



Re-presenting the Shoah in Poland and Poland in the Shoah

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It would be impossible to speak of representing the Shoah in the 21st century without speaking of Poland. In 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, Poland's estimated 3.5 million Jews comprised the largest Jewish community in Europe (second only to that in the U.S.). Furthermore, the territories reigned by Poland in the interwar years constituted the very heart of *Ashkenaz* – the closest thing to a nation-state that the Jews in Europe had ever experienced. The bitter irony was that it would be economically and demographically facile for Germany to establish its ghettos and death camps on that same land. Although Poland's Jewish citizens constituted roughly ten percent of her prewar population, they were fifty percent of her six million wartime dead. Occupied Polish territory was also to be the burial ground for millions of Jewish citizens of other countries. In Poland, the postwar motto has not been *never forget* – a country which had experienced every World War II horror could never forget. The slogan here has always been *never again*.

Nevertheless, one could consider the title of this paper and question whether there ever was in the first place a 'presenting' of the Shoah in Poland during most of the twentieth century's postwar years. It was, in fact, hardly presented at all. Heightened wartime writing, fiction and non-fiction, as well as some legal attempts – trials and executions – to confront the horrors of the Holocaust continued above ground into the first half-decade before Stalinism ultimately closed all doors. Prose writers, including Tadeusz Borowski, and poets, including Czesław Miłosz, did, indeed, write about the Shoah during and immediately after the war. Early postwar cinema also communicated the Jewish experience in the death camps. Trials were held, not only in cases of wartime conflagrations such as Jedwabne, but in those of postwar aftershocks such as Kielce.¹[1] By 1950, however, the subject seemed to evaporate. Adorno and others have spoken of stunned silence as the appropriate reply, and for roughly two decades speechless amnesia was a universal reaction to the Shoah.²[2] In the former Eastern Bloc, however, there were, in addition to similar psychological reasons, very different political ones for the mute suppression, and for its longer duration. The Shoah was one of the bleached out *białe plamy* – literally 'white stains', or blank pages of history, an idiosyncrasy taken for granted in this region. On the one hand, the official thinking was that what goes unmentioned would be considered insignificant or nonexistent; on the other, the unofficial reasoning was that key information was missing: what was absent would become extremely present. There were, too, specifically Polish motives for under- or non-presentation of the Shoah. The path to breaking through this silence continues to be a trying and testing process, often involving agonising introspection. It is a very fearful and dangerous venture into the depths of the Polish identity, as created and depicted with regards to 'the War', and then leading to its deconstruction and reconstruction anew with regards to the Shoah.

The Shoah in Poland: Hidden

Firstly, and not without concrete justification, the Holocaust would rarely be noted as a unique event, separate from the overall war experience. Between 1939 and 1945, Poland lost one-sixth of its population – the highest loss per 1000 inhabitants of all the countries involved – and by the end of the war, pain and sorrow had visited each family. As Saul Friedländer has pointed out (1994: 252), 'Anyone who survived WWII is a survivor of a traumatic event, not just the Holocaust survivors, but any and all survivors'. This would be all the more true of Poles. Thus, when it was mentioned, the *Zagłada żydowska* – 'the Jewish genocide' – was seen as but one of the numerous tragedies of the Second World War, involving one of the several categories of humans who had perished, and one of the many means of death.

Secondly, individualised, diverse accounts could not coexist in postwar Poland, which had been handed over to the USSR's sphere of influence. A Sovietised society was assumed to be composed of able-bodied, fully employed workers with matching needs and desires, requiring identical resolution. The new socialist regime strove to eradicate all differences.



Controlled at best, or banned at worst, minority groups – including Roma, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. – were most often ignored or hidden from sight. So, too, would be their distinct histories. Hence, though post-World War II Poland could boast a Jewish Historical Institute, Europe's only national Yiddish Theatre, a Yiddish-Polish newspaper, several functioning synagogues and Yiddish-language schools, as well as the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland with headquarters in each major city, all of these agencies of Jewishness were under the financial, social, and political control of the state. Such was the case with all legal organisations; freedom of assembly existed in name only, and the expression of 'otherness' was kept under a watchful eye. Concurrently, the general public was led to believe that such cultural institutions were simply folkloric curiosities.

In fact, the postwar expulsion of Germans, the *Akcja WisBa* campaign, which forced the dispersion of the Ukrainian and Aemko population from their traditional homelands in the southeast to the depopulated western and northeastern territories, the repatriation of Polish citizens from east of the Bug River into the country's new borders, and the shifts of Lithuanians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians into their respective Soviet Socialist Republics, not to mention the later emigrations of Jews in the aftermath of the July 1946 Kielce pogrom, the 1956 communist party purge, and the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign, all made Poland more monocultural than it had ever been in its history. Step by step, ethnic Poles became convinced that all 'others' had actually gone. With the erasure of sociocultural variations, so, too, did the different experiences of the Second World War vanish: even if there were once other stories, theoretically there was no one left to tell, or hear them.

Thus, belying the many physical reminders of Jewish history and culture, and especially of the Shoah, the absence of a human presence has skewed nearly all representations towards the majority perspective. As James Young (1994: 224) observes, '[Holocaust] monuments lead a curious double life in Poland: one in the consciousness of the local community and another in that of Jewish visitors. On the one hand, they continue to serve as essential commemorative sites for the visitors. But . . . , it was inevitable that Jewish memory would also be collected and expressed in particularly Polish ways. It could not be otherwise. For once the state reassembles the fragments, it necessarily recalls even the most disparate events in ways that unify them nationally'.

Thirdly, throughout the socialist bloc, the World War II enemy was portrayed solely as (West) Germany and anti-communist fascism, theoretically representing the final moral decline of capitalist imperialism. Geoffrey Hartman (1994: 4) is not alone in noting that the Jewish identity of the victims was suppressed on monuments and memorial sites built in the Eastern bloc countries' out of an 'ignorant or deliberate and expedient falsification, abetted by prejudicial stereotypes and ethnic or national myths'. Ideological mythology was a strong factor, too, denying mention to all obviously non-communist victims, such as Catholic and other clergy.

This portrayal was particularly true in Poland: to root the new 'alliance' with the Soviet Union, only one of her two wartime foes could be named officially. Over subsequent decades, all sites of death in the struggle with Nazi Germany were catalogued and marked by the symbol of the two Grunwald swords – referring to a 1410 unpredicted Polish victory against the German Teutonic Knights – while struggles against, or deaths caused by the Red Army, were disregarded or denied. Publicly, only the efforts of Soviet-sanctioned resistance forces were recognised; censured *Armia Krajowa* (AK or 'Home Army') fighters were tortured, jailed, or condemned to death.

The quintessential bearer of the dominant Socialist Bloc message have been the exhibits at the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, speaking to nearly every Pole since 1947, and increasingly, to the world. The museum's overlying theme, as well as that of the separate national expositions, was not the portrayal of the systematic persecution and murder of the Jews of Europe, but an international crusade against fascism, won by the Soviet army in conjunction with forces in all the countries (including Austria and East Germany) whose 'transnationalised' and 'de-ethnicised' *citizens* had perished in the camps. The narrated commentary in the Soviet-made, staged 'liberation' film, still on view by visitors to the museum, does not refer to the victims' ethnicity.



But there was also a Polish socialist message. Along these lines, as Iwona Irwin-Zarecka observed (cited in Dwork and van Pelt, 1994: 241): ‘Auschwitz ... is *not*, for Poles, a symbol of Jewish suffering. Rather, it is a general symbol of “man’s inhumanity to man” and a symbol of the Polish tragedy at the hands of the Nazis. It is a powerful reminder of the evil of *racism*, and not a singular reminder of the deadliness of antisemitism’. These themes were reinforced for Polish schoolchildren by the core message of such mandatory readings as NaBkowska’s book, *Medaliony* (1995). If ethnicity was ever mentioned, the prevailing message was crosscultural camaraderie – as in the first Auschwitz film, *Ostatni etap* (*Last Stage*, 1948) by Wanda Jakubowska (based on the director’s personal experience), with its German communist, Russian and Polish Jewish heroines, as well as in Aleksander Ford’s *Ulica graniczna* (*Border Street*, 1947), with its allied ethnic Poles and Jews fighting for the Warsaw ghetto.

Fourthly, the entrenchment of the Polish perspective inhibited a Jewish one. In point of fact, ‘Auschwitz I had been established as the Nazis’ instrument to subjugate the *Poles* into serfdom – an enslavement the Poles rightly interpreted as the initial steps to a “Final Solution” to a Polish problem. Auschwitz I was a tremendously significant site in Polish history, and it made sense that a *PaDstwowe Muzeum* (National Museum) would concentrate the nation’s meagre resources on it’ (Dwork and van Pelt 1994: 241). As Auschwitz I, the predominantly non-Jewish labour camp, became (for numerous reasons) the infamous worldwide icon, it relegated Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the overwhelmingly Jewish death camp, to secondary status.

The emphasised German crimes were to detract from or obscure Soviet Russian crimes, but Polish society saw through the ruse and countered it privately. Shaping the other half of the Polish perception, and in perhaps ‘typically’ rebellious fashion, the role of the *AK* was enhanced and accentuated privately, and ‘KatyD’ became an unofficial metonym for all persecution under the Soviet occupation and subsequent rule – the tyranny, massacres, jails, and gulags. After World War II, this April 1940 massacre of 15,000 Polish reserve officers in the KatyD and other forests was categorically censored, much more so than the Shoah, which, safely for the USSR, symbolised murderous German instincts. In a bitter irony of the war, the Polish Jews whose bodies lie in the KatyD and other forests were executed because they were Poles – members of the country’s elite, its armed forces, intelligentsia, and clergy. Yet, with time, the Polish majority’s unofficial discourse stressed more the struggle against the USSR, which had, nonetheless, been a Jewish saviour for many, and less the fight against Germany which had been the archetypal Jewish foe for most. In the long run this would be a source of discord between non-Jewish and Jewish presentations of the Second World War in Poland.

If Primo Levi concluded (in Friedländer 1994: 252) that ‘...survivors of traumatic events are divided into two well-defined groups: those who repress their past *en bloc*, and those whose memory of the offence persists, as though carved in stone ...’, then it could be said that while Poles suppressed or were made to stifle their own and other individual experiences, the Polish state was engraving its collective pain in stone. Here one meets the fifth reason for a veiling of the Shoah. The war experience needed to be fitted into the long-established and deep-rooted mythology of the Poles as intrepid and courageous – always the solitary underdog in battle against empires and tyrants, but ultimately the winner. This had always been crucial to Polish identity and World War II could not be interpreted as anything but another instance of national martyrdom in the name of European civilisation. In visual and tangible markers, as well as in popular culture, Poles were unquestioningly presented as the innocent victims of aggression and the brave heroes of a just cause. 3[3] To speak of the Shoah would diminish the victimhood of the Polish nation; to speak of Polish Christians who did nothing or, worse still, murdered Jews, would diminish their hero status.

Poland in the Shoah: Emerging

The conspiracy of silence was not total. Some Poles were studying and writing about not only the commission of the Shoah on occupied Polish territory, but, increasingly, about the role of Poland, and Poles themselves, in the Shoah. Much of the wartime prose and poetry had, in fact, dealt directly or indirectly with such moral issues. Postwar newsreels showed, and commented upon, the 1946 funeral for those killed in the Kielce massacre; war crimes trials were held and sentences meted out.



Researchers, especially at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, delved into the Holocaust and their findings were published regularly – some of them disclosing cases in which ethnic Poles had acted less than honourably and heroically.^{4[4]} Nevertheless, the Holocaust aspect in fictional works was diminished or disregarded, while the audience for the nonfictional was a limited circle of interested members of the intelligentsia. Shoah representations were more prevalent among the educated, and the influence of these texts did not spread beyond a relatively small élite circle.

Public spaces specifically and directly associated with the Shoah were sometimes renamed and/or marked: a *plac Bohaterów Getta* (Ghetto Heroes Square) appears in the World War II ghetto district of several major cities.^{5[5]} Yet, though all sorts of monuments were erected, especially in the 1960s, nearly all of them – with the notable exception of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial – ^{6[6]} referred only to the murder of Polish citizens, not mentioning that these were overwhelmingly Polish Jewish citizens. ^{7[7]} As Young (1994: 224) comments: ‘Thus, the state integrates Jewish memory into its own constellation of meaning. Whether or not the Jewish fighters of the ghetto were regarded as Polish national heroes at the time, they are now recast as such whenever the state commemorates the uprising’.

Like elsewhere, the Holocaust actually began to enter public discourse in Poland in the wake of the Eichmann trial in 1961. The first distinct Polish encyclopaedia entry for ‘death camps’ (as opposed to ‘concentration camps’), and noting the unique experience of the Jews, appeared in 1967. Its publication date was, however, less than fortuitous, incongruously coinciding with the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign, which led to its retraction.

To a great extent, presentations of the Shoah would evolve from and be continuously accompanied by the study of Jews in Poland. It could not be otherwise in a country in which their history and culture were so intertwined with that of non-Jews; in fact, to speak of the Shoah outside this context would be imprudent. Grassroots-organised Jewish Culture Weeks (under the auspices of the Warsaw branch of the liberal Catholic and democratic *KIK*, the Catholic Intelligentsia Club), and the Flying University in Warsaw in the 1970s, as well as the 1968 inauguration of the official Jewish exhibit at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and, in 1980-81, articles on heretofore taboo topics (such as a re-examination of Kielce) in *Solidarity*’s newspapers set the door ajar.

Even martial law (December 1981 to July 1983) scarcely hindered progress in this area. Monika Krajewska’s photo album of the remnants of Jewish cemeteries in Poland was officially published in Warsaw in 1982. Subjects once, and once again, prohibited appeared underground, if not above ground. Daringly enough, the editors of *Znak* (also members of *KIK* in Kraków) requested government permission^{8[8]} for a double issue on Judaism, Jews, Polish Jewish history, and the Holocaust in memory of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The regime, eager to be seen in a more positive light by the country and the world, seized the opportunity. The February-March 1983 *Znak* was a turning point: it not only led to an official commemoration of the insurrection, but also pioneered discussion of Jewish and Holocaust issues.

Once the floodgates were opened, the information began to flow, and interest grew with increasing speed and intensity. In 1986 the Jagiellonian University established its Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland. Above ground Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was translated and published in 1987 (1987); underground, Alexander Hertz’s *The Jews in Polish Culture* and Alina CaBa’s *Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture* were being distributed.^{9[9]}

Literature and film also began to re-enter the arena of Shoah representation. As early as 1977, Hanna Krall’s *Sheltering the Flame* (current Polish edition: 1997) – an interview with Marek Edelman (the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising) was published. Since then, her prolific fiction, based on real Holocaust tales in occupied Poland has accompanied the reappearance of works by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Julian Strykowski, and Bruno Szulc. Although Henryk Grynberg’s essay *Holocaust w literaturze polskiej* (*The Holocaust in Polish Literature*) had to come out in Berlin rather than Warsaw in 1984, the first anthology of Polish Holocaust literature was published in Poland in 1988 (Maciejewska).

To commemorate the fortieth anniversary, director Marcel Aozidski completed *Witnesses*, based on interviews with eyewitnesses to the Kielce pogrom. Made under the aegis of that city’s bishop, it premiered at the Warsaw *KIK* in 1987.



Included in director Krzysztof Kie[lowski's 1988 *Dekalog* series is a film dealing with the ethics and morality in the non-Jewish and Jewish sides of one Holocaust story. *Fiddler on the Roof* and the 1936 *Yidl mitn fidl* were broadcast on Polish television, while various Polish directors began creating new films based on old (Andrzej Wajda's *Wielki tydzień* based on Jerzy Andrzejewski's 1943 short story) and new Holocaust literature (Izabela Cywińska's *The Purim Miracle* based on a Krall short story). The subject of Jews, the Polish Jewish minority, and the Shoah was reaching mass Polish audiences.

Nevertheless, what ultimately brought it to the forefront were the 1986 eruption of the Carmelite convent controversy at Auschwitz (though the most rousing debates would not come until 1989-90), and the showing of Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour *Shoah* in its entirety in some cinemas and in part on primetime television.¹⁰ Most significantly, both of these issues entered public discourse from outside, and thus introduced the general Polish public to external representations of Poland in the Shoah at the very moment when internal ones were forming. From here on, Poles would become increasingly aware of how they were being characterised in Shoah representations elsewhere, and know that they would henceforth be presenting it under the assiduous eye of the West. Polish society would not be free to come to terms with the Shoah on its own, and at its own pace.

Poland in the Shoah: Insight and insight

Concurrent with internal Shoah representations, the external ones of Poland in the Shoah had been developing largely in the absence of dialogue with Poles and ignorance of their history. Becoming particularly prominent in the 1980s, and in sharp contrast to representations of the Shoah emerging within Poland, these external representations were, by and large, highly negative. Erstwhile Western stereotypes of the illiterate Polish peasant – the Slavic 'slave' solely capable of physical labour, with superstition dominating his religious practice and belief – combined with new ones.

With real exchange precluded for half a century, a 'guilt by association' stereotype was constructed around the fact that the remnants of all the known German death camps could now be found within Poland's postwar borders, and that the country lay in that sinister and glacial abyss 'behind the Iron Curtain', officially affiliated with the West's Cold War enemy. An ominous reputation seemed to befit Poland – and Central and Eastern Europe in general – much more than West Germany or Italy. Moreover, what Holocaust survivors living in the comfortable and democratic West – and subsequently their progeny – felt towards Poland was understandably, though blindly, centred on the pain of losing their homeland, their shtetl, and their friends and family. Surely this 'cemetery', this lunar landscape from which they had escaped, was hell in every respect; how could they see it otherwise? As Laurence Weinbaum encapsulated this, 'Over the past decades, and especially with the heightening of consciousness about the Shoah, in the minds of many Jews, however, Poland itself has become an extension of Auschwitz – the "necropolis of night and fog" frozen in time in Jewish consciousness' (Weinbaum 2001: 5).

Poland's overthrow of socialism actually exacerbated the situation. With all its symbolic, as well as physical, borders opened, mass media journalists and internet chatters, Holocaust and other tourists, former residents and their grandchildren came and left with their own prejudices and misinterpretations. Paradoxically, the more open it became, and the deeper Polish society investigated its wartime past, the more it became aware of and exposed to ubiquitous negative representations of itself in the Shoah. This realisation played into the hands of Polish anti-Semites and provided them with ammunition in arguing not only against Polish Christian-Jewish dialogue as hopeless, but also against publicly revealing the ignoble behaviour of some Poles during the Second World War to avoid adding fuel to the fire of 'anti-Poles'.

Feeling unfairly attacked before their own horrific tale was heard or recognised, a 'competition over victimhood', and compensatory overemphasis of valour surfaced and swelled among Poles.

Libellous Western references to 'Polish' – as if they were not German – death camps (e.g., Dershowitz in his *Chutzpah* and Pelosoff in her *In the Name of Sorrow and Hope* as cited in Weinbaum 2001: 23, 42)



and/or to 'Polish anti-Semitism' as a reason for the Holocaust would be defensively (though ineffectually) countered citing the German death penalty for lending assistance to a Jew in occupied Poland and listing the thousands – more, in fact, than in any other country – of altruistic and extremely courageous Poles whom Yad Vashem has recognised as Righteous Gentiles.

The initiation of the now annual March of the Living, and other demonstrations in 1989, evoked more fear and defensiveness. Jewish participants, primarily from the U.S. and Israel, strode triumphantly from Auschwitz I to Birkenau draped in blue and white, their ranks officially exclusive of any Poles, even Polish Jews. Concurrently, the semi-annual, en masse 'incursions' of Israeli secondary school students on 'death camp field trips' began appearing. Often swathed in the Israeli flag, rigorously shielded by Mossad agents, they were 'parachuted' into Poland (often in the inclement weather of late autumn or early spring), and then whisked safely away to sunny, warm Israel. These visitors, and the Poles who witnessed their 'invasions', could not help but feel mutually antagonistic. Weinbaum (2001: 35) divulges how, 'In one textbook used by the March of the Living, for example, the entire inter-war history of the more than 300,000 Jews in Warsaw is compressed into a single sentence that emphasises their achievements despite the prevailing anti-Semitism. An earlier edition of the same volume instructed the youths embarking on the March: "Everywhere we will be surrounded by the local Polish people, and our feelings toward them will be ambivalent. We will hate them for their involvement in the atrocities, but we will pity them for their miserable life in the present. Let us not be carried away by negative emotions"'.

Although some opportunities were lost and initial impressions remain, the worst abuses have been rectified. The Polish prime minister, Jerzy Buzek walked shoulder-to-shoulder with the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the 2000 March of the Living and, progressively, Israeli youths are being given a chance to meet with their Polish peers. Yet Holocaust tourism has been as much a hindrance as a help in Polish and non-Polish representations of the Shoah. For Poles, representations of the Shoah have not become cynical or banal, but a 'Shoah business' is beginning to show its ugly face with regards to representations for non-Poles. *Schindler's List* tours take tourists to the factory, yet overlook the pharmacy which served as a ghetto gateway, and whose owner was recognised as a Righteous Gentile. Visitors to Auschwitz typically spend less time at the death camp of Birkenau, and escape to sleep in a four-star hotel in Kraków, peacefully unaware of its proximity to the former Kraków ghetto and Płaszów labour camp.

The Shoah in full view www.polish-heroes.org

When Polish society began to specifically confront the Shoah, the bias still leaned towards co-victim status and heroic partisans who had battled, as always, to the death 'for your freedom and ours'. 11[11] The first major breach in this national mythology came in 1987 when Jan BBoDski wrote an essay titled 'The poor Poles look at the Ghetto', for the Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*. The piece by the Jagiellonian University literature professor was an analysis of the moral implications of CzesBaw MiBosz's wartime poems *Campo di Fiori*, and *The Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* (1988). In the article, BBoDski ventured that Polish society, as eyewitnesses to the Shoah, had held back and not done enough to save the Jews from the Final Solution, and was therefore 'co-responsible'. An equally eminent lawyer with impeccable wartime and postwar credentials, WBadysBaw SiBa-Nowicki (1987), felt compelled to reply to what he saw as an affront to the Polish reputation. The exchange between these two well-respected public figures reverberated over an extended period of time, straddling the revolution of 1989 and echoing ever since. Introducing new roles into the Polish paradigm was the next major turning point, as Poles began to bear in mind the sometimes frightened or indifferent bystanders, and even denouncers.

By the time the revolution arrived, strong foundations had been laid. Since 1989, representations of the Shoah in Poland and of Poland in the Shoah have been shifting at a fast – sometimes breakneck – speed. With the political barriers shattered, Polish society has been seeking new means for Shoah presentation and discourse in the public space.



Gradually, more and more monuments and plaques identify Polish and other Jews as the victims and heroes of the Second World War. An International Advisory Council was established by the first new post-communist government in 1989; its members are Polish Jews and non-Jews, as well as non-Polish Jews – thus explicitly taking Western opinion into account – with the purpose of resolving issues involving the ‘death camp sites’ in today’s Poland. Among the Council’s accomplishments are the new plaques at the international monument at Birkenau, specifying clearly that the 1.5 million murdered were primarily Jewish men, women, and children. In Warsaw, the ‘Memorial Route of Jewish Martyrdom and Struggle’, a self-guiding tour of the area of the WWII ghetto – with Polish and Hebrew texts, was launched on the forty fifth anniversary of the uprising. In the much smaller city of Tarnów a plaque, unveiled on the fifty fifth anniversary, marks the date of the liquidation of the ghetto there.

It may seem odd that the icon of Western Holocaust teaching, the unabridged *Diary of Anne Frank*, was only finally published in Poland in 1993. Yet there is such a wealth of autochthonous firsthand accounts that others may be superfluous: the native accounts tell stories from a familiar landscape and raise issues closer to home. The year 2000 brought, among others, WBadyś Baw Szpilman’s autobiography, *The Pianist* (2000), upon which basis Roman Polański – himself a Polish child of the Holocaust – is basing his first film to address the subject.

But shifting the emphasis from the Shoah in Poland back to Poland in the Shoah, it was another volume published in the millennium year which has served as the latest turning point. *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (2000), though also a tale of altruistic action and righteous rescue, centres on base behaviour – torture and murder, and a horrific crime – the burning alive in a barn of nearly all the Polish Jews of Jedwabne committed by a group of ethnic Poles, their neighbours. Public discourse regarding the Kielce pogrom, initiated in 1981 and culminating in a public apology by the Polish government on the fiftieth anniversary in 1996, had opened this fissure in the national mythology. Going one step further, *Neighbors* forced Poles to reflect upon themselves not only as victims, heroes or bystanders, but also as perpetrators. The confrontations between mythology and history keep the subject in the foreground in Poland and lead to multifaceted and meaningful examinations of the many truths regarding World War II in general, and the Shoah in particular. This is not to imply, however, that the majority of Poles readily accept the need to undertake this task. There has been resistance to presentations of Poland in the Shoah at variance with the crucial components of Polish identity. Fervent nationalists, and others for whom this has been the sole remaining constant amidst the tumult of the twentieth century, are unprepared to deconstruct and reconstruct it. Moreover, many Poles hoped to replace the previous ‘single truth’ with an equally simple one, not prepared to face the multiplicity of truths that is closer to reality.

There is yet another factor in Polish representations of the Shoah. Poland, unlike any other state, suffered a dual occupation from the outset of the war. >From the ethnic Polish perspective, after decades of dealing with the Polish-German aspects of the war, there was a desire to openly deal with the Polish-Russian. Yet, just when they could finally speak of Katyń and of the Soviet gulags, or of Roman Catholic priests as specific targets of both the Germans and Soviets, the outside world put pressure on Poles to return to the Polish-German, with the addition now of the Jewish aspects, and accused Poles of ‘Catholicizing’ the war experience. In memory of the many Poles persecuted or killed by the Soviets, their descendants wanted to attend to the undressed wound of that occupation. For them, the Shoah is a foreign experience, a foreign pain that blocks the vision of their own.

Only public discourse and education can present the Shoah to these people, and here much progress has been made. Following the Jagiellonian University research centre (now the Department of Jewish Studies), similar units have been established at other institutions of higher education; nationwide competitions have been held for the best thesis or dissertation on a Jewish subject; the Jagiellonian has offered doctoral scholarships in Holocaust research since 1998; and, in 2000, it inaugurated the first university postgraduate Holocaust studies programme.



Working with teachers, the State Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau is running its year-long programme on *Totalitarianism, Fascism, and the Holocaust* for the third time, and the Jewish Historical Institute continues to hold weekend workshops it began several years ago. Increasingly, scholarly research focuses on the Holocaust and/or the period immediately preceding it. Museum exhibits are being added or altered, while textbooks and curricula are being revised. Continuing education programmes for teachers, projects of the Spiro Institute and other NGOs outside and inside Poland, and visits by and to Yad Vashem facilitate the fulfilment of Poland's Stockholm 2000 pledge to teach the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, an open society and true democracy is expected to respect and tolerate even those groups of which it does not approve, and to deal with them in legal, not forceful fashion. Hence, alongside the growing number of positive representations in Poland, there have also been negative representations. Just as the Ku Klux Klan has been allowed to publicly march through sensitive neighbourhoods in the U.S., so the young skinheads of Bolesław Tejkowski's right-wing party received permission – particularly in the face of the inconsiderable and recurring Jewish shows of force – to march through Auschwitz-Birkenau on Good Saturday in 1996. In 1998-99, the self-appointed defender of the faith, Kazimierz Zwitoń, organised a sit-in which turned into a long term occupation of the terrain beside the so-called 'Papal Cross' beside the former Carmelite convent adjacent to the Auschwitz museum – complete with masses led by an excommunicated Lefebvrist bishop, and the erection of over 200 crosses. Since Zwitoń was the legal occupant of the area known as the 'gravel pit' where predominantly non-Jewish Polish prisoners had been shot, the Polish authorities could only physically remove him, along with the crosses his group had erected, using lawful means. Finally, Poland has 'achieved' its own incarnation of David Irving: Dariusz Ratajczak (1999) published a book that indirectly denied the Holocaust. Polish law does limit freedom of speech in this regard: for publishing a revisionist book, he has been tried for propagating the 'Auschwitz lie' – denial of the fact that it was a German death camp for Jews. Ratajczak was found guilty, lost his position as a college historian, and was fined, although his sentence was suspended. In general, however, the problem in Poland is not outright denial, nor revisionism, but rather – as in other central and eastern European states – a lack of knowledge: one cannot deny what one does not know in the first place; one cannot 'never forget' what was never taught, or made to be forgotten.

Yet time is not being wasted. The rapid progress made includes the establishment of Jewish studies and Holocaust studies, scholarly conferences and open public discussions, a growing number of publications, mass media articles, and a free market for books and magazines, an annual Jewish cultural festival in Kraków, the Jewish Book Fair in Warsaw, Polish participants in various marches, and exchanges between young people. All these have contributed to an awareness of the unique Jewish experience of the Shoah and its more complete representations in Poland, as well as to a deeper understanding of Poland in World War II and of the Shoah within that context. Mutual learning of each other's histories, and the recognition of each other's points of view will lead not to a single, shared representation, but to a community of representations, more holistic and closer to the truth.



Conclusion

Friedländer (1994) proposes that a rupture requiring time to heal resulted in a general absence of Holocaust representation. Even where it could be discussed openly and legally, a generation-long period of historical and cultural amnesia served most countries in dealing with the traumatic caesura of the Second World War and the Shoah. Only since the 1970s, but especially the 1980s, has the unspeakable increasingly become the topic of film, books, museums, memorials, and commemorations. It was relatively recently that France tried Petain; Browning, Goldhagen, and Rosmus delved into the guilt of ‘ordinary Germans’; and Slovakia began questioning the *raison d’etre* of her First Republic under Tiso (see Shafir in this volume). In opposition to Adorno’s statement, what we are witnessing at the start of the twenty first century is the impossibility of silence.

Particularly those nations who, like Poland, have torn away the gags of totalitarianism are aware that they have already surrendered once to silence. To do so again would constitute another acquiescence to ‘the very forces that created Auschwitz in the first place’. Yet while the West benefited from unlimited access to film and literature, information, archives, and the living testimonies of survivors and witnesses, this was impossible within the Soviet bloc, which must now struggle to make up for lost time – reconciling internal and external representations just when memories are not only altering, but literally dying out.

In Poland, the suppression of Shoah representation reflected not only a desire to leave behind the painful traumas and memories of the war in general, but also of complex identity issues connected with the de-ethnicised, internationalist Soviet ideology in a newly homogeneous Polish society, the lack of freedom of speech, and the exclusivity of the ‘single truth’ in a totalitarian system. Yet while other countries may have been able to avoid confronting the Shoah, Poland could not. The Shoah had been committed upon her historical lands and murdered half her wartime dead, had been witnessed by and sometimes even mired her people, and now she remains the keeper of the greater part of its landscape. But though never wholly effaced, the Holocaust was not a focal point. The blurred *biaBa plama* (‘white stain’), however, did tempt and inspire a relatively early interest in and real work by opposition élites on deciphering the palimpsest text. The public announcements and broad discussions of the readings came much later, and not without their difficulties.

In truth – as much as Poles wanted to be able to read the illegible – the omission of the information was convenient not only for the socialist government, but also for Polish society itself. It helped create and maintain a singular and unified Polish identity which concentrated on historically traditional and morally respected roles. Nonetheless, with time and the impetus of key *modi vivendi* – most notably the 1983 issue of *ZNAK*, and the texts of Jan BBoDski and Jan Gross – the Shoah is finally being shown explicitly, and in a multitude of ways – in history and non-fiction texts, in museum exhibits new and old, in the arts and literature, and in public and private discourse. Poles have begun to debate, discuss and, in due course, acknowledge not only the valiant hero and the innocent victim, but also the unwilling witness, the sometimes helpless, sometimes pitiless bystander, and even the perpetrator. Issues not only of resistance and valour, but also of direct or indirect complicity, responsibility, and guilt are being addressed. Naturally, it is still less problematic to accept the representations of the Shoah in Poland than of Poland in the Shoah, and less problematic to accept the Righteous Gentiles than the aberrant murderers of Jedwabne and Kielce.

It is not at all odd that Shoah representations in Poland and the accompanying discussions have evolved primarily from an interest in Jews and things Jewish – at times quite a philosemitic fascination. The Jews of Poland were the cultural minority which, for the longest continuous period of time, served as the counterpart and mirror for ethnic Polish identity. The better they reincorporate the whole of their Jewish co-heritage the more firmly will the new Polish identity be rooted in the country’s past and future. The same holds true for Jews: the more the Jewish past enacted on Polish lands – not just the Shoah – is reintroduced and incorporated, the more constructive and rooted Jewish history and identity will be.

Scattered throughout Poland are the physical traces of nearly a millennium of a very deep and strong Jewish presence in Polish history and culture, and a Polish presence in Jewish history and culture.



The synagogues are mostly empty, the cemeteries falling to ruin, factories and private homes have changed ownership several times – the German *Endlösung* deprived them of their Polish Jewish caretakers. According to James Young (1994: 229), ‘In the aftermath of the Holocaust, much of Jewish life in Poland has become one long commemoration of the dead, transforming young Polish Jews and non-Jews alike into perennial caretakers and archivists. Instead of communities, we have community records; instead of a people, their gravestones’.

However, a short distance from the Auschwitz site stands a restored synagogue in the old centre of O[wi]cim – part of an educational centre established by an American Jewish foundation, and focused on the history and lives of local Polish Jews. The town the Germans renamed with a label, which instils fear and hatred, was, like most Polish municipalities, a very Polish Jewish place. Representations of the Shoah in Poland and Poland in the Shoah – inside and outside the country – must always connect to this.

Friedländer’s second hypothesis is that the Holocaust also requires a new means of representation, which has not yet come about. Perhaps it has been waiting for precisely this link to the pre-Shoah past; perhaps bridges back to those communities and people will bring us twenty first century re-presentations of the Shoah not only in Poland, but also beyond.

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(Endnotes)

1[1] On 10 July 1941, Jedwabne, a small town in northeastern Poland, was the site of a massacre of up to 1,600 Polish Jews who were burned in a barn; in 4 July 1946, Kielce, a city in south central Poland, a blood libel accusation led to the death of 42 survivors of the Holocaust. Though other events of similar calibre occurred in the Jedwabne region in 1941, and then throughout Poland in 1945-47, these two place names have become the symbols for all such phenomena.

2[2] This silence is now pointedly addressed. Saul Friedländer (1994: 259) comments: ‘The fifteen or twenty years of “latency” that followed the war in regard to talking or writing about the Shoah, particularly in the United States, should not be equated with massive repression exclusively Against this background, the more sustained silence of the intellectuals, and particularly the historians, must be mentioned. The most renowned Jewish historians of the post-war period did not allude to the Shoah during the 1940s and 1950s, or for that matter at any time later on.’

3[3] In all justice, it must be added that nearly every nation-state entangled in WWII has portrayed itself as a victim of Nazism and as heroic in the battle against it.

4[4] For instance, Szymon Datner, the late historian and BiaBystok Ghetto uprising survivor, had already written of the Jedwabne and other massacres in this region (Datner, 1966).

5[5] After 1989, streets and squares in most cities were to revert to their 1939 appellations; quite notably, the ‘Ghetto Heroes Squares’ have not.

6[6] Another exception is a plaque on a building in Kraków where Jewish partisans bombed a club well attended by German officers.

7[7] Sites of Roma massacre such as in Szczurowa were similarly ‘de-ethnicised’.

8[8] They would require the censors’ agreement as well an increased paper allotment.

9[9] Though underground in the late 80s – Hertz’s came out in Kraków in 1987, CaBa’s in Warsaw in 1988 – both these books now have their official Polish editions; see References.

10[10] Paradoxically, perhaps because the regime wished to present a good face westward, this film was shown officially and immediately, while the concurrent work by Aozidski was not.

11[11] Polish Jews leading the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising also took up this motto.

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