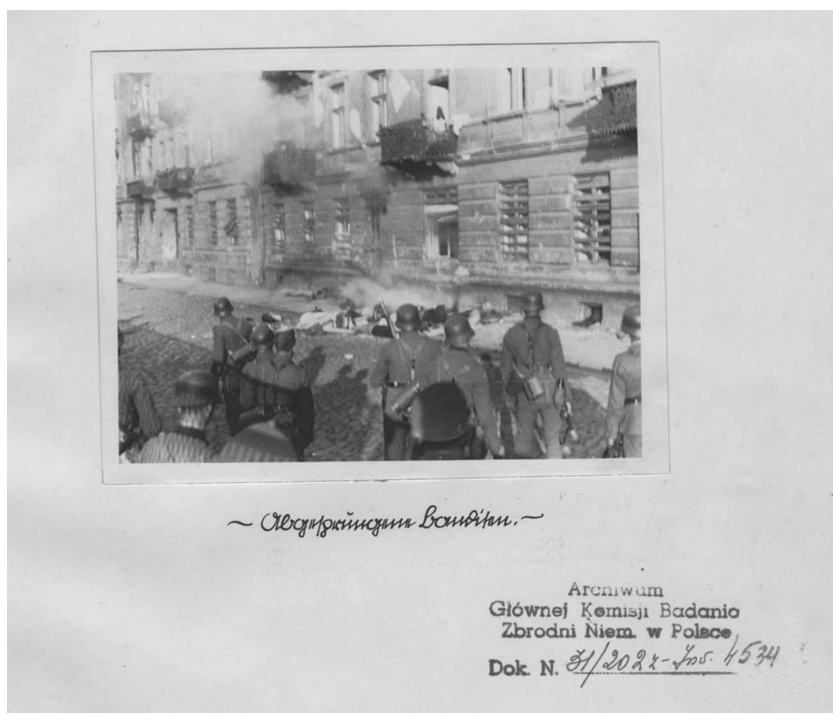


Figure 20.2 *Raport Juergena Stroopa*. Jürgen Stroop, *Żydowska dzielnica mieszkaniowa w Warszawie już nie istnieje!*, Andrzej Żbikowski (ed.) (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009).

In the 53 photographs included in the copy possessed by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington D.C., there are two additional photographs that capture the same sequence of the jump of the man on Niska Street 25.⁸ Though they are captioned similarly to the two photos of Niska Street included in the IPN's copy, they are photographs of the scene "before" the jump that show two individuals, one of whom is identified as the jumping man in the photograph mentioned above, sitting on the window ledge looking down. One of the photographs, captioned as "Bandits who jumped," was taken from the front side of the building, outside the fence. The other, captioned as "Diese Banditen ziehen sich der Festnahme durch Absprung" [These bandits try to escape arrest by jumping], was taken below the building, inside the fence from diagonally below.⁹ Though the former, taken at a distance, captures the overall scene of the person getting ready to jump within the frame—the oppressors and the oppressed, namely three German soldiers standing on the street with a gun pointing up and the two Jewish men looking down at the soldiers on the street piled with mattresses and human body-like forms—the two Jewish men are just shapes. Their faces are barely visible. The latter photograph, taken from diagonally below, on the contrary, focuses on them leaning out of the window, but it does not show what is happening on the street. These series of photographs and the selection of them for the report suggests that the Germans planned to take photographs of jumping scenes, which were typical during the operation.

Throughout the *Stroop Report*, in the introduction and the daily reports, we find several descriptions of Jews jumping from buildings. In the introduction written by Stroop:

They [Warsaw ghetto residents who tried to flee—A.K.] preferred to jump from the upper stories after having thrown mattresses and other upholstered articles into the street from the burning buildings. With their bones broken, they still tried to crawl across the street into blocks of buildings which had not yet been set on fire or were only partly in flames. (Rutkowski 1958, 24–25)

On April 27, the day Stroop ordered troops to set fire to the buildings on both sides of Niska Street, we learn of similar descriptions in the daily report: "They fired their arms until the last moment and then jumped into the street, sometimes from as far up as the fourth floor, having previously thrown down beds, mattresses, etc., but not until the flames made any other escape impossible" (Rutkowski 1958, 57).¹⁰ The series of photographs of the jumping man in the report illustrate these descriptions.

When and how did the photograph from the report become accessible to the Polish public? In Poland, Stanisław Piotrowski, a prosecutor and a

member of the Polish delegation of the Nuremberg trials, informed the Polish public for the first time about the report in the weekly magazine *Odrodzenie* [Revival] in 1947. In this article “Sprawozdanie Joergena [sic] Stroopa” [The Strop Report], which was published in two issues, the author briefly introduced the topic of people jumping from burning buildings during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, although the photographs that illustrate this article do not include the photograph of the jumping man.

In 1948, after the Nuremberg trials, the Polish government received a copy of the *Strop Report*, which is now considered to be the report that was prepared for Himmler. In 1948, Piotrowski published a book in Polish titled *Sprawozdanie Juergena [sic] Stroopa: o zniszczeniu getta warszawskiego* [The Strop Report: On the Destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto], which includes his detailed article on the report, photocopies of some pages from the report with Polish translations, and 13 photographs that were selected from the photographs found in the original report (3 were from the NARA’s copy). However, this book did not include the photograph of the jumping man. This might have been a cultural act of decency or respect for the victims. Most of the photographs selected by the author show Jewish people bravely facing armed German soldiers. Only two of them show dead bodies.

Strop was sentenced to death by the Warsaw District Court in 1951 and hanged in Warsaw in 1952. In 1958, the entire report appeared in Poland, but in English, when the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw published the English translation of the report held by the the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland in Warsaw, a predecessor of the IPN established in 1998, which obtained the copy from the archive of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party in 1952 (Stempowski 2018). This English version had 10 photographs including the photograph of the jumping man, which was captioned as “People jumping down from burning houses.” In 1960, the entire report was finally published in a Polish translation with all of the photographs included in the IPN copy in the *Biuletyn Główniej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce* [Bulletin of the Main Committee for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland]. However, these publications were intended for experts.

At last, the photograph of the jumping man began to circulate in the public independently around 1960, as it had been extracted from the report. In 1959, an album of photographs of Poland under German occupation 1939–1945: *We Have Not Forgotten* was published in Warsaw. This book, which accuses the Nazis of crimes against Polish citizens, consists of photographs that illustrate a trilingual text (in English, Russian and French) about “the sufferings and struggle of the Polish people in the years 1939–1945” (Wrzos-Glinka et al. 1959, cover page) and includes the photo of the jumping man on Niska Street in the

section on the Warsaw ghetto, along with other photos that were selected from the *Stroop Report*. The reproduction of the photograph of the jumping man is cropped and enlarged to make his figure more discernible. The caption briefly explains the scene. “To mop up resistance centres [sic], the Germans set apartment houses on fire. The photo on the left shows an inhabitant of the Ghetto jumping from a burning house” (Wrzos-Glinka et al. 1959, 141). In 1961, an abridged edition of this album appeared with trilingual text—this time in English, French and German instead of Russian. This edition not only includes the photograph of the jumping man on Niska Street but also a photograph of a woman hanging from the balcony by her hands that was not included in the bound *Stroop Report* (Figure 20.3).

The caption reads, “A mother with her child in her arms jumps out of the window of a burning house in the ghetto,” (Mazur and Tomaszewski 1961, 63) although it is difficult to discern if the woman is holding a child in her arms. Let us pay attention to the composition of the double-spread page. Under the photo of the woman printed in the top half of the left page, we see the photograph of Jürgen Stroop standing with German male soldiers in the ghetto. One of the soldiers holds a gun as if pointing at the hanging woman of the photograph printed above. On the right page is a photograph of the “Ghetto Boy,” also cropped and enlarged to focus on the boy, the woman walking next to him, and the German soldier pointing at them with a gun. Thus, the



Figure 20.3 The *Stroop Report*. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 05507, courtesy of Louis Gonda.

chosen photographs and their captions printed on the double-spread pages create a clear contrast between the victims (females and children) and oppressors (German males), emphasizing the total vulnerability, domination and suffering of the victims at the hands of the Nazis.

The *Stroop Report* was not the only source that depicted this episode of people jumping. In the 1970s, Stroop's name was once again widely visible for the Polish public. Kazimierz Moczarski, an officer of the Polish Home Army who was arrested by the new Polish government in 1945 after the liberation of Poland, was confined for 225 days in the same prison cell as Stroop in the Mokotow prison of Warsaw. After his rehabilitation in 1956, he published his conversations with Stroop as a serial in the cultural-social monthly *Odra* from April 1972 to February 1974, which caused a sensation. Titled *Rozmowy z katem* [*Conversations with an Executioner*], the serial subsequently appeared in book form in 1977 (English translation in 1981). In this series of conversations with Moczarski, Stroop repeatedly mentioned the Jews jumping from burning buildings during the liquidation of the ghetto in a manner very similar to the descriptions in the *Stroop Report*.

Nonvisual Elements in Literature: Nałkowska's *The Cemetery Lady*

While the images of the people jumping from burning buildings in the *Stroop Report* were captured through the eyes of Stroop and his subordinates, the same scenes were witnessed by individuals standing outside the ghetto and have been depicted in Polish literary works.

Zofia Nałkowska's collection of short stories *Medallions* (1946) is one of the earliest and best-known Polish works of literature on Nazi crimes in Poland and the Holocaust. The book consists of eight short stories based on the author's experience as part of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland that was organized in 1945, just after Poland's liberation from the German occupation. Starting with the epigraph "People dealt this fate to people" (Nałkowska 2000), the book features Nazi crimes and the victimhood of Polish citizens including Jewish, and has been widely read in school in Poland as well as in the Eastern European countries of the Soviet Bloc, especially during the Cold War era (English and French versions did not appear until 2000). It is one of the most influential books in Poland in terms of the formation of collective memories of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust, though it is also criticized for blurring the distinction between the victimhood of the Jews and that of the Poles under the influence of communist ideology (see Żukowski 2016).

The book includes a short story based on Nałkowska's experience of living in occupied Warsaw: *Kobieta cmentarna* [*The Cemetery Lady*]. In the story, a female cemetery caretaker who lives close to the wall

surrounding the ghetto tells the female narrator that she witnesses Jews jumping from burning buildings and the sounds of their bodies hitting the street every day. Tormented by the sight and sounds, she explains that “The mothers wrap up their children in anything soft and throw them out the window onto the pavement below. Then, they jump too. Some even jump holding the youngest child” (Nałkowska 2000, 21). Let us remember the photograph of the woman hanging from the veranda published with the caption that she holds her child. The recurring photo image with the caption perfectly fits the description of Nałkowska’s famous short story, and it could be connected in the imagination of Polish readers.

Furthermore, the female cemetery caretaker’s account not only overlaps with the details of Stroop’s report but also provides new information on the event, namely, the sound.

From one spot in our home, you could watch a father jump with a small boy. [...] whether the father shoved him or what, you couldn’t tell. But they both fell down, one after the other. [...] Even when we don’t see it, we hear it... it’s like something soft smacking down. Thwack, thwack... each time they jump – and they’d rather jump than be burned to death. (Nałkowska 2000, 21)

The Warsaw ghetto is a very specific *topos* for eyewitnesses. It was surrounded by 3-meter-high walls, which obstructed the view of the ghetto from the outside except from the upper stories of adjacent buildings. A person who stood outside the ghetto could observe a man falling, still alive in the air but would never see him hit the street. The woman in the story, a witness who stands nearby but outside the ghetto wall, never watches the jump to the end: “thwack, thwack” (“plask, plask” in the original)—she only hears the thud of human bodies on the street, which implies the death of the falling person. The sound replaces the visual image of the event.

Furthermore, the sound, verbalized by the cemetery lady as the onomatopoeia “thwack, thwack,” not only captures the invisible consequence of the leap but also lends materiality to the image of the jumping man’s body in descriptions and recurring photographs of the event. Nałkowska verbalized in her short story nonvisual and nonverbal elements, which elude photographs and official records, thus lending reality to the witnessed event by adding material details.

Witness in Art: Mieczysław Wejman’s *Dancers*

The image of a man suspended in the air represents another aspect of the Polish collective memory of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Let us analyze the etching series *Tańczący* [*Dancers*] that was created by Polish artist

Mieczysław Wejman (1912–1997) in 1944.¹¹ This series, which is hardly remembered today, could be added to the list of works of literature and art that document individuals who chose to jump from burning buildings in the Warsaw ghetto rather than be caught by German soldiers.¹²

Dancers originally consisted of approximately a dozen etchings, 11 of which remain today. They present a group of people flying in the air, as if dancing. Each image in the *Dancers* series does not directly refer to a specific event, place, or time. Although Jakimowicz (1965) emphasized that this series does not illustrate concrete events, it appears to have been inspired by the Warsaw ghetto Uprising and its liquidation in 1943, considering the images and the circumstances under which the series emerged.

According to Stanisław Wejman (b. 1944), Mieczysław Wejman's son and a graphic artist, Mieczysław and his wife lived on Promyka Street in Żoliborz in Warsaw during the war.¹³ At the time, Mieczysław worked at the Jamasch factory on Miodowa Street 22, which was located directly across from the ghetto wall. He would have passed the ghetto on the way from Żoliborz to Miodowa Street.¹⁴ In an interview with Krzyżanowska, Stanisław Wejman also stated that during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto his father often walked along the ghetto walls to help people smuggle food and weapons into the ghetto. At that time, he witnessed people enjoying riding the carousel in an amusement park made by Germans beside the ghetto wall. Based on what he observed, Mieczysław made a series of paintings titled *Zabawa ludowa* [Folk Play] for his graduate work at the Academy of Arts in Warsaw (year unknown), though most of these paintings were lost during the war. According to Stanisław Wejman, whose father continued to produce etchings at home during the war by using a wringer and wool felt cut from his wife's hat (Krzyżanowska 2014, 326–327, 330), this experience must have influenced the subsequent *Dancers* series, which was dated 1944 but created in the winter of 1943–44.

Wejman's *Dancers* series is not a realistic visualization of what the artist witnessed during the war. However, it addresses concerns similar to themes addressed by Czesław Miłosz in his poem on the Warsaw ghetto uprising: *Campo di Fiori* [*Campo dei Fiori*].¹⁵ On Easter Sunday 1943, Miłosz was on the way to visit Jerzy Andrzejewski, a Polish writer who lived in Bielany, a Warsaw borough north of the ghetto. From the tram, he witnessed the scene of people riding the carousel that inspired him to write the poem.¹⁶ The carousel, which Polish citizens rode for amusement, became another iconic image of the Warsaw ghetto uprising—a symbol of the indifference of some Polish citizens toward their Jewish neighbors. Miłosz does not mention people jumping from burning buildings in this poem, but his depiction of joyful people “flying high in the cloudless sky” (2001, 33) on the carousel is a vivid contrast to

the Jewish people suffering the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and becomes a particularly graphic contrast for readers who know of the Jewish inhabitants forced to jump from burning buildings.

Mieczysław Wejman, who was also a witness of the same scene, likely featured the flying/falling people in his series of *Dancers*, by combining familiar compositions and motifs of Western paintings with the contemporary theme of the Warsaw ghetto.

Two figures of flying women who wear clothes in *Dancers I* clearly follow the archetypes of the putti or angels flying around deities in Western paintings (Figure 20.4).

We also see a platform on which a woman and a man, both naked, are lying down. The platform indicates that the whole scene happens at a high place. Read in the context of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the platform could also be interpreted as the top of a ghetto wall or a building. There is also a woman who stands on it with her arms open. We can read the two flying women as angels who descend to the dead and the woman with her arms open as waiting for their rescue. We can also interpret all five human figures as jumping people. The two flying women still dressed imply that they are still alive falling through the air, while the naked figures on the platform imply that they were corpses.

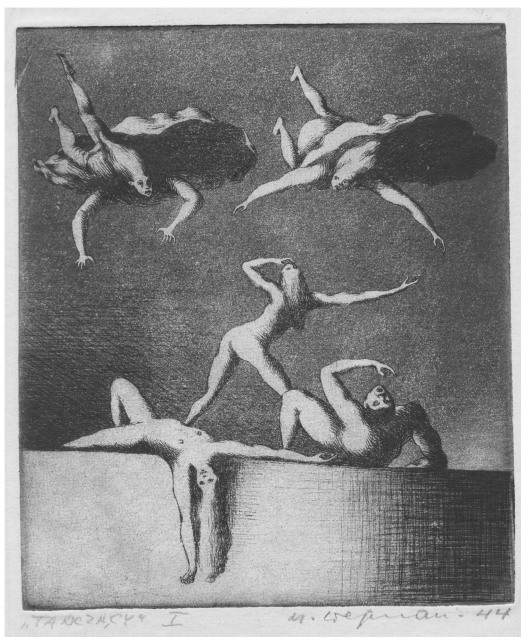


Figure 20.4 Mieczysław Wejman, *Dancers I*, 1944, National Museum in Warsaw (Gr. W. 1854).

The woman standing with her arms open also can be seen as trying to catch and rescue the falling people.

Dancers XI also shows two women flying above or landing on a building-like platform, or on a man wearing a striped clown uniform, perhaps a reference to a concentration camp prisoner, lying down on the platform as if dead. If we compare *Dancers XI* with the carousel scene of Miłosz's *Campo dei Fiori*, the female figures who fly toward the man become loaded with double meanings. We can interpret them, especially the one wearing a skirt blowing up in the wind, as the people who fly on the carousel next to the ghetto wall behind which people are dying (Figure 20.5).

Thus, when read in the context of the Warsaw ghetto, flying people in these images can be interpreted in multiple ways: as victims, their rescuers, or indifferent bystanders. In other words, these images represent various emotions and attitudes of witnesses standing outside the ghetto toward the events happening in the ghetto.

We cannot overlook that, in the *Dancers* series, Wejman often contrasts the figures of dancing people with anonymous groups of people watching them. Highlighting the relationship between the subjects of seeing and the objects of their gazes, he presented the relationship between the Poles standing outside the ghetto and the Jewish inhabitants trapped inside the ghetto.

As if forming a trio with *Dancers I* and *XI*, *Dancers VI* focuses on two women with their eyes turned upward and who are observed by

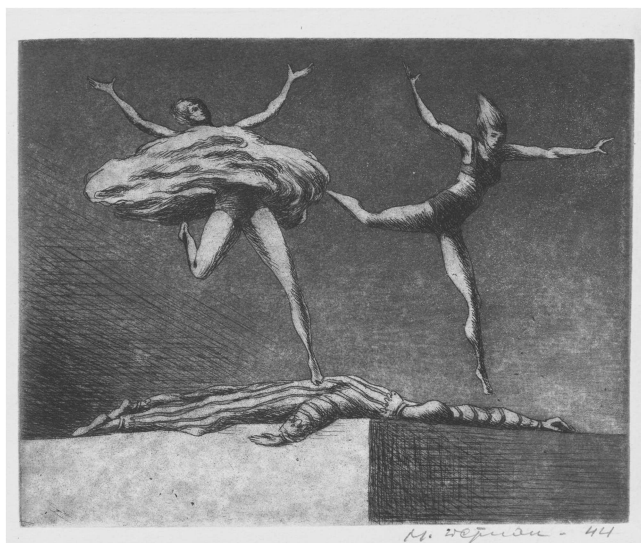


Figure 20.5 Mieczysław Wejman, *Dancers XI*, 1944, National Museum in Warsaw (Gr. W. 2059).

the anonymous uncharacteristic crowd, which maintains a distance from them (Figure 20.6).

Dancers VI expresses the relationships among the ghetto's observers. The people who sympathized with the persecuted Jews behind the wall keep their eyes focused on them, whereas other people fix their gazes on the people who take care of the Jews. As Andrzejewski's *Holy Week* describes, the attitudes toward the Jews varied among Polish citizens during the war. There were more than a few informers and blackmailers. We can also interpret the two central figures as Jews hiding outside the ghetto among Poles. They had been ceaselessly threatened by potential anonymous collaborators of the occupiers. Thus, *Dancers VI* represents the moral questions of the attitudes of the Polish gentiles toward Jewish citizens.

Dancers IV shows more clear reference to ghetto scenes. It shows observers who dress up and watch a naked man dance, an image that references a scene of Jews dancing at the Germans' command in the ghetto. The image also corresponds to episodes in which the ghetto becomes a type of "theater" in the middle of the city.

In the *Dancers* series, the boundary between the ground and the air is blurred. This makes it appear as if the human figure is floating in the air and defying gravity. For human beings, flying is a type of dream or longing that has been projected onto imaginary, divine beings, such as angels or demons in myths, religion, and folk tales.¹⁷ In the *Dancers* series we can recognize a will to record the existence of jumping



Figure 20.6 Mieczysław Wejman, *Dancers VI*, 1944, National Museum in Warsaw (Gr. W. 2062).

people not in a realistic style but in a sanctifying way that frees them from the context of the ghetto and recovers the dead's dignity. Visual arts are neither a substitute for photographs nor mimetic representations of events. Combining contemporary events with the motifs and styles of traditional Western painting, Wejman rendered the Warsaw ghetto from a perspective that was external to the ghetto, demonstrating compassion for the suffering and dying Jewish people.

The shadow of the war pervades not only *Dancers* but also other works by Mieczysław Wejman, including his most famous graphic series, *Rowerzysta* [*Cyclist*]. His works in the context of the Warsaw ghetto warrant further analysis.¹⁸

Suspended in the Air

The ambiguity, which does not allow a single interpretation, characterizes Wejman's etching series *Dancers*. The iconic image of the man forced to jump in the air on Niska Street is similarly ambiguous. First, this is an image that is shared by people who stand both inside and outside the Ghetto: by persecutors, supporters who sympathized with the victims, and indifferent or curious bystanders. However, their gazes are different.

Like Wejman, there were people standing outside the ghetto who hoped to stop the act of falling to avoid the consequent death of the people who jumped. By contrast, Stroop and his troops could have hoped to stop the motion of falling people by shooting them. Moczarski's report tells us that Stroop called the people who jumped "paratroopers" and that his men played a game of shooting them in the air as moving targets.¹⁹ The photographer of the *Stroop Report* wanted to "shoot" a picture of Jews jumping as a typical ghetto liquidation scene for the record. It seems the photographer was expected to capture the very moment of jumping as perhaps the soldiers were expected to with a gun instead of a camera. These eyewitnesses standing both inside and outside the ghetto wanted to stop the jump in mid air—although their motivations were completely different. There were also indifferent bystanders who observed the scene as a spectacle.²⁰ Thus, this image could reflect various, even contradicting feelings and views toward the sufferings of the Jewish citizens.

Second, the image literally presents "suspension," which enables us to interpret the scene in opposing ways: it alludes to a man's death but shows the man still alive. Here, we can view an image not only of peril and imminent death but also of life, not only of suffering and terror but also of bravery, freedom, and autonomy.

In addition, there is an effect that is familiar from the suspense genre: the image retains our attention at its climax, without revealing its ending,

and enables us to empathize with the jumping man. The literary “suspension” that is presented in the photograph appeals to the conscience of the people who witnessed the scene from outside the wall and the people who look at the picture today, capturing the violent force of the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, which made people feel powerless, and, inherent in this suspension, the twisted irony that perhaps a last moment of freedom could come in this brutal form.

Image of a Falling Person in the 21st Century: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

The image of a falling person has become an iconic image of another event, the September 11 attacks. Wisława Szymborska, the Polish poet and 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate, published the poem *Fotografia z 11 września* [*Photograph from September 11*] in 2002, following the September 11 attacks, most likely referencing an iconic photograph capturing the horror of this event, “The Falling Man,” taken by photo-journalist Richard Drew.²¹

They jumped from the burning floors—/ one, two, a few more, /
higher, lower. / The photograph halted them in life, / and now keeps
them / above the earth toward the earth. / Each is still complete, /
with a particular face / and blood well hidden. / [...] / I can do only
two things for them—/ describe this flight / and not add a last line.
(Szymborska 2003, 67)

Readers of Szymborska and Polish literature, or those who know the history of occupied Poland well, could easily blend the image of a jumping man in the Warsaw ghetto with the falling man in New York. This poem provides a good example of the way the image of the jumping man that is held in the collective Polish memory, of which Szymborska undoubtedly must have known, was regenerated in the different context beyond Poland.

American writer Jonathan Safran Foer, whose intensive use of visual and material elements in his writing challenges the conventions of printed books, employed the image of a falling person in his novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). The novel’s main protagonist is Oscar, a New York boy who lost his father in the September 11 attacks. The novel ends with a reverse sequence of 15 pictures that depict a person falling from a skyscraper. Before the series of pictures appears, there are descriptions of Oscar viewing these images taken from the internet in reverse, as if he were viewing a flip animation.

Finally, I found the pictures of the falling body. Was it Dad? Maybe. Whoever it was, it was somebody. I ripped the pages out of the

book. I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last. When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. [...] I'd have said "Dad?" backward, which would have sounded the same as "Dad" forward. He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from "I love you" to "Once upon a time ..." We would have been safe. (Safran Foer 2006, 325–326)

Thus, the pictures that were printed after these final lines of the novel demonstrate what the narrator Oscar sees and enable the reader to experience his act of reading. We flip the pages, on which are printed images of the falling person, in reverse, and the body goes back into the sky and fades out of the frame of the picture and the page. The last picture depicts nothing but the building and the sky.

Oscar "reverses" time from the moment of the attack to the previous night, when his father told him a bedtime story. His desire to nullify the attack and his father's death is "realized" by the manipulation of the pictures. However, the pictures represent more than his desire. Oscar was traumatized by the loss of his father. He regrets being unable to answer his father's final telephone call from the burning building, something he could not discuss even with his mother. However, Oscar finally finds people with whom he can share his feelings and experiences, which allows him to verbalize the traumatic event. The reversed pictures anticipate that Oscar, who has joined his father through the collectively-shared image of the anonymous falling person and lets the narratives of other people represent his feelings, will start to narrate the event himself with his own words.

Szyborska's poem *Photograph of September 11* employs the similar image used by Foer in his novel.²² She halts time for the people falling through the air and ends the poem with the following words: "I can do only two things for them – / describe this flight / and not add a last line" (Szyborska 2003, 67). By reading someone's "jumping" as a "flight" and adding the line "not add a last line," she not only tries to save the man from death, by stopping the motion while the jumping man is suspended in the air, but also reminds us that the images we perceive are images that are delivered by the mass media. Thus, the image was already contextualized when it arrived to us. September 11 has been schematized as a conflict of different civilizations. Subsequently, this simplified scheme has been repeated and fixed. Thus, the image of the man has been absorbed in a collective history of "us" and "the other." A last line has already been added. Szyborska's phrase "not to add a last line" sounds passive. However, it implies her will to observe and narrate

history individually with her own words and against the powerful voice that manipulates histories into a simple history based on the dichotomy “us” and “them.” The image of a person falling in mid-air represents a state of history which is not just frozen in the past, but continuously affects our present; a state with an ending that we can still change.

Conclusion

The image of the falling person, which lacks both a beginning and an end, forces us to get involved in this history. This article demonstrates how the photographs and historic facts about the people who were forced to jump from windows in the Warsaw ghetto became, after some time after the war, publically shared and how literature as well as art also responded to these incidents and circulated the images through different media. Descriptions of the Jewish ghetto inhabitants jumping from burning buildings began to appear in Polish literature and art soon after the war, or even during the war. In these representations by the first generation that witnessed the events, the authors used the image of the people jumping as a “field” on which Polish citizen-viewers, including the authors, could reflect their attitudes towards the Jewish genocide, set against the backdrop of the general trauma, devastation and peril of the Nazi occupation of Poland. The iconic photograph of a jumping man suspended in the air, included in the *Stroop Report* and circulated many years after the war in other publications, provides a visual image to the narrative of the event of the Warsaw ghetto’s liquidation.

This examination reminds us that the Warsaw ghetto is a specific *topos* of the Polish memory of the Holocaust. It questions the relationship between the Jewish and Polish citizens, with respect to which Polish writers and artists have raised critical and ethical questions, particularly regarding the attitude of Warsaw’s Polish citizens toward the Jews of the ghetto. In 1987 Jan Błoński published the essay “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” [*The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*] to discuss the responsibility of the Poles to Jewish people’s fate in occupied Poland. This theme has been still current in 21st century Poland, particularly after the debate started by the book on the Jedwabne pogrom, *Neighbors* (2000) by Jan Tomasz Gross.

The jumping person’s suspended figure—which will soon fall according to the law of gravity—not only represents the particular context of the Holocaust in Poland, asking of the Poles what could have been done, but also demands of us now to know what we can do at this very moment as we view the picture. These same questions could be applicable in narratives of other catastrophes as well.

Notes

- 1 There are several opinions about who took these photographs. Żbikowski assumes that some photographers of the Propaganda Troop 689 and the SS commander Franz Konrad took the photos (2009, 16). However, Stempowski (2018), referring to judicial records, rejected the possibility of the participant of the Propaganda Troop. He assumed that the photos were taken by photographers of the Security Police in Warsaw, though he did not reject the possibility that Franz Konrad took the photos.
- 2 At the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg Trial (as PS-1061) in 1946, subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings in 1947, and the Warsaw District Court in 1951.
- 3 Originally, three copies were prepared (for Himmler, Krüger, and Stroop). Additionally, a rough copy of the report might exist (Stempowski 2018). Currently, however, only two copies of the *Stroop Report* exist—one in The Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) in Warsaw, and the other is in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington D.C. Both copies were used in the Nuremberg Trial as PS-1061, and one of them was sent to Warsaw in 1948. The third copy was reportedly deposited at the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, but this has not been confirmed (Raskin 2004, 30; Żbikowski 2009, 16; Stempowski 2013; Stempowski 2018). The IPN's copy has a black cover and regarded as that prepared for Himmler, while another, the NARA's copy, which lacks Stroop's signature and a cover, was treated as "duplicate" during the Nuremberg trial (Piotrowski 1947a, 3). Stempowski (2018) supposed that the NARA's copy was the rough copy of the report. The copies of the *Stroop Report* that are preserved at IPN and NARA, respectively, are available on the internet. See http://pamiec.pl/ftp/ilustracje/Raport_STROOPA.pdf [last accessed 30, April 2020]. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6003996> [last accessed 30, April 2020]. In 2017 the *Stroop Report* was registered in the list of the Memory of the World of UNESCO.
- 4 Raskin (2004) and Rousseau (2009) explored this photograph in detail.
- 5 The building in the photograph is identified as the building on Niska Street 25. See Leociak 2016, 361.
- 6 About the role of the iconic photographs, which not only repeatedly appear in public culture but also effect and alter the culture from inside, see Hariman and Lucaites (2007).
- 7 Leociak (2016) outlines the photographs and the descriptions of the jumping people included in the *Stroop Report* in his detailed article on the history of Niska Street.
- 8 Leociak (2016, 361) assumed that these four photographs of Niska Street as well as the photograph of a woman hanging from the veranda were taken by Franz Konrad, "the King of the Warsaw ghetto," the administrator of the acquisition of Jewish properties, whose office was located on Niska Street. During the investigation on 2 and 4 October, 1948 in Warsaw, Konrad admitted his authorship of a photograph of people jumping from a burning building on Niska Street (Stempowski 2018). However, Stempowski doubts that the *Stroop Report* included photos taken by Konrad because of the bad relationship between Konrad and Stroop.
- 9 The latter was presumably taken by the same photographer of the photographs of the jumping man and the corpses piled together on the street, while the former was taken by the same or another photographer standing at another place.

- 10 There are also descriptions of the Jewish ghetto inhabitants jumping in the report on 22, 24 April, 2, and 4 May (Rutkowski 1958, 40, 49, 69, 75).
- 11 Mieczysław Wejman is a Cracow-based graphic artist who, as a professor of the Academy of Arts in Cracow, started the Cracow Graphic School after the Second World War. In the 1930s, he was a student at the Academy of Arts in Cracow and Warsaw, and during the war, he lived in Warsaw under Nazi occupation until September 1944.
- 12 I deeply thank Piotr Rypson, the ex-deputy director of the National Museum in Warsaw, for the suggestion to interpret this series in the context of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.
- 13 Personal interview with Stanisław Wejman, 12 May 2017, Cracow.
- 14 In the interview with Krzyżanowska, Stanisław stated that his father had conflicts with a *volksdeutsch* individual who worked at the same factory and himself had to hide in Warsaw. It is unknown when this event occurred (Krzyżanowska 2014, 324).
- 15 The poem was first published in the underground in *Z otchłani* [From the Abyss] in 1944 and after the war in *Ocalenie* [Rescue] in 1946.
- 16 Miłosz observed this scene with his own eyes. See Grudzińska-Gross (2013, 819–820); Miłosz (2004, 64–65).
- 17 We can note a similar desire to overcome human imperfection in the Icarus myth.
- 18 For example, two woodblock prints and an etching titled *Zasłona* (*Zasłona I* [Curtain I], 1962; *Zasłona II* [Curtain II], 1962; *Czarna zasłona* [Black Curtain], 1962), which depict torn curtains with a center hole, also remind us of the empty buildings in the ghetto.
- 19 This “game” is not mentioned in the *Stroop Report*. However, in the short story *Dwojra Zielona*, also included in Nałkowska’s *Medallions*, a Jewish woman Dwojra Zielona recalls how she was shot in her eye by German troops when she was forced to jump from the window of a building in the ghetto in Międzyrzecz. It was a game between German soldiers. (Nałkowska 2000, 32).
- 20 Benjamin Meed witnessed indifference of Poles to Jewish inhabitants’ sufferings in the Warsaw ghetto when he stood outside the ghetto on Palm Sunday in 1943. As a Jewish survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, he explained in the interview conducted in English in 1990 that he never heard any sympathetic voices to the scene of people jumping from the window in the ghetto. In this interview he also mentioned the scene of the carousel. Oral History Interview with Benjamin Meed. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accession Number: 1990.356.1 / RG Number: RG-50.030.0152. Verbatim transcript is available online. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/benjamin-ben-meed-describes-the-burning-of-the-warsaw-ghetto-during-the-1943-ghetto-uprising?parent=en%2F3636> [last accessed May 23, May 2020].
- 21 See Richard Draw, “Falling Man,” 2001. Time 100 Photos. - <http://100photos.time.com/photos/richard-drew-falling-man> [last accessed 7, July 2021].
- 22 The poem was published originally in Polish in the collection of poems of Szyborska *Chwila* [Moment], which was published in the same year in English in the United States (Schmidt 2002, 106).

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