Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond

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Disturbing Pasts

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The Return of the Jew in Polish Culture

Uilleam Blacker

Context

For Poland, the mourning of the loss of its Jewish population to the Holocaust has been a complex and difficult process. Transnational Holocaust discourse, which incorporates the suffering of Polish Jews into a wider Jewish tragedy, has been seen by some Poles as eclipsing Polish wartime suffering and building an image of Poland as a vast Jewish cemetery. In this landscape, Poles, often portrayed as anti-Semites who allowed the Holocaust to happen or took part in it, become the villains. This memory narrative was resisted in different ways by both the Polish communist regime and its opponents, meaning that the deaths of Poland's pre-war Jews were seen in terms of sharply drawn ethnic boundaries. Polish and Jewish suffering were incompatible, even mutually exclusive, and the patriotic Polish self was left to gather and protect its suppressed and fragmented memories in confrontation with the Jewish other. The State increasingly helped to form this image, especially in the post-Stalin period, when the regime became more nationalistic and anti-Semitic.[1]

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, writers, intellectuals, historians, civic activists and remaining Jewish communities combined to question the official effacing of Poland's Jewish past and the tragedy of the Holocaust, as well as the polarization of representations of Polish and Jewish experiences of the war.[2] To give an exhaustive summary of all the literary texts, art works and films that have contributed to this process over the last half century or so would go far beyond the scope of one chapter; I will instead focus on a number of texts that have approached the topic through one specific motif, that of the return. The chapter hopes to demonstrate that writers and filmmakers use the motif of return in order to disturb familiar ways of remembering the war and the Holocaust, and in particular the practice of drawing sharply defined borders between Jewish and Polish memories; at the same time, the chapter will identify a tendency to move away from the dominant notion that the re-appearance of the Jewish parts of Poland's past must always contain an element of the disturbing, a move that attempts to soften the shock and dissonance of the Jewish return.

Return

The dynamic of return is at the heart of memory. In Freudian terms, repressed memories may come back to disturb and haunt us; this return can be related to melancholia, whereby a loss that we fail to identify and name brings about a pathological confusion, often an obsessive acting out, or return to the 'scene' of the trauma. The 'healthier' process of mourning also involves a return to the object and moment of loss, but this time a conscious one aimed at productively working through and accepting the loss: here the object of loss is identified and named.[3] In Freud's conception, then, mourning is a condition that is oriented towards the other, at an external object of loss, whereas melancholia, unable to find that object, turns inwards, narcissistically conflating the ego with the object. This dichotomy becomes problematic when applied to complex situations of collective loss, as in the case of Poland's Jews: are Polish texts addressing the loss of Polish Jews directed at a Jewish other, at a composite Polish-Jewish self, or are they rather concerned with addressing a purely Polish trauma related to the witnessing of the Holocaust?

In a sense, the inability to locate the object of loss in melancholia parallels the lack of knowledge of the traumatic event that is at the heart of trauma, an idea used frequently to describe the relationship to the Holocaust of survivors or their descendants.[4] According to Alexander Etkind, however, the concept of trauma itself is unsatisfactory when describing processes of later representations of catastrophes: the idea that an actual trauma may be passed on across generations through cultural media is 'empirically less verifiable' than the idea that the often tortured returns to historical catastrophes are in fact products of 'warped' processes of mourning: an other-oriented condition based in practices and representations that can more realistically be imagined as being transferred across generations. The overwhelming nature of the loss often inspires convoluted forms, frequently involving gothic or supernatural imagery.[5]

Etkind's focus is mourning for the victims of the Gulag, a loss whose scale and ambiguity make it particularly prone to producing 'warped' forms of representation. The self-other mourning dynamic is, according to Etkind, more straightforward in the case of the Holocaust, with its clearly defined perpetrators and victims, better documented atrocities, clear admissions of guilt by the 'perpetrator society', more easily locatable crime scenes and more extensive public commemoration. Yet when the Holocaust is considered in light of the complex relationships to it of the societies that were its primary witnesses (in other words, those in east-central Europe), it becomes clear that this is a memory discourse that is also riddled with ambiguities. A rescuer of Jews, for example, could become a denouncer depending on contingency, while an exploiter of hiding Jews could become a courageous rescuer, as Agnieszka Holland's memoir-based film *In Darkness* (2011) demonstrates. Also, just as pre-war anti-Semitism and segregation played a role in the course of the German occupation in Poland, so too did the intermingling of Jewish and Polish families and identities. Many Jews, of course, spoke Polish as a first language and held a strong affinity for Polish culture and civic identity, both of which they helped to create. The self-other dynamics at work within post-war and contemporary Polish mourning for the victims

of the Holocaust are thus far from straightforward, and also often take on surprising, 'warped' forms.

Physical returns

Mnemonic or temporal returns are often mapped onto space through physical returns. Svetlana Boym has noted of nostalgia that it allows us 'to revisit time like space'.[6] Given that Boym famously gives two categories of nostalgia, reflective and restorative (the former healthy, ironic, recognizing loss, the latter unable to accept the loss and unhealthily obsessed with reversing it), we can suggest that there are different types of physical return: one that recognizes the space that is returned to as bearing only degraded traces of an irrecoverable past, and another that seeks the lost time in earnest as though it were in fact a place. This difference resonates with the difference between mourning and melancholia.

Both of these sets of ideas can be linked to Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post-memory', which describes the way in which experiences that are not ours may be passed on to us via powerful images, family narratives and other media. Hirsch's focus in exploring this phenomenon is the second generation of Holocaust survivors, who experience their parents' memories almost as vividly as their own. The strength of this post-memory is such that members of the second and third post-Holocaust generation see journeys to the places that their families inhabited before the war, or to the places where family members were killed, in terms of return. The locus of such returns is usually eastern Europe, and in Hirsch's own case it is Chernivtsi (pre-war Cernăuți or Czernowitz), in western Ukraine. For many Jews with eastern European heritage, the focus of the return is Poland, cities like Kraków, Warsaw, Lublin, or many villages and former shtetls, as well the sites of the death camps at Oświęcim, Treblinka or Majdanek. The experience of return to the lost Jewish homeland of eastern Europe is one that is well documented in memoirs, fictional texts, photographic projects and documentary and fiction films. The experience of those witnessing these returns – in the case of this paper, the Poles who inhabit these places today – attracts less attention.[7] Even less well studied, however, are the returns that are actively made across or within these former Jewish spaces by those who inhabit them, whereby, in the Polish case, an increasing number of Poles are either seeking ways to mourn more effectively the loss of the Jewish element of Polish society, or recovering previously obscured Jewish identities; in each case, those re/discovering Jewish pasts and identities embark on their own pilgrimages, metaphorical and physical, in order to revisit vaguely known personal and/or collective pasts and activate their own post-memories. The nature of the return here is complex: in Freudian terms, the returnees cannot be said to be straightforwardly mourning a Jewish other; yet their practices and texts go beyond the inward dynamic of melancholia. Writers, filmmakers and ordinary people turn away from the idea that commemorating the Holocaust means recognizing the loss of the Jew as the principal other, and instead begin to discover the object of loss as an element of the self (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively). The Polish Jew is thus simultaneously an other who is part of the self, and a part of the self that is other.

The feared return

Before examining the more complex returns alluded to above, it is instructive to start from one extreme, but not uncommon attitude towards Jewish return: fear. On the face of it, it may seem strange that anti-Semitic attitudes and prejudices should persist in a country that, since the war has had only a tiny Jewish minority. Yet it is precisely the memory of the circumstances of the destruction of Poland's Jews, and the fear of the return of these memories with the return of surviving Jews, that fires resentment.[8] Since the very early post-war period, fear of Jewish return has played a large role in the attitudes towards Jews and the wartime past in Poland. Jan Gross, whose books *Neighbours: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001) and *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (2006) are among the most important historical texts written on Polish-Jewish relations, outlined the situation in the latter of these works. The fear of Jews reclaiming homes and property that had been taken by Poles during the war, and the fear of retribution for assistance in the Nazi persecution of the Jews was so powerful, according to Gross, that it led to acts of horrific violence, such as the infamous Kielce pogrom of 1946. The controversy that followed Gross's uncovering and discussion of these incidents serves as testament to the powerful hold that the fear of the return of this knowledge still has in Poland, though at the same time it signals Polish society's readiness for a wide-ranging, if often acrimonious discussion.[9]

Hanna Krall, a Polish-Jewish writer and journalists whose works sit on the borderline between fiction and reportage, documented these attitudes in her book *Dowody na istnienie* (Proof of Existence, 1995). When she travels to the southern Polish town of Leżajsk, the inhabitants of pre-war Jewish houses refuse to speak to her. One of the few locals willing to speak tells her:

> They won't open up. One woman came and said she wanted to look at the stove. I'll just touch it with my hand, she said. I've come from America to touch our stove ... I shouted through the window that the woman just wants to touch the stove and then go back to America, but they didn't open the door. [...] People are already asking whose house the Jews will take first.[10]

The fear of material claims by Jews is intertwined with the fear of moral condemnation either over actions during the German occupation or over the appropriation of property. These possibilities were not simply imagined by those inhabiting the ex-Jewish towns and buildings, but were fed in part by the attitudes of those visiting from abroad to investigate the Holocaust. One prominent example of a project that contributed to this fear is Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). Lanzmann's film is structured around physically 'returning' to 'crime scenes', as the director himself put it. In its sections filmed in Poland, the film features almost exclusively poor and uneducated rural Poles, and seems to deliberately try to draw out anti-Semitism and lack of regret over the fate of their former neighbours. While the film was widely acclaimed in the West, its reception in Poland was negative. Some, like the dissident intellectual Jacek Kuroń, defended Lanzmann's right to a one-sided approach, but most, including Polish-Jewish

organizations and progressive intellectuals, criticized the film's confrontational stance (Lanzmann openly stated that his film was an 'accusation against Poland').[11] The film performs a double function in this respect: it portrays the fear of Jewish return, and at the same time acts as a manifestation of precisely what is feared.

The resentment towards the accusatory tone of *Shoah* finds echoes in Polish attitudes towards one of the most common types of Jewish return to Poland – that made by the countless groups of young Israelis who travel to Poland to see the death camps or the site of the Warsaw ghetto, and who see nothing of Poland beyond the legacy of persecution and death. As Elżbieta Janicka has shown in her study of commemorative practices in Warsaw, Polish nationalist memory politics seems to anticipate this confrontational type of return by placing its own ostentatiously Polish Catholic memorials along the same routes.[12]

In some ways, the reaction to Lanzmann's film and to the memory tourism of Israeli youth groups was echoed in the controversy that Jan Gross's books sparked: in each case, Jews 'return' to Poland to confront Poles with forgotten and uncomfortable parts of the jigsaw of the memory of the war. Yet the difference in Gross's case was marked: Gross may have written and returned from the US, but he was born and raised in Poland. His mother, an ethnic Pole, had been in the Home Army, and had helped his father, a Polish Jew, to survive the occupation. Gross emigrated in 1969, while still a student, after suffering reprisals for his oppositionist activity and in the wake of the state-sponsored anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. His historical work in the 1970s sought to combat communist myths about Poland's past, including addressing the taboo topic of the Soviet Union's wartime aggression against Poland. For some, Gross became a figure of hate for supposedly blackening the reputation of Poles; but his books became extremely widely read, and even produced their own artistic afterlife. In 2008, playwright Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Nasza klasa* (Our Class), closely based on Gross's book, was first performed, itself causing something of a sensation; other playwrights (Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, Paweł Demirski and Michał Zadara) have also taken inspiration from the Jedwabne case as described by Gross.[13] Perhaps the most influential artistic interpretation of Gross's work, however, was Władysław Pasikowski's controversial film *Pokłosie* (Aftermath, 2011).

Aftermath is structured around returns: the return of the ghosts of the past, but also the return of a Polish emigrant from Chicago to his home village in provincial Poland. The man's brother, who has remained in the town, has aroused suspicion locally by gathering together Jewish gravestones that had been used as building materials around the area. The brothers delve deeper into the past of the town and discover that, contrary to the accepted narrative of Nazi culpability, the local Jews had been murdered by their Polish neighbours and their property subsequently appropriated by local families. Indeed, the brothers' own father had played a leading role in the massacre, which took place in what was then his house (now a burnt out, overgrown ruin). The house the brothers grew up in and its surrounding land had belonged to the murdered Jewish neighbours, as indeed had the houses of many of the village's inhabitants. On a visit to the local archive, the elder brother not only establishes the original ownership of the land, but also that the chronology of events in relation to post-war legislation means that the previous owners would have rights to reclaim it.

Following a tip-off from an older neighbour, the brothers dig into the earth under the ruin of their father's old house and discover the bones of dozens of Jews. The scene, drawing on horror conventions, takes place at night, in pouring rain, with skulls and bones emerging from the muddy water, and morning finds them sitting among piles of bones; at this moment a mysterious old woman appears from the forest and recounts her childhood memory of witnessing the massacre. Here we see an overlaying of different kinds of return: the physical, uncanny return of the dead Jews is a manifestation of the return of the buried memories, which in turn is facilitated by the return of the brother, who, perhaps influenced by the Western mind-set, breaks through the stubborn silence of the Polish province and uses his right of access to information to unearth the documents that prove the original status of the land on which the villagers live.

The result of the brothers' activities is a rise in fear among the local people of the uncovering of past crimes, but also of claims by Jews on their property. This combination leads to tragic consequences for the younger brother, who, in the film's most notorious scene, is crucified on the barn door.[14] The barn is an important motif in relation to the subject matter of the film: when the brother's field is set on fire by neighbours, we see a dramatic shot of a burning barn, which is a direct reference to the Jedwabne massacre, in which the Jews were burned alive in a barn, not a house. Yet the brother's death is not in vain: we are assured, at the film's close, that the memory of the fate of the village Jews has been brought back into the open and properly commemorated. The last scene, set some time after the main events, echoes the famous ending of *Schindler's List* in this regard: a group of Israeli Jews stands in the brothers' field praying over the gravestones that the latter had salvaged and erected on their land; there is also a modest monument, a rock reminiscent of the one at Jedwabne. Memory has been openly restored to the village thanks to the (very Catholic) redemptive self-sacrifice of the son of the Polish murderer.

While closure of sorts may be intended here, the final scene also reveals something different. The 'cemetery' may be seen to be endorsed by living (returning) Jews, but the viewer is also left with an uneasy impression: the site has been created artificially by the Polish brothers by haphazardly re-erecting the headstones and, we assume, reburying the recovered bones in a similar way in the middle of a field. The unlikeliness of the scenario serves ultimately to create a grotesque imitation of mourning, with the 'other', the foreign Jews (who do not speak in the film), inserted as a kind of stage decoration for a performance about Polish guilt and redemption. At the same time, however, this unlikely, overtly symbolic ending is in keeping with the film's exaggerated, thriller- and horror-influenced plotting and aesthetics: one could, indeed, read the whole film as a grotesque parody of Poland's tortured relationship with its Jewish past in general.

Engaging with return

Pasikowski's film represents a melancholic turning inwards in which the returning Jew is eclipsed by the returning Pole. The Jew appears as an uncanny, voiceless Shakespearean ghost in a Polish tragedy: a tragedy that, judging by the film's popularity and the controversy it caused, needed to be played out before contemporary Polish

society. A related, but separate, trend in Polish culture, however, has focused more on complexities of mourning. Central to Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's influential novel *Umschlagplatz* (1988) is the return of a fictional Polish-Jewish writer, Icyk Mandelbaum, to Warsaw many years after the war. Rymkiewicz's semi-autobiographical narrator is open about the fact that he has invented Mandelbaum as a way to get inside the head of a returning Jew ('what would I have done as a Jew after the war?'),[15] and as a way of creating dialogue. The novel is saturated with dialogues between the narrator and his Jewish wife, between the narrator and Mandelbaum, the narrator and his friend as they walk through Warsaw's former Jewish district and the former ghetto, or the imagined conversations Mandelbaum has in pre-war Warsaw among circles of Jewish intellectuals. Rymkiewicz allows voices to grow independently, to contradict his narrator, to put his narrator and his projected Polish reader in awkward positions with regard to the past. This is a work that by its very construction, following Bakhtin, opens the possibility for dialogue that escapes the control of the authorial voice.[16]

Rymkiewicz's Mandelbaum comes back not as an alien force intent on disturbing Polish memories; he comes *home* reluctantly, willed to do so by his friend, Rymkiewicz's narrator. This return is intended not to accuse or confront, but to encourage Poles to ask the question: 'What meaning does it have, can it have, that we live around their death?',[17] and also to probe the border between 'us' and 'them'. Czesław Miłosz, one of Poland's Nobel Prize laureates, wrote one of the most famous texts on this border, the poem 'Campo dei Fiori', in 1943, describing how a carousel spun on a Warsaw square while the ghetto burned nearby.[18] The poem is a stark exposé of the horrific divide that can open up in that distance created by persistent othering, a divide which the literary critic Jan Błoński captured in his famous essay 'Poor Poles look at the Ghetto', published in 1987, just before Rymkiewcz's book: according to Błoński, Poles' historical failure to fully come to terms with the Jewish other, to negotiate a place for that other within Polish society and culture, and the complex legacy of the Holocaust that resulted in part from that failure, have left a 'bloody and awful mark' on Polish culture.[19] For Rymkiewicz, finding the erased site of the Umschlagpatz in Warsaw is precisely about uncovering and understanding the nature of this mark, and tackling the question of what to do with it.

The return of Mandelbaum in Rymkiewicz's work is an early example of a string of Jewish returns in recent Polish culture. In her prose debut, *Sefer* (2009), the distinguished poet Ewa Lipska imagines the 'return' to Kraków of a Viennese Jewish psychoanalyst, the eponymous Sefer, whose father had fled the city after narrowly surviving the Holocaust. The psychoanalyst is an urbane, educated foreigner, much like Icyk Mandelbaum, but his connection to Poland is different; written twenty years after *Umschlagplatz*, and featuring a representative of the post-Holocaust generation, *Sefer* is an exercise in post-memory. The conversations that ensue when Sefer 'returns' to Kraków are less tortured than those entered into by Mandelbaum. The latter finds himself disorientated by a drastically transformed late-socialist Warsaw from which traces of Jewish life have been expunged; Sefer's Kraków is an EU city basking in new-found confidence and proudly displaying its Jewish heritage. Sefer's engagement with his family's past during his trip – through the classic medium of post-memory, the photograph – is tinged with nostalgia, with a sweet melancholy that characterizes

his relationship to Poland more generally. There is nothing difficult about the return: Sefer encounters only educated, enlightened people, even enjoys a brief romance with a younger local woman, a descendent of his own father's first sweetheart. Violence, resentment, fear – all these seem distant, and Lipska's return belongs firmly to the new, EU Poland, in which anti-Semitism and the fear of the Jewish return are becoming more and more marginal. Lipska gives over her narrative perspective entirely to the returning Jew, placing the Pole in the position of (here rather romanticized) other. In contrast to the confused, compulsive acting out of Pasikowski's film or the difficult conversations in Rymkiewicz, Lipska's treatment of the question of mourning Poland's Jews is transferred into the rarefied and harmonious sphere of Viennese and Krakowian intellectuals, where the complexities of the self-other dynamic are negotiated with an ease that is increasingly characteristic of the newly self-confident, post-accession Poland more widely.

A different type of return altogether appears in Igor Ostachowicz's debut novel *Noc żywych żydów* (Night of the Living Jews, 2012), which attracted a flurry of media attention on its publication and was nominated for Poland's leading literary prize. In Ostachowicz's novel, it is not émigré or second-generation Polish Jews that return to contemporary Poland, but the Jews who died in the city during the war, who return to haunt Warsaw as zombies. The protagonist, a Polish everyman living in Muranów, the pre-war Jewish district of Warsaw and during the war the main part of the ghetto (the same district that is traversed by Rymkiewicz's protagonists), has little interest in the Jewish past, engaged as he is, the author leads us to understand, in the banal, materialistic concerns of most contemporary Poles. His encounters with Jewish zombies, who emerge from under the foundations of his building, changes his outlook. Eventually, the protagonist joins the zombies in a dramatic battle against Polish neo-Nazis in a shopping centre.

The novel is composed from a patchwork of popular cultural references, most obvious being George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, and is written with considerable irony and a willingness to play on the edge of good taste. Despite its surface shock value, however, Ostachowicz's novel is a highly moral tale (not unlike Romero's original film, widely seen as a moral warning against rampant American consumerism), whose irreverence masks an earnest liberal agenda that fits well into Poland's ever-increasing canon of texts on Polish-Jewish relations.[20] On the one hand these Jewish zombies represent a curious 'warped' form of mourning for the lost other. On the other, however, the message is straightforward, and is merely an expression of the same, well-established, politically correct desire to engage with the Jewish past that has produced Muranów's recently opened state-of-the-art Museum of the History of Polish Jews. (Indeed, its author, as a former adviser to Poland's progressive ex-prime minister Donald Tusk, is a member of the political class).

Reading the three texts discussed above, it is important to bear in mind that those by Ostachowicz and Lipska are products of post-EU accession Poland, where Jewish festivals are hard to escape, and where there is possibly greater academic and cultural interest in all things Jewish than in any other country in Europe.[21] There is little in *Night of the Living Jews* and *Sefer* that would seriously disturb the status quo in terms of memory culture and politics. Rymkiewicz, who posited the dialogic return of the

Jewish other long before these works, is doing something different. *Umschlagplatz* did not come out of a vacuum, but it was not part of a dominant discourse: indeed, the novel went against the grain not only of the state-approved discourse (albeit at a time when this was becoming less monolithic), but also that strand of opposition thinking that was crystallized around patriotic Polish opposition to foreign-imposed communism. What makes Rymkewicz's work even more remarkable is that he is hardly typical of the liberal-left circles that pursue the topic of Polish-Jewish relations. Rymkiewicz has always had a conservative, at times nationalistic outlook (though this has become more pronounced in recent years), and he has treated the nature of Polishness and Poland's national losses and tragedies extensively.[22] To the heart of Polish patriotic intellectual resistance, then, Rymkiewicz brings Icyk Mandelbaum, a more challenging figure than any of Ostachowicz's zombies or Lipska's Sefer, to disturb the national narrative of victimhood, and ask what it means for his narrator, a patriotic Polish intellectual, to 'live around their death'.

This important difference notwithstanding, Rymkiewicz's, Lipska's and Ostachowicz's texts are united by their treatment of the subject of the return. In each case, the Jewish other is imagined as returning, in some cases to unsettle the Polish self, in others to shore up that self's latest methods for self-identification. All three texts are in a sense born of the failure to bridge the divide between Poles and Jews identified by Błoński and Miłosz, and interrogate this divide by bringing back Jews, be it as symbols, as phantoms, or as real characters with whom Poles can engage in dialogue. For Ostachowicz and Lipska, empathy and openness towards the other are clearly posited, but there is a distinct sense of distance and separation. Sefer is a foreigner who comes to Kraków as a tourist, encountering his exotic eastern European hosts and their *joie de vivre*, so lacking in stuffy Vienna, and his hosts find a similar gratification in the Freud-esque figure of the Viennese psychoanalyst. Ostachowicz's Jews are certainly native Polish, but they appear as humorously grotesque revenants, and are only temporarily invited into the present in order to teach contemporary Warsaw a lesson, before they are consigned again to the underworld. Pasikowski's Jews are, similarly, called on as both scary spectre and as classroom prop. In Rymkiewicz (and, indeed, in Krall), the division between us and them, our suffering and their suffering, is still apparent, but the encounters and the dynamics of the returns that facilitate them, are more complex, the forms of mourning and melancholy more convoluted and confused, and the conversations more involved.

Return of/to the self

The motif of the 'return of the Jew' has taken on a different dimension more recently in Polish culture and more widely in society, whereby the sharp division between Polish and Jewish identities has begun to be questioned at its most fundamental level. Instead of the Jewish other returning from without (from abroad), it is increasingly being shown returning *from within*: from within Poland, and from within Poles themselves. The sociologist Katka Reszke's book *Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland* (2013) represents one of the first in-depth

treatments of this topic, and focuses on the 'third generation' of Polish Jews after the Holocaust (generally those born from the 1970s onwards), whose parents and/or grandparents had concealed their Jewish identity. In most cases, the discovery is the result of family detective work, and comes when these people are in their teens.[23] Reszke's work portrays a generation of 'new' Polish Jews for whom the question of return is complex. As Reszke states: 'Jewish culture in contemporary Poland is not a returning phenomenon. It is a new construct, which very much relies on its past renderings and aspires to be rooted, to be a continuation.'[24] These returns are different from those post-mnemonic returns described by Hirsch and others, whereby a powerful existing identity inspires a physical return to a place never before visited: here, the 'return' is to an identity and culture that is barely known, but occurs in a place that is well known.

The topic has been dealt with before: Krall's *Proof of Existence*, for example, in a section called 'Niepamięć', or 'non-memory', documents cases of the rediscovery of Jewish roots by Poles who had previously had little or no knowledge of their mixed origins.[25] The subject has received more elaborate artistic treatments in recent years, however. Central to this process has been the writer and editor of the Polish-Jewish magazine *Midrasz* Piotr Paziński (born 1973), who has been hailed, in an echo of Reszke's book's title, as 'the first voice of the third post-Holocaust generation' in Poland.[26] Although Paziński does not fall into the category of those who 'suddenly' became aware of their Jewishness, his work nevertheless focuses on the experience of returning to or maintaining Jewishness as a Pole in contemporary Poland.

Paziński's debut novel *Pensjonat* (The Guesthouse, 2009) is built entirely around the motif of the return: a young man travels from Warsaw to a Jewish guesthouse in a small town of Otwock (not named in the novel), where he used to spend time as a child. The journey to Otwock may be grounded in autobiographical experience, but it forms an intertextual link with Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz*. *Umschlagplatz* features imagined scenes from the 1930s at a very similar guesthouse in the same town, and a later journey back to the town to try to relocate the guesthouse, as the narrator-author tries to piece together his picture of Icyk Mandelbaum. Paziński's protagonist partakes in further returns via the post-memory routes opened up by piles of old photographs and the rambling stories of the elderly guests in Otwock. This return is different from those outlined above, where an alien or semi-alien Jew comes back into the midst of Polish society in order to disturb memory narratives; this is rather a journey that takes place entirely within Poland, by a Polish Jew into the past of Polish Jewishness. The narrator's return extends into the wartime and pre-war memories of his interlocutors, but is perhaps more importantly a journey back to his own childhood in communist Poland, among the Jewish community that never entirely disappeared, living a life that was its own and yet also entirely connected to the everyday reality of the Polish People's Republic. Paziński does not dig up a corpse or import exotic Jews: his is a return less of what is lost, than of what has gone unperceived – that is, the continuing Jewishness of Poland.[27]

A similarly complex intra-Polish return to Jewishness, to the Polish-Jewish experience of the Holocaust, and to the difficulties faced by Jews in post-war Poland can be observed in Magdalena Tulli's novel *Włoskie szpilki* (Italian High Heels, 2011). The

reader is again confronted with a complexly woven fabric of mnemonic and physical returns. The narrator, the daughter of a Polish Jewish woman who survived Auschwitz, returns to her own childhood, sifting through the layers of personal traumas that have shaped her, not least of which are the realization as a child that she is a Jew in the anti-Semitic climate of late 1960s Poland. Recalling her own childhood, the narrator also recounts yearly trips to Italy to visit her father's family (he is Italian), and the difficult returns to Poland after these trips, which also serve as a spark for the narrator to travel back into her Italian family's history.

As the loosely structured novel progresses, the narrator unravels the most important return of the work: that made by her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, back through her own life, first through the hardships of late socialist Poland, then the anti-Semitic campaigns, and finally back to the concentration camp and the war. With each stage of her regression, the mother places her daughter in the shoes of a figure who has emerged from memory, until she seems to believe that they are together in the concentration camp. Tulli's narrative piles memory on memory until the effect becomes overwhelming, even manifested physically in the world around the narrator: it hangs over Warsaw as a black cloud, a reference also to the smoke rising from the incinerators in the death camps, and at one point the narrator even collapses under the weight of this past.

The word Jew is never actually mentioned in Tulli's novel. Indeed, despite her untypical roots, the narrator's story is remarkable in many ways for its typical Polishness. It is the wider story of the generation that grew up in the 1960s unable to emerge from the shadow of the war that had scarred their parents, struggling through the difficulties of the Polish People's Republic. In a way, the unusual figure of the Italian living in communist Poland here replaces the returning foreign Jew, and by contrast serves to underline the Polishness of the Jewish mother, who shares also in the general Polish wartime trauma. The narrator's Jewishness is not clear to her from her earliest childhood, but is gradually revealed to her as she gets older, with the full trauma of its implications revealed ultimately through her mother's mnemonic reversion: the disorientating effect of this on the narrator are a perfect example of the power of the post-memory return.

The 'return' of a suppressed Jewish identity is even more dramatically revealed in the Polish-British director Paweł Pawlikowski's film *Ida* (2013). Set, as are some of Tulli's stories, in Poland in the 1960s, the film tells the story of a novice nun who is sent to stay with her only living relative, her aunt, before taking her final vows. The aunt, a public prosecutor, reveals to the girl that their family is Jewish, and that her parents died during the war.

Pawlikowski takes his visual cues from French (and also Polish) new wave cinema, and incorporates a loving eye for period detail that is far more affectionate than Tulli's bleak Polish People's Republic. The film becomes a road movie of sorts as the girl and her aunt travel back to their native village in eastern Poland to find her parents' grave. The return of the girl's lost Jewish identity is thus, again, accompanied by a physical return; this is then mirrored by her return, despite the revelations, to the convent at the film's close. As is the case with Paziński and Tulli, Pawlikowski's film reminds the viewer that Jewishness is not foreign to Poland, neither did it vanish after the Holocaust. Ida's

journey echoes in some ways those being made by contemporary young Polish Jews, as described by Reszke, who are suddenly made aware of their roots, often to their complete surprise: the important difference here being the context – 1960s Poland was a far less friendly place to be Jewish than contemporary Poland.

The primary function of Pawlikowski's characters is symbolic, and the director consciously draws on stereotypes: a meek Catholic nun serves as a natural metaphor for Poland, while the post-war Jew is represented by a ruthless judge and committed communist, evoking the myth of a Jewish-controlled communist state that was – and to an extent remains – popular particularly with regard to Stalinist-era Poland. At the same time, we also see the image, familiar from Lanzman's *Shoah*, of the sultry, impoverished, uneducated rural Pole when the women visit their village. This reversion to stereotype and a certain flatness of characters has been criticized by some commentators, as has the overt use of Catholic aesthetics to tell a 'Jewish' story (and the film's generally highly aestheticized approach to its subject).[28]

It could also be argued, however, that the film's physical and mnemonic returns complicate these black-and-white images, removing them from their familiar, closed spatial framings (the convent, the aunt's spacious city-centre flat) and taking them on journeys into the openness and uncertainty of wider, undefined spaces, causing the contours of these images to blur. The opening scenes of the film, for example, show four young nuns within picturesque convent walls cleaning a statue of Jesus then carrying it outside into the snow and placing it on a pedestal – a quintessentially Polish image. When one of these nuns is taken outside of the convent and brought into contact with the complex reality of post-Holocaust Poland her hybrid identity is revealed, and the original image takes on an extra resonance that serves to disturb familiar conceptions of Polishness. At the same time, the back-story of the aunt, who we learn during the trip back to the village also lost her own child when the girl's parents were killed, reveals a depth of traumatic experience behind a flat image that had initially seemed to invite the antipathy of the viewer.

A similar approach is taken to the Polish family who now inhabit the women's family home. Shown as simple and poor, their initial reaction is one of hostility and suspicion. Yet it is soon revealed that the current occupier's father had first hidden Ida's parents in the forest, and that his son had later killed them out of fear for what would happen to his own family were they to be discovered. This revelation occurs during a scene that is strongly reminiscent of the exhumation scene in *Aftermath*: the son takes the pair to the site of the parent's death, digs up their bones and hands them over to the women. Pawlikowski, however, constructs this macabre scene without the broad-brush melodrama of Pasikowski's film, revealing the complex reasons for the son's actions and showing with sensitivity the way the underlying memories provoke simultaneously outward hostility and profound shame and regret.

At the end of the film, Ida returns to the convent. It is unclear how her newly gained knowledge about her origins will affect the way she perceives herself, or how or whether she will act on that knowledge. Indeed, the return to the convent has been seen as a sort of return to Polish normality and laying to rest of the complexes and complexities generated by the loss of Poland's Jews.[29] It is true that Pawlikowski's film ends ambiguously but serenely, leaving many questions unanswered, allowing

the disturbing questions it raises to sink beneath the film's calm, beautiful veneer. Yet perhaps this is one of the most effective aspects of the film: *Ida* refuses to force its characters to torture themselves with questions, to define themselves as Polish or Jewish, or to quantify how a hybrid of the two might work for them. Ida seems to accept her Jewish origins without question or difficulty, and yet also does not seem to allow it to shake her identity as a Polish Catholic. Perhaps, the film seems to suggest, it is not always necessary to seek tension or contradiction; perhaps the return of this suppressed aspect of Polishness does not have to be challenging or deeply disturbing.

Conclusion

The return of the Jew to the heart of Polishness that we find in the text outlined above and the representation of identities that are irreducible to a stark self-other dichotomy are not new to Polish culture. These things can be found in various forms in Polish literature from both post- and pre-war eras, as Jews, who made enormous contributions to Polish literature, attempted to negotiate their way in a culture that they did not necessarily see as a 'host', but as their own. Non-Jewish Polish intellectuals and writers have also contributed to this stretching of identity. Recent years have, however, seen a particular resurgence in expressions of this kind of complexity, expressions that are couched in the language and imagery of mourning, and overturning the simplistic idea of the disturbing return of the alien Jew as ghost, zombie, corpse, or foreigner, intent on upsetting the order of national narratives of the past and identity. The return first becomes something that happens within Poland, and then manifests itself within individual Poles, revealing something contradictory, yet somehow naturally so, at the heart of Polish cultural memory.

Writing about the memory of the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra has stated that:

> [...] one might suggest that the ghosts of the past – symptomatic revenants who have not been laid to rest because of a disturbance in the symbolic order, a deficit in the ritual process, or a death so extreme in its unjustifiability or transgressiveness that in certain ways it exceeds existing modes (perhaps any possible mode) of mourning – roam the post-traumatic world and are not entirely 'owned' as 'one's own' by any individual or group.[30]

Poland's Jews are precisely the kind of revenant that challenges the very idea of what may or may not be 'ours', that is, of the self and not of the other. The dead who are the source of these revenants certainly provoke melancholic turning inwards and obsessive returns, and in the confusion they provoke over the relationship between subject and object of mourning inspire warped forms of the latter that are expressed, as in the works by Ostachowicz and Pasikowski discussed above, in macabre imagery and pleasantly shocking popular genres.

While Pasikowski and Ostachowicz revert to entertainingly grotesque expressions of loss, the more complex texts by Pawlikowski, Tulli and Paziński, demonstrate the intertwining of mourning and melancholy in the dynamics of post-memory: in each case

a second or third-generation survivor accesses their lost, or rather, never-experienced past through physical returns, mnemonic media (photographs are prominent in all three texts) and family stories. This is not the return of a previously hidden traumatic memory that is excavated from within the self, returning to disrupt that self. Rather, it is a post-mnemonic return that is orchestrated through external stimuli, and it is thus not restricted to the individuals who experienced the original events: it is something that haunts Polishness more widely, which is available in the stories, objects and places among which all Poles live. The hybrid dynamic in these three texts whereby individuals find memory 'within themselves' precisely through the external apparatus of cultural memory means that the returns depicted belong exclusively neither to melancholy nor mourning: they go inwards and outwards simultaneously, into the self and out towards the other, blurring the boundaries between these.

These latter texts suggest that Poland's Jews cannot be mourned through a straightforward process of empathetic return to/of the other. As the work of Paziński, Pawlikowski and Tulli in particular demonstrate, this is not simply a matter of Poles' orientation towards their dead, but to their living too, something that sociological studies of contemporary Polish Jews, like Katka Reszke's, confirm. And just as Reszke's respondents encounter the return of the knowledge of their Jewishness not in terms of the disturbing return of suppressed knowledge, but rather as the result of a voluntary, often pleasurable process, Pawlikowski's Ida suggests that in the end it may be possible to think of Poland's Jewishness beyond the categories of contradiction, repression, haunting, disturbance, or even mourning, but rather as something that can be calmly acknowledged, accepted and reflected upon as an inherent part of twenty-first-century Polish cultural memory.

Notes

1 On various aspects of these problems see Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Poland and Germany* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 161–168; Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes* (Kraków and Budapest: Austeria, 2008); Piotr Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu: spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010); Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994).

2 Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 155. Katka Reszke, *Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 24–25.

3 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Pelican Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through', *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (London: Vintage, 2001).

4 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub,

Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

5 Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

6 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

7 See Jackie Feldman, *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity* (Oxford: Berghan, 2008); Erica Lehrer, 'Relocating Auschwitz: Affective Relations in the Jewish-German-Polish Troika', in Kristin Kopp and Joanna Nizynska (eds), *Germany, Poland and Postmemorial Relations: In Search of a Liveable Past* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

8 Karen Underhill, 'Next year in Drohobych: On the uses of Jewish absence', *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, 3 (2011): 581–596, 588; Genevieve Zubrzycki, 'Narrative Shock and Polish Memory Remaking in the 21st Century', in Marc Silberman and Florence Vatan (eds), *Memory and Postwar Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 104.

9 In this sense, Poland probably leads the way among east-central European states. For discussion of Gross's work and its impact in Poland see Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic, 'Introduction', in Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic (eds), *The Neighbours Respond: the Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

10 Hanna Krall, *Dowody na istnienie* (Poznań: a5, 1995), 24.

11 Joanna Szczęsna, '25 lat spory o "Shoah" ', *Gazeta wyborcza*, 24 March 2010. Available online: http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,76842,7694169.html (accessed 30 March 2015).

12 Elżbieta Janicka, *Festung Warschau*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012). For a discussion of Israeli artistic responses to this type of 'return' see Erica Lehrer and Magdalena Waligorska, 'Cur(at)ing History: New Genre Art Interventions and the Polish-Jewish Past', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 3, no. 27 (2013): 510–544.

13 On Słobodzianek see Paul Vickers, 'Constructing a Memory of Polish/Jewish Community in Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class*', *Polish Literature in Transformation*, ed. Ursula Phillips, Knut Andreas Grimstad and Kris Van Heuckelom (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013), 203–224.

14 The Polish artist Rafał Betlejewski caused some controversy in 2010 with his 'Burning Barn' performance, which marked the 70th anniversary of Jedwabne: he bought and reassembled an old barn and burned it in a village near Warsaw. See Lehrer and Waligorska, 'Cur(at)ing History' and Uilleam Blacker, 'Spatial Dialogues and Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Polish Art: Yael Bartana, Rafał Betlejewski and Joanna Rajkowska', *Open Arts Journal*, 3 (2014), 173–187.

15 Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Umschlagplatz* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1988), 73.

16 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984).

17 Rymkiewicz, *Umschlagplatz*, 16.

18 Czesław Miłosz, 'Campo dei Fiori', *New and Collected Poems, 1931–2001*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 33–34.

19 Jan Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1987), 10.

20 For an analysis of Jewish motifs in popular culture in Poland, in particular in detective diction, which helps put my discussion of Ostachowicz and Pasikowski

in perspective, see Magdalena Waligorska, 'The Jewish-theme whodunnit in contemporary Poland and Germany', *East European Jewish Affairs*, 43, 2 (2013), 143–161.

21 This claim was made by Janusz Makuch, director of the Festival of Jewish Culture in Kraków, in an interview for Polish Radio: *Kultura w wielkim mieście* (2012), [Radio programme], Polish Radio 2, 3 March, 20.20. Available online: http://www.polskieradio.pl/8/1399/Artykul/567406,Kultura-zydowska (accessed 30 March 2015).

22 See, for example, Rymkewicz's recent works *Wieszanie* (2007) and *Kinderszenen* (2008), or the earlier *Rozmowy polskie latem 1983* (1983).

23 The American filmmaker Adam Zucker has treated exactly the same topic in his documentary *The Return* (2014), which follows four young Polish women as they rediscover their Jewish roots and (re)-embrace Jewish identity, culture and religious practice.

24 Reszke, *Return of the Jew*, 12.

25 Krall, *Dowody na istnienie*, 57–84.

26 Joanna Sobolewska for the magazine *Polityka*, as cited on the book's cover.

27 On Paziński, see Knut Andreas Grimstad, 'Writing after Testimony, or the Relevance of Piotr Paziński's *The Boarding House*', *Polish Literature in Transformation*, ed. Ursula Phillips, Knut Andreas Grimstad and Kris Van Heuckelom (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013), 189–202.

28 Agnieszka Graff, ' "Ida" – subtelność i polityka', *Krytyka polityczna: Dziennik opinii*, 01 November 2013, available online: http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/film/20131031/graff-ida-subtelnosc-i-polityka (accessed 30 March 2015).

29 Ibid.

30 Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21.