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Disputed memory

Jewish past, Polish remembrance

Before WWII, over 3 million Jews lived in Poland. Almost all of them were killed during the Shoah. The Communist regime forbade commemoration of Jews as a special group of victims. That has changed since 1990, but remembrance of Jews still polarises Polish society. That is shown by the debate over Jedwabne and the post-war pogroms. There exists a competition of victims between Jews and Poles. A mythological and symbolic figure of "the Jew" is still at work in Polish memory. Moreover, a "virtual Jewry" has come into being at former sites of Jewish life.

"Our memory is a place where there are no Jews." This is how cultural anthropologist and ethnologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir characterised Polish society's collective memory of WWII in January 2001. In 2008, Barbara Engelking-Boni confirmed this judgement with respect to Polish historiography:

The historiography on the National-Socialist occupation of Poland has a tradition going back 60 years, with patterns for categorisations and principles of chronology. In most cases, Jews have no place there. The Holocaust has still not become part of Poland's history.¹

Tokarska-Bakir made her assessment not long after the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbours*.² In this book, Gross reconstructed how the Polish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne murdered their Jewish fellow citizens in 1941. By apportioning a share of the blame for the Shoah to the Poles, Gross triggered the most intense and most emotional post-war debate on Polish-Jewish relations during WWII.

Engelking-Boni expressed her views in a discussion on Gross's latest book *Fear*.³ The book deals with anti-Semitism in Poland after WWII. The public debate sparked by this book in early 2008 was not as intense as the Jedwabne debate of 2001 to 2003.

The topic of Polish-Jewish relations during WWII was left on hold during the Cold War in that it was not possible to discuss it in public in Poland. It did emerge on a superficial level during the 1980s, but it was only during the Jedwabne debate that it moved to the centre of society. Meanwhile, three generations have passed since the war and the Holocaust. Even so, the Jedwabne debate gripped and shocked almost all of society. Some people welcomed it as an admission of Polish guilt and perceived it as a catharsis. Others branded it anti-Polish and feared that it would damage Poland's image throughout the rest of the world. They wanted to defend themselves against

such a prospect. This division in society deepened during disputes over other issues related to reassessing the past,⁴ and it has again surfaced during the debate surrounding *Fear*.

This division also reflects a split reality. On the one hand, the assessments made by Tokarska–Bakir and Engelking–Boni are accurate. They are based on the specific manner in which the Polish nation and state have been created. On the other hand, the Jewish population is very much present in the Polish remembrance culture in three ways. While it is claimed that Jews do not exist as a distinct group of victims, they are still present as something that has been suppressed. Second, there exists a notion of the mythical, symbolic Jew, which is important to the stereotype of Polish self–perception. And third, Jewish history is present in the public sphere in the form of folklore.

The fact that Poland's Jewish population failed to be recognised in Polish memory as distinct victims is rooted in a number of factors. Between 1949 and around 1980, a type of "official remembrance" predominated that was defined by those in power in the Socialist state. It increasingly drew on the traditional historical canon of national history. Although internationalism and friendship among the peoples were promoted in official ideology, the Communists' nationalism, which was designed to stabilise their hold on power, was by contrast highly traditional and xenophobic.⁵ Reflection on Polish history, open and public debates of self–perception over Polishness, patriotism, and the nation, as well as discussions about the Holocaust or the minorities living in Poland were thus prevented.⁶ Topics of this nature tended to be discussed in private, where a counter–memory existed. To this extent, it would be wrong to assume that Poland had only a monolithic, official culture of remembrance. The Jews were very much present in the memory of private individuals. In public, however, they were not mentioned.⁷ This changed significantly only after 1989, when there were no longer any taboos, and historical gaps began to be filled.

Throughout eastern central and eastern Europe, including Poland, this was accompanied by a pluralisation of historical memory. Beyond this general political framework, there were numerous other factors that prevented the public mourning of the murder of Poland's Jews.

The Reduction of History

One of these factors, according to historian Marcin Kula, is the distance that separated Jews and Poles before WWII. Jews and Poles, he writes, knew little of each other, which is why the Poles were unable to lament the loss of Poland's Jews. Furthermore, he adds, it is difficult to remember people who were viewed negatively; thus negative stereotypes of Poland's Jews would also have been a reason to forget them.⁸ Even if this argument appears plausible at first, the fact is that the two sides were not so ignorant of each other. Many of these three million or more Jews — first and foremost, but not only those who spoke Polish — showed a deep–rooted, genuine interest in Polish history and culture. This interest, however, was barely reciprocated and generated little affection in return.

Many of these Jews used the Polish language as writers, journalists, academics, and teachers.⁹ In many Yiddish–speaking families, parents made sure that their children were no longer affected by a severe language division. Isaac Bashevis Singer remembers that: "there was an unwritten law among the wives of Yiddish writers and of the great number of so–called Yiddishists that their

children should be raised to speak the Polish language".¹⁰ Historians and the general public have yet to delve into the pre-war interests and contacts between Jews and Poles. To this day, the divisive features of this relationship have been at the fore, not least because the contemporary discourse on Polish-Jewish relations in Poland and elsewhere has been dominated by the events of the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust. In this way, the legacy of 1,000 years of living among one another as neighbours has been reduced to just under a century of exclusion, mistrust, hostility, and despair. Consequently, the fact that the history of Jews in Poland-Lithuania and Poland was more than a history of exile, persecution, and isolation, let alone something that should be reduced to "ghetto history", is all too easily forgotten. This history is also the history of a Jewish homeland, Jewish presence, as well as specific types of Jewish modernity in eastern Europe.¹¹

From the moment the first Jews arrived in eastern Europe — especially in Poland — in search of a haven from persecution in western Europe during the late eleventh century, they strived to achieve equal rights as citizens, while at the same time preserving their cultural differences. On a daily basis, it was necessary to find a compromise between Jewish religious law and concepts on the one hand, and state law and practises on the other.

Living conditions among Jews in Poland were therefore contingent upon the result of cultural, political, economic, and legal arrangements between Jews and other ethnic and confessional population groups. These arrangements were neither ideal, nor did they result solely in conflict. They varied according to the situation. Jews and non-Jews lived alongside each other in clearly defined structures. Each group had its own administration and autonomy. At the same time, there were spaces where the groups came into contact with each other, whether in the tavern run by a Jewish innkeeper or when trading at the market. These arrangements and contacts took place whenever religious, national, ethnic, or other groups encountered one another. They form an important and lasting part of Polish-Jewish history. After WWII, however, this history was perceived almost solely as a history of destruction. "Auschwitz" has become the universal catchword for this destruction, a symbol that goes far beyond the German-Polish-Jewish framework of remembrance.

The nation's "Foreigners" or the right to a homeland

Another reason why Jews have been excluded from Polish collective memory is related to the history of the Polish nation's formation, during which the concept of a nation without a state was created.¹² At the end of the eighteenth century, Austria, Prussia, and Russia partitioned the Polish Commonwealth. For Poles, the desire to re-establish the state became so powerful that nationalist ideas gained the upper hand over other political ideas, including liberal ones. During the late nineteenth century, the concept of the exclusive, ethnically homogeneous nation-state had already gained dominance over the idea of a shared republican identity for all citizens, regardless of their nationality and faith.¹³ National self-identification took on forms that were accompanied by the drawing of clear boundaries between the Poles and the other, who were treated as foreigners. Anti-Semitism, the roots of which extended back to Christian anti-Judaism, became an important element in Polish society's mentality.¹⁴

That the construction of the nation was accompanied in political and cultural terms by a hostility towards Jews is not unique to Poland.¹⁵ Every nation strives for homogeneity. The fact that such homogeneity is a fiction, since

antagonistic and plural elements are intrinsic to every collective, was ignored.¹⁶ In its concept of the nation, a majority within Polish society frequently defined Jews as the epitome of the "foreign element", as the "enemy within", which was hollowing out and destroying the "healthy" national and social fabric.

In the wake of the partition of Poland, a Romantic and messianic understanding of history became popular among Poles. In this perception of history, the suffering of the divided Polish people was defined as a moral distinction.¹⁷ The sense of moral superiority that ensued negatively influenced popular relations with Jews. Religion was also important in shaping these relations. The Roman Catholic faith was considered the guardian of Polish national identity and played an important role in the formation of the nation-state.¹⁸

Already before the modern era, the religious identity of Jews had made them the "others", the "foreigners". In the eyes of many Christians, Jews were a prime example of the non-believers, while the national element in Poland was in turn largely based on Christianity.¹⁹ The religious, ethnic, and social anti-Semitism that existed in Poland during the pre-modern era saw Jews as the embodiment of a demonic "anti-Christ" and assigned them an "unsafe place" that could vanish from the face of the earth at any time.²⁰ The Jews retained this demonic role during the Second Republic, from 1918 to 1939. Nationalism, which reached its peak in Europe at this time, also held sway in Poland. Nationalist concepts also played a role in numerous other political movements beyond the Roman Dmowski's rightwing National Democracy movement.²¹

The effect that National Democracy had on many Poles should not be underestimated. The writer Kazimierz Brandys called Dmowski, the author of several anti-Semitic works, a devastating figure for the Polish intelligentsia, the man "responsible for greater intellectual damage than the partitioning powers, since he poisoned the minds of three generations".²² During the 1930s in particular, Poland was dominated by a dichotomous view of the world, which was divided into "ours" and "the other". Depending on one's political views, the enemy could be a fascist, a communist, a capitalist, a freemason, a spy, or indeed a Jew.²³

Between 1918 and 1939, anti-Semitism was widespread among most political parties and within society. The political sphere was dominated by national attributions and categories from the nineteenth century.²⁴ These included the anti-Semitic scenario that Jews posed a threat. It was insinuated that they wanted not only to damage Poland, but to destroy it. Jews became the subject of numerous debates and were encouraged to leave the country.

In cultural and literary circles, anti-Semitism was considered to be almost *de rigueur*. So it was that in 1933, the well-known writer Karol Irzykowski announced in the Jewish newspaper *Nasz Przegląd* that he was also willing to become an anti-Semite: "I, too, will have to write an anti-Semitic article at some point."²⁵ He picked up on this thought again in 1937 and began his contribution by noting that an anti-Semitic article had been on his mind for a long time. In the article, he called Jews "Poles with reservation", since a Jew could easily stop being a Pole, while non-Jewish Poles were bound to their fatherland for better or worse. He then called for an "intelligent anti-Semitism" as opposed to a violent anti-Semitism.²⁶

The language and ideas used in reference to Jews were frequently pejorative during this period. A young writer called Zbigniew Unilowski described the largely Jewish district surrounding Warsaw's Nalewki Street as an "urban abscess" with a "sickly vitality" and as a gloomy "ghetto" where the residents were unhappy and anaemic.²⁷ Such notions of the urban environment of Jews contributed to the development of certain ideas of Jewishness. Jews were regarded as a backward mass of city dwellers who voluntarily cut themselves off from the rest of society, and who turned the cities into unpleasant places simply by their presence.²⁸

With regard to later developments, the importance of the interwar years and the attitudes that developed during this time should not be underestimated. Many unresolved social and national problems, such as the failure to implement land reform or the minorities policy, which erupted in bloodshed during and after the war, have their origins in the Second Republic.²⁹ To this day, it still casts a long shadow over the prospect of mutual understanding between Poles and Jews. Many Jews had hoped that, with Polish independence, they would obtain equal rights in that country that they had helped to create. These hopes were for the most part dashed. Writer Zusman Segalowicz, for example, described the city of Warsaw as a shared achievement of Poles and Jews.³⁰ Singer expresses a similar view in his memoirs:

The Poles still considered us aliens, but Jews helped build this city and participated enormously in its commerce, finance, and industry. Even the statues in this church represented images of Jews.³¹

Few Poles were at the time willing to express such a view so clearly as writer and journalist Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who noted in 1960 that Poland's Jews should not have been denied their right to a homeland, because they had helped to create the country over the centuries.³² Most people between the wars saw things differently: Many continued to consider Jews "foreign" and "disloyal", no matter how much they had acculturated to the majority population. The nation–state required homogeneity and clarity. Flexible notions of identity among Jews, which by no means entailed disloyalty to Poland, appeared not to fit in.

The murder of Polish Jews and its repercussions

The murder of almost all of Poland's Jews during WWII did not lead to a change in Polish attitudes. Instead, it deepened both fictitious and real divisions.³³ This occurred, for one, due to the isolation of Jews through the German policy of ghettoization and then murder. Furthermore, there were, to a limited extent, some Poles who played an active part in the Holocaust. It became known that others, after being forced by the National Socialists into the highly compromising role of witnessing the Holocaust, they allowed themselves to be tempted into exploiting the situation and demanded large payments for providing hiding places for Jews or blackmailed Jews for these services.³⁴ On many occasions, these Poles may have saved the lives of Jews concerned, but their conduct created new rifts.

Memories of the war period also created divisions. The memories of Jews and the Poles drifted far apart from each other. For Jews, the Shoah formed the basis of all remembrance of WWII. Non–Jewish Poles mourned their own, immense sacrifice. Due to the historical constellation of the August 1939 German–Soviet Non–Aggression Pact, the Soviet occupation of eastern

Poland, and the establishment of the Communist system after 1944, the history of WWII is in Polish cultural memory above all the history of a confrontation with Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.

In Polish memory, the support for Communism among a small part of the Jewish community was exaggerated and generalised. Although many Jewish Communists did not see themselves as Jewish, they were nonetheless perceived precisely as such and, with that, as different from other Communists: they were considered collaborators in the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland after the Hitler–Stalin pact and accomplices in establishing the Communist system in Poland after the war.³⁵

No language for remembrance

Remembrance of the Jewish population after the war was also difficult because almost all of the Polish Jews had been murdered, and most of the survivors had emigrated. As a result, by the early 1950s there were relatively few bearers of collective memory. Such a collective memory usually has an appellant, trans-generational character: those who are born later commit themselves to shared memories and thus compensate for the passing of the generation that experienced the events first hand.³⁶

The non-Jewish members of Polish society failed to take on this role. The sociologist Hanna Swida–Ziemia has made an interesting observation on this subject: after the war, the "Jewish question" was treated among young people as if the world had gone back to the pre-war period and the Holocaust had never happened. For this reason, society was again dominated by either the adherents of anti-Semitism, who continued to invoke the arguments of the pre-war era, or their staunch opponents. This emerged from a certain sense of time: whereas the post-war era was assuming an indistinct shape for Polish youth, the war era was set apart as a closed matter. The pre-war years, on the other hand, were perceived as very much alive. The unpleasant realities of the war and the insecurities of the present were blotted out.³⁷ This situation, Swida–Ziemia writes, resulted in the preservation of anti-Semitic attitudes, which were then passed on to the next generation and polarised the intelligentsia. This constellation should not be underestimated either, when it comes to the issue of remembrance.

The few Holocaust survivors who remained in Poland were either unwilling to acknowledge their Jewish origins in the light of the post-war pogroms, or they were so traumatised by their wartime experiences that they suppressed the memory of what had happened to them. There was no question of their becoming bearers of remembrance.³⁸ Furthermore, right after the war, there was quite simply no language available to describe what these two groups — separated from one another, yet living side-by-side — had experienced in the same country during that period. The unimaginable could not be articulated at first.

Warsaw as paradigm

The killing of three million Poles of the Jewish faith had destroyed social structures, not just Jewish ones. The middle classes and the intelligentsia, including the Jewish intelligentsia, had been murdered, and those who had survived had lost the settings in which they acted. Warsaw is a clear example of the lack of ability to articulate grief over the murder of Jews. The fact that the entire Jewish quarter around Nalewki Street and the 380,000 Jewish

inhabitants of Warsaw were simply no longer there, was not discussed. This was due not only to the traumas that they had experienced, but also to the fact that Warsaw was an empty city after the war. All that remained was rubble.³⁹ Following the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, the city had lost over 50 per cent of its pre-war population. Warsaw had to integrate thousands of people who had never lived there. The Polish capital changed dramatically as a result.

When it comes to remembering Polish–Jewish relations, Warsaw is almost a paradigm. Remembrance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 was overshadowed by remembrance of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, during which 180,000 people died and thousands of Warsaw families lost their relatives. In official Communist propaganda, no mention of the Warsaw Uprising was permitted, yet this ban on remembrance tended to have the opposite effect in the memories of many Polish families.

That the Ghetto Uprising was the first armed conflict involving street-by-street, house-to-house fighting in a German-occupied city in Europe, or that the Ghetto Uprising could have provided inspiration for the Warsaw Uprising, was not an interpretation of events that came from Polish historians. However, the Bulgarian-born writer Tzvetan Todorov has shown that the arguments presented by Jewish and Polish underground leaders were strikingly similar.⁴⁰

On the other hand, according to Marcin Kula, the Ghetto Uprising tends to be degraded in the minds of many Poles to a form of self-defence and is denied the honourable label "uprising" in Polish history.⁴¹ Already during WWII, it was not regarded as a Polish tragedy. According to historian Tomasz Szarota, the tragedy of their murdered Jewish fellow citizens did not provoke the same kind of response as the crimes that Germans committed against non-Jewish Poles in the Pawiak prison. According to Szarota, "We will avenge the ghetto" was never written on the walls of Warsaw as justification for the Warsaw Uprising, only "We will avenge Pawiak".⁴²

Due to the influx of immigrants to Warsaw from the countryside after the war, the memory of the Holocaust was lost. The city was no longer multinational. There was hardly anyone left to keep alive the memory of the old Warsaw.⁴³ At the same time, the national Communist ideology that pursued the vision of a homogeneous culture and nation was consolidated. Even sculptor Nathan Rapaport's well-known monument to the ghetto fighters, erected in 1948, was in keeping with this ideology. With its mythologised, proletarian figures depicted in a mix of Romanticism and Socialist Realism, the monument is saturated in proletarian ideology, thus successfully eradicating the religious affiliation of the insurgents as a mark of their identity. Jews were not to be recognised as such; they were instead instrumentalised as the fighting proletariat. In this way, the monument contributed more to forgetting than to remembering.⁴⁴

Only writer Hannah Krall's famous 1976 interview with Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Ghetto Uprising, and the translations of works by Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1978, showed the Poles just how interesting and varied Warsaw once was. For while the city was for many Poles the mother of the patriotic resistance, for many Jews it was one of the largest Jewish cities in Europe, a centre of religious and political thought, of literary life, a kind of "new Jerusalem".⁴⁵

These two memories were not reconciled after the war, not in Warsaw, nor anywhere elsewhere in Poland. On the contrary: until the 1980s, Jewish memory simply did not exist. This is one of the reasons why there remains to this today only limited knowledge of the fact that Warsaw was also a Jewish city before the war. However, the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto also spawned feelings of guilt, as one observer diagnosed: Poles suffered from "guilt by neglect", from the guilt of being witnesses.⁴⁶ A further result of this trauma is that there is hardly anything in Warsaw's public spaces to remind us that a Jewish quarter ever existed. The "ghetto" established by the Germans is now an empty space, a place that does not recall the ghetto's destruction, a place that has been filled with residential buildings, but that calls on the observer to interpret the empty space.⁴⁷

Possibly, this empty space can be filled to some extent by the Museum of the History of Jews in Poland, which is currently under construction.⁴⁸ It remains to be seen whether this can compensate for the suppression of memories, that were so difficult to process emotionally. Those who participated in the atrocities or made money from Jews during or after the war had a vested interest in this suppression. Furthermore, many Poles were ashamed of their negative attitude towards Jews.⁴⁹ Sometimes, their incapacity to show sympathy veered to anger, aggression, and anti-Semitism. At any rate, the events of WWII left deeply wounded memories.⁵⁰

Competition among martyrs and victims

The way in which the Ghetto Uprising and the Warsaw Uprising have been treated is an example of competition among victims. At times, this competition has dominated the dialogue between Poles and Jews and contributed to the failure to remember Jewish life in Poland as well as Jewish suffering. The almost inflationary use of the term "victim" today is in historical debates always linked to an assumption of innocence. Jan Philip Reemtsma has also spoken of the interpretative authority of the victim, "as if great suffering could only generate insights, rather than hinder them at the same time".⁵¹ Moreover, victims and guilt are not only to be understood as opposites; they can certainly function in a complementary manner. Against the backdrop of the aforementioned romantic paradigm, which created a victim myth in Poland that "is so rooted in our awareness that we regard it as historical reality",⁵² there developed among Poles a type of self-immunisation against the view that their own victim status did not protect them from taking responsibility for injustices done to others. The human rights activist Jacek Kuron put it this way in May 2001: "The problem is that [...] we have cultivated ourselves as a nation of martyrs and have difficulty recognising that there are other nations of martyrs."⁵³

The competitiveness between Poles and Jews goes back a long way. It can already be found in the messianic ideas of Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz. Both peoples, he claimed, were chosen by God. Poles and Jews had to travel the road of exile and suffering in order to be "redeemed". Failure as a nation could thus be re-interpreted as a sign of "God's grace". Such a self-image was able to convert a history of defeat and victimisation into an expression of a "divine plan". Feelings of inferiority could thus be tempered and reinterpreted as strengths. Here, parallels can be seen in the concepts of identity and the memory of both Poles and Jews.⁵⁴

Under the influence of growing nationalism, an identity competition emerged from these parallels. It manifested itself in debates on how much Jewish blood

was flowing in the veins of certain Poles: in the interwar years, several court cases were held that aimed to prove that the individual in question was not of Jewish origin. The issue was discussed with regard to Mickiewicz himself and the composer Chopin. After 1989, presidential candidate Tadeusz Mazowiecki had to field questions in public as to whether he was a Jew. Those individuals who look "Jewish" find it necessary to explain themselves or are publicly forced to do so.⁵⁵

Since 1945, the competition of victims has been expressed by the fact that many Poles, given their own suffering, find it difficult to acknowledge the victim status and unique nature of Jewish suffering during the Shoah. A symptomatic example from the 1960s is the entry "concentration camp" in the new Great Encyclopaedia. Here, a distinction was made between concentration camps and extermination camps, with Treblinka and Birkenau being included in the latter. This was met with protests by the nationalist oriented faction within the Polish United Worker's Party, led by Mieczyslaw Moczar, who claimed that all concentration camps had been extermination camps, and that the Polish people had also been threatened by extinction. According to this logic, the history of the Polish Jews should not be granted a unique status.⁵⁶

The competition of victims was repeatedly reflected in the way the symbolic site of the concentration camp and killing centre Auschwitz was treated. The Communist government made Auschwitz a symbol of the persecution and resistance of the Polish nation, while the murder of Jews was to a large extent ignored. After the visit of Pope John Paul II to the memorial site in 1979, the camp gained a new religious, Polish Catholic significance as well, which resulted in numerous conflicts after 1989. One need only recall the controversy surrounding the Carmelite nunnery in a building bordering the camp and the crosses erected there in the former gravel pit.⁵⁷ This unilateral appropriation of Auschwitz has since then been corrected: today, Auschwitz is for many Poles a Polish, Jewish, multi-national, and universal symbol.⁵⁸

Treatment by historians

After the war, Polish historians failed to make any contribution to the process of coming to terms with the Holocaust. The terror of the German occupation, the martyrdom of the Polish nation, and the heroic armed struggle against the occupiers took centre stage. In general, Polish historians regarded the Poles and Jews as separate subjects of enquiry.⁵⁹ This tendency can also be found in other nationally oriented histories, such as Jewish or German history writing. Since the late 1960s, Polish history writing has become somewhat more complex, and the fate of Jews has to some extent been incorporated into studies on WWII. However, the emphasis has remained on the political history of the occupying regime.⁶⁰ Until the 1980s, Jews were omitted from the history of Poland and were not treated as a distinct victim group in official works on the war.⁶¹

During the 1980s, the traditional stories of armed resistance and the heroic conduct in Poland during the occupation were put into perspective. The impulses for this came from international research on the Holocaust, which described the Polish population's behaviour as marked by passivity, indifference, or *schadenfreude*. The indifference among the Poles to the genocide of Jews was also literary critic Jan Blonski's thesis in his essay, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto", which unleashed the first broad debate on Polish-Jewish relations during WWII.⁶² After 1990, the genocide of Jews became the subject of intense study, leading to a wave of popular

representations in films, works of art. Academic research also had a great deal of catching up to do. Independent research on the Holocaust in Poland had been possible only from 1945 to 1947 and to a certain extent during the early 1960s — and then with only limited public impact.⁶³

New frameworks of memory: Remembrance after 1989

Since 1990, the persecution of Jews during WWII has been the subject of intense examination. The fact that all of the extermination camps were located on Polish soil makes this examination particularly dramatic and historically explosive. The close spatial connection between the genocide of Jews and the persecution of non-Jewish Poles in places such as Auschwitz raises such questions as: What kind of national and international remembrance is appropriate? What does balanced commemoration involve?⁶⁴

The location of the extermination camps has repeatedly focused world public attention on Poland. Some Poles regard this international dimension as a burden, because they fear Poland's standing in the world will be damaged, something that cannot be reconciled with the Polish self-image of moral superiority. As a consequence, there is a competition in Poland between Polish and international remembrance; this is obvious, for example, when Israeli youth delegations visit Auschwitz-Birkenau and have hardly any contact with the Polish population. They have little interest in contemporary Poland or the fact that numerous Poles also lost their lives during WWII in general and at Auschwitz in particular. It is the same with the annual "March of the Living", which is held in Poland every April.

At the same, however, Poland is also part of the international developments that have taken place since 1989 and is involved in shaping them. In the early 1990s, seemingly fixed constructs of memory from the immediate post-war years started to crumble throughout Europe. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, a rather stable collective memory had taken shape in the countries concerned. At the core of these constructs was the uncontested fact that Nazi Germany bore responsibility for WWII and had caused great suffering to Europeans in the course of the conflict. Issues of collaboration with the National Socialists were suppressed. In many countries, a myth of resistance was created.⁶⁵

In Poland, the effects of this myth have not been eliminated completely. It was only during the debates over *Neighbours* and *Fear* that the many different degrees of collaboration and culpability became known. This development is due not least to the fact that the generations that experienced these events are dying in increasing numbers. Since 1989, a fundamental, Europe-wide shift has taken place away from memory of the war to cultural memory. The Holocaust became the centrepiece of these cultural memories, but so did the genocide of the Sinti and Roma and the persecution and murder of homosexuals and the disabled.⁶⁶

However, the fact that the Holocaust has become a type of "negative founding myth", particularly for Europe's West, cannot simply be carried over to "the East". Remembrance cannot be homogenised in the name of a common European culture: nobody can be forced to remember in accordance with a particular norm. The Holocaust cannot play the same role for Polish society as it does for German society. Nonetheless, Poles are also demanding that the Holocaust be recognised as a universal event, as a never-ending mourning ritual, in which Poles should also participate. This mourning should be an

ethical attitude, according to literary critic Maria Janion, who quotes Maria Czapska, writing in the Paris-based exile magazine *Kultura* in 1957:

The most terrible genocide in the history of mankind, the massacre of several million Jews in Poland, which was selected by Hitler as the place of their execution, the blood and ashes of the victims, which seeped into Polish soil, form an important bond linking Poland to the Jewish nation, and it is not in our power to release ourselves from this bond.

This obligation, Janion adds, applies equally to Poland and to Europe.⁶⁷ She calls on her countrymen to show an empathy hitherto withheld, to lament the Holocaust, and to re-write the history of Poland. Similarly, the writer Kazimierz Brakoniecki appeals to Poles to respect Jewish pain and sorrow, for they are the inheritance of all mankind.⁶⁸ According to Janion, this path can be followed by taking a critical approach to one's own myths.⁶⁹

The Jedwabne debate must be seen as a step along this path, which leads through a differentiation and pluralisation of memories.⁷⁰ The fact that this is not a linear or irreversible process lies in the nature of memory.⁷¹ A secure consensus shared by all that is never again called into question is a foreign concept in democracy. After the Jedwabne debate, in which a general consensus was not reached, there followed a counter-wave of renewed heroisation and a return to a confrontational history of the war, as if a shock reaction to the loss of innocence.⁷² This was seen in the history policy that the government was promoting so as to generate a positive sense of community, an "affirmative patriotism", and a favourable image of Poland abroad.⁷³ The same can be said for the controversy over German plans to create a *Centre against Expulsion*. Among this history policy's advocates, the Jedwabne debate raised the question: "If we agree on a collective sense of shame, why can't we reach an understanding on a collective sense of pride?"⁷⁴

To some observers, it now appeared as if history policy had been initiated in order to eliminate the topic of Polish-Jewish relations from the public sphere.⁷⁵ That this did not, and could not, succeed has been shown by the recent discussion of Gross's book *Fear*. According to Gross, Polish anti-Semitism, which he confirmed was widespread in post-war society, can be traced back to fears on the part of the Poles that they would have to return Jewish assets to returning Holocaust survivors as well as to feelings of guilt arising from their conduct during the occupation.

The positions taken by representatives of the national rightwing parties and of the episcopate have made it particularly clear that they are not yet willing to part with old myths. Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz wrote in an open letter to the Catholic publishing house of *Fear* that its task was not to stir the demons of anti-Polishness and anti-Semitism. He also claimed that the book created an atmosphere of tension among nationalities in Poland.⁷⁶ However, in a democratic society, controversies and debates over self-perception are an indispensable component of political culture and a measure not only of its existence, but also its quality. Such debates do not aim for acquittal, or conviction, but for insight and understanding. The ongoing discussion of Polish-Jewish relations in Poland is nothing more than a Polish-Polish, democratic debate over self-perception. As such it is incapable of blocking the Polish-Jewish dialogue, as sociologist Ireneusz Krzeminski claimed.⁷⁷ On the contrary, the Polish-Polish debate can if anything support the Polish-Jewish dialogue, since one's own memories are a prerequisite to showing empathy for

the memories and the suffering of the others.

The "mythical" Jew

As these debates have shown, hardly anybody in Poland, whether an academic or a member general public, is indifferent to this topic. Few "if any narratives in contemporary European history are as fractured as that of Polish–Jewish relations in WWII".⁷⁸ This brokenness has lasted to this day, and there continues to be no other historical subject that has such a polarising effect in Poland: moral sensibilities collide with anger and resentment.⁷⁹ After all, for a significant share of Polish public opinion, the "Jewish question" in the twentieth century meant more than just the task of shaping the co–existence with a community that had another religion, different customs, and in part different professions. The "Jewish question" formed the core of the worldview of Poland's national rightwing parties. In this worldview, Jews were to be the embodiment of satanic evil, treason, and perfidy.⁸⁰

Since nobody else could take on this demonic role, the "symbolic, mystical Jew" survived in society's collective imagination, even though there were hardly any Jews left in Poland after the war. Since then, a symbolic Jew has existed in the Polish consciousness. This symbolic Jew constitutes a key element of the auto–stereotype of many Poles.⁸¹ That is why it is possible to revive the image of the "perfidious" Jew in any political crisis. This image appeals in different ways to existing patterns of thought. These range from Jews as Communists or capitalists, to dissidents or Zionists hiding behind the scenes, conspiring against the Poles, and secretly pulling the strings.⁸² The result is a Judaisation of the rejected "other" — and it has never been left to Jews or the "others" to decide who was a Jew and who were the "others". Those who are drummed out of the national corpus by means of definitions or oppose such putatively absolute values as Catholicism or the family, which have always been regarded as the pillars of the nation, can pose a potential threat. Formerly, it was Jews who bore the brunt of this argument; nowadays, it affects others, according to historian Andrzej Walicki.⁸³ In the perception of the political Right, these are primarily feminists and homosexuals.

With regard to the stigmatisation of homosexuals, the arguments put forward today are astonishingly similar to anti–Semitic sentiments of the 1920s and 1930s: homosexuals are considered the enemy within, just like Jews, without their own territory; both are branded as being anti–Polish, as "foreign", and as an internal danger for the Polish family, the pillar of the nation. At demonstrations, direct comparisons are sometimes made in terms as in the slogans: "We'll do to you what Hitler did to Jews" and "It's no myth, it's so true: where there's a gay, you'll find a Jew".⁸⁴

This recourse to anti–Semitic set pieces is not representative of Polish society. It is used by rightwing and extreme rightwing parties. Most Poles, particularly younger Poles, do not share these attitudes. However, this recourse shows that the pre–modern, anti–Semitic thinking and the anti–Semitism of the interwar years are still alive.

Here, one has to ask what it is that Jews or homosexuals threaten. For those who harbour this worldview and the media that propagate it, such as the popular *Radio Maryja* or the daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, their own identity is at stake. They fear losing the traditional family, which they regard as the foundation of the nation. What Jews and homosexuals have in common is their place in the construct of a national, Catholic identity structure.⁸⁵ The

symbolic Jew is still present, as is also shown in the use of the term "Jew" — in different linguistic forms — in public discourse and set phrases.⁸⁶ In colloquial speech, on the streets, where children use the word "Jew" to insult one another, in the football stadiums, where the opponent is vilified as "Jewish", in everyday conversations while shopping or talking to workmen, in which Jews stand for a symbol of whatever is fickle, unreliable, dirty, perfidious, fraudulent. "The Jew", this "abstract negative symbol", as he has been defined by Leszek Kolakowski, remains a traditional object of aggression.⁸⁷

As a foil to the presence of the "mythical Jew", initiatives and associations such as *Borussia* in Olsztyn, *Pogranicze Sejny*, or the German–Polish project *Spurensuche* have begun to pluck the Jewish life from oblivion. Their way of life, their streets and squares, their works and buildings, synagogues and customs are to be made visible on site. These initiatives are frequently organised by non–Jews. This results in the creation of what Ruth Ellen Gruber calls "virtual Jewish": a putative Jewish culture without Jews. There is always a danger of a folklorisation of Jewish life and its clichéd distortion. Klezmer music and Jewish restaurants are booming in Berlin just as they are in Kazimierz in Cracow, places that used to be centres of European Jewish life, and where there are no longer any Jews left. However, klezmer music and Jewish restaurants are flourishing there precisely because there are no longer any Jews remaining.⁸⁸ This appears to be the alternative: Jewish culture will either be forgotten, as has generally been the case in Warsaw to date, or it will become virtual. But this also means that notions of the East European Jews and who they were will increasingly be defined by this virtual Jewishness.⁸⁹

Paths of remembrance

In the attempt to summarise the different levels of remembrance of the Jewish population, it is noticeable that, since 1990, the landscape of remembrance in Poland has changed dramatically despite certain continuities. The process of analysing the entangled history with Jews, as well as Polish–Ukrainian, Polish–Russian, and Polish–German history, can be observed in historiography and numerous public debates. Former Foreign Minister Stefan Meller sees these debates about the past as a blessing for his country in the long term.⁹⁰ In its treatment of the past, Poland is going through an interregnum. The past can no longer be found where it used to be. The country is poised between different myths, of which some are not yet accepted, while others have been rejected.⁹¹ On the one hand, received attitudes towards the persecution of Jews are now being questioned, attitudes that have tended to be remembered as giving assistance to persecuted Jews or as standing by helplessly.⁹² On the other hand, there is a split between the Polish general public and historians as to how the limited participation of some Poles in the Shoah should be classified. It is impossible to predict whether an integrated culture of remembrance can be achieved, or whether in the long term there will be two separate remembrance communities that hardly communicate with each other. Historians currently scrutinising the period of the German occupation will find it just as difficult as the general public to ignore the fact that despite the ghetto walls, the Poles were involved in the fate of Jews in a number of ways and to a far greater extent than has been assumed to date.⁹³

Those who wish to pursue the path of an integrated history and culture of remembrance, those who wish to abandon an exclusive way of remembering that separates the Poles from Jews in favour of an inclusive remembrance that incorporates the two groups in their shared history will probably have to leave

behind the level of nation–state, or at least question it critically. To date, the point of reference in most debates is the nation–state, which is conceived as being mono–ethnic. However, the Polish people were never mono–ethnic. The modern nation–states were not really ethno–national entities, but emerged from historical constructs and are based on myths. In European history, the nation and the nation–state have been an extremely strong gravitational force in the forging of identity; this phenomenon also applied to Zionists. The nation continues to provide an important point of reference. However, a portrayal of history that focuses solely on the nation–state tends to create a clear division between national groups, even though, as is still the case today, these people by no means regarded themselves as being as purely "Polish" or "Jewish", as nationalists imagined.⁹⁴

Leaving behind the level of the nation–state also presents an opportunity, since in this way, a national self–image based predominantly on continuity and homogeneity becomes more difficult. The current Polish debates are so painful precisely because they have departed from the national (protective) space as transnational debates over self–perception. The Holocaust, for example, has become a universal point of orientation in commemoration as well as political reception, albeit with very different functions.

But maybe this is what is needed for an open historical memory: leaving behind the nation–state, opening oneself up, and searching for other points of reference that can be researched and debated. In this way, memories of history can become less vertical and more horizontal. Differences, rather than homogeneity, can come to the fore.⁹⁵ If it is possible to overcome the current incompatibilities within national remembrance, without apportioning blame or pursuing a competition of victims; to adhere to the principle of self–questioning, while recognising the suffering of others and one's own guilt, then the normative exclusivity of the individual stories among Jews and Poles could itself be consigned to the past.

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