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**THE HOLOCAUST**  
and Coming to Terms with the  
Past in Post-Communist Poland

Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs

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**The Holocaust and Coming to Terms with the Past  
in Post-Communist Poland**

Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs

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THE INA LEVINE INVITATIONAL SCHOLAR AWARD, endowed by the William S. and Ina Levine Foundation of Phoenix, Arizona, enables the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies to bring a distinguished scholar to the Museum each year to conduct innovative research on the Holocaust and to disseminate this work to the American public. The Ina Levine Invitational Scholar also leads seminars, lectures at universities in the United States, and serves as a resource for the Museum, educators, students, and the general public.



At the beginning of World War II, Jews in Poland identified the Germans as enemies. They did not, as a rule, identify Poles as such. In general, they perceived Poles as neighbors, with all the concomitant expectations. Where there are such expectations, subsequent disillusion and pain are all the stronger; in this case they left their mark on the trans-generational attitudes of those Jews whom Poles betrayed. Poles who risked their lives for Jews were at the same time afraid of their Polish neighbors. These problems are aggravated by the non-memory, or rejection of inconvenient facts, that prevailed in Poland for almost half a century. The olive trees planted in honor of Polish rescuers in the memorial grove at Yad Vashem—constituting the largest section of the grove—do not tell the stories of the painful context of Polish aid to Jews. The events of March 1968, which led approximately 20,000 Polish Jews to emigrate, sealed the image of Poland as an unjust country.

### **Some Questions**

*The Past is a Foreign Country* is the title of a 1999 monograph by David Lowenthal. Can the past of one's own homeland be a foreign country? Yes, if it is largely unknown, as was the history and culture of Polish Jews, from several years after the end of World War II until the 1980s. When will the memory of the Holocaust in Poland become a shared, collective legacy for ethnic Poles? This remains a vital question for Polish society. Can historians, writers, educational institutions, memorial sites, museums, and civic organizations in post-1989 Poland create spaces where the

repressed voice of Jewish victims can be heard and where communities of memory can integrate? Or will Polish society continue to be characterized by rivalry between competing memories? How can education about the Holocaust deal sensitively with the Polish national sense of martyrdom? Repressed memories remain active and their outcomes, as we know from studies by Harald Welzer and his team<sup>1</sup> and many other surveys worldwide, bring undesirable effects for education about the Holocaust. How can facts and events that have been repressed or dismissed from the individual and collective memory be reintegrated into consciousness? Why does the current generation of young Poles have an increasing interest in Jewish culture and history and the memory of the Holocaust? What is their motivation to learn, to study and to commemorate the Jewish absence? These questions form the foundation of my research and trigger interest in the evaluation of existing educational programs.

### **Setting the Scene**

Nearly 90% of the 3.5 million Polish Jews who inhabited Poland on the eve of World War II perished in the Holocaust. Through most of the postwar period, those Polish Jews were rarely mourned. Since 1989, however, Jewish culture has become attractive to many among the younger generations of Poles. Can we interpret the numerous current educational state and civil-society initiatives as a form of compensation for the earlier lack of mourning?

Ethnic Poles had limited influence on the fate of the vast majority of Polish Jews, who were killed in the camps, in ghettos, in mass killings in the East, or on death marches. But after the liquidation of the ghettos between 1942 and early 1945, many of those who escaped searched for help among the rural Polish population and partisans. They were often met with indifference, aggression, denunciation, or even murder. Poles' attitudes and behavior had an impact on those who, for a longer or shorter term, escaped death and went into hiding in the forests or villages. Poles did not have to chase Jews, hand them over to the Germans, or kill them; nor did they have to betray their fellow ethnic Poles who risked their lives to hide Jews.

The Ulm family, which sheltered the Szall and Goldman families, was among those who were willing to risk everything to aid Jews. Wiktorja and Józef Ulm from Markowa near Łańcut (recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1995) and their six children were killed by German gendarmes on March 24, 1944, together with eight members of the Szall and Goldman families. It is assumed that the Ulms were denounced by a member of the Polish "blue police" from Łańcut. Wiktorja was in her

last month of pregnancy at the time of her murder. The oldest of the Ulms' children was 8, the youngest, one and a half.

All Poles were victims of the German occupation, and virtually all had reliable knowledge of the mass murder of Jews. There were many instances of murder by ethnic Poles, however, particularly in small towns and villages. This type of crime is currently being researched by historians Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, Jakub Petelewicz, Alina Skibińska, Andrzej Żbikowski, Jan Tomasz Gross, and Jan Grabowski. The findings of these scholars should fundamentally change the widespread image of occupied Poland. Will they also change the consciousness and collective identity of Poles?

How can one understand the motivations of victims who kill other victims? The theory that views *szmalcowniks* (blackmailers) as the margins of society did not survive the fall of communism. Recent analyses attribute this phenomenon to the following factors: the extreme conditions of occupation, including poverty and hunger; the dehumanization of Jews; and prewar antisemitism, which remained undiminished during the war. Respected mainstream citizens became killers. Some prewar antisemites sheltered Jews, however; among these rescuers was Father Stanisław Trzeciak, who had campaigned in the 1930s to prohibit ritual slaughter of animals and had argued for the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Leopold Socha, the hero of Agnieszka Holland's film *In Darkness*, first rescued Jews for income and only over time became motivated by altruism.

### **Memory Games**

In the mid-1970s, discourses on collective memory (also called remembrance or commemoration) started to intermingle with those on collective identity. Memory provides us with knowledge about who we are, who we want to be, who we are not, and who we do not want to be. It supports our identities, clarifies the boundaries between *Us* and *Them*, and unites *Us* against *Others*. For centuries, Jews have been the symbolic Others in Poland.

The work of Pierre Nora and others proposes that memory can both construct and deconstruct identity.<sup>2</sup> In Poland, collective memories of Polish-Jewish relations before and during the war were obscured and falsified. One explanation for this was the censorship that occurred under the communist regime—a regime that supported individual and family processes of forgetting. Together these processes acted to maintain the martyrology of the nation and the image of the Poles as heroic. Attitudes

toward the Holocaust in Poland are divided. Related topics have given rise to heated polemics and disagreements over visions of the past.

Voices challenging indifference toward the Holocaust were first raised in 1945–1947 by a group of courageous and honest Polish intellectuals, including Kazimierz Wyka, Jerzy Putrament, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Witold Kula. Erasure of memory can be caused by a number of traumatic events: witnessing mass murder, witnessing family members or friends killing Jewish neighbors, or even involvement in the crime. Kazimierz Wyka posited that the absence of discussion was the result of witnesses' fear that they might be accused of collaborating or of taking over Jewish homes, as well as the shame people felt at witnessing barbarous behavior on the part of their own people. Polish literature has carried the burden of Holocaust memory, beginning with works by Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Nałkowska, and Tadeusz Różewicz, and continuing with those of Henryk Grynberg, Hanna Krall, and Michał Głowiński.

In the mid-1980s, the Holocaust returned to broader Polish discourse. A new narrative, opened by Jan Józef Lipski and Jan Błoński, challenged the collective memory and identity of Poles. The uncomfortable feelings evoked by Błoński's famous 1987 essay "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," were replaced in 2000 by the symbol of the burning barn. Jan Tomasz Gross revealed that God had not stopped the hand of Polish murderers, as Błoński had hoped. The phenomenon of divergent, polarized memories of the Holocaust was described by Piotr Wróbel as a "double memory," by Antony Polonsky as a "divided memory," and by Joshua Zimmermann as "contested memories." For Yehuda Bauer there is no national community without skeletons in closets.

### **Current Issues: Taboo and Trauma**

Twenty-two years after the fall of communism, it is "Not Your Grandma's Poland Anymore," as the title of Don Snyder's December 2011 article in the *Jewish Daily Forward* indicates. To understand how deeply the debates of elites have penetrated the social texture, we must examine contemporary attitudes toward the Holocaust and the memory of the Holocaust—particularly among young Poles.

As Polonsky has written, the nature of trauma is that it "can neither be forgotten nor remembered." This observation provides perhaps the best insight into some processes under way in post-1989 Poland, where the lack of public recognition of the Jewish past coexists with silent local memory markers: formerly Jewish-owned property, including houses in which ethnic Poles live today, and synagogues, often

abandoned or transformed into local businesses. The only cure for trauma is to acknowledge the pain and suffering of a traumatized people and mourn those whose ashes remain in Polish soil (and in that of other European countries). The transmission of trauma can be ended only if the mourning of the victims is completed, and this must involve the collective practices of mourning across categories of victims and perpetrators. But this rarely happens in the second generation, as Vamik Volkan and Gabrielle Schwab have observed, and as Dan Bar-On has demonstrated through his work with groups of second-generation Germans and their Jewish counterparts, and with Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

### **The Reconstruction of Memory: Loss of naïveté and innocence?**

Sometimes younger generations are able to break through the walls surrounding the older generation. In March 2004, two older women were present in Cracow among the youth who attended a panel discussion on the topic “How to Teach about the Holocaust?” One said that she regretted all her life that she had not done anything to save Jews. This unusual voice came from the generation that did not speak and did not want to remember.

The topic of the Holocaust in Poland, which was present in public discourse immediately after World War II, was pushed aside, particularly after 1968. Polish help to Jews was exaggerated, while individual Righteous Persons preferred to remain anonymous. Until the fall of communism, the Holocaust tended to be either universalized or treated as a taboo topic in education. Young people were taught that those who had died in the camps were Poles and prisoners “of many different nationalities.” The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was presented as a site of Polish national martyrdom.

The most recent phase, called the reconstruction of memory (1989–present), is replete with public debate that pertains not only to the Holocaust, but also to the expulsion of Germans (with discussion peaking in 1994–1995) and Polish-Ukrainian relations. Jan Tomasz Gross’s books *Neighbors* (2001) and *Fear* (2005) triggered highly emotional nationwide debates about the involvement of individuals in the murder of Jews.<sup>3</sup> Poles’ fear was caused, Gross argued, by ordinary hatred and by the fact that many had taken Jewish-owned property. Poles who helped Jews were afraid of their neighbors.

It is crucial to recognize, and criticize, as Saul Friedländer rightly noted, those aspects of Holocaust remembrance that may turn into a politics of memory.<sup>4</sup> For

example, in the wake of the *Neighbors* debate, official acknowledgment of Irena Sendler's heroic and selfless acts was politically useful in Poland. Sendler created a network of helpers, including nuns and couples without children, who harbored Jewish children who had been smuggled out of the ghetto in suitcases or potato sacks. Sendler was little known until 1999, when four American schoolgirls, Elizabeth Cambers, Megan Stewart, Sabrina Coons, and Janice Underwood, supported by their teacher Norman Conard, wrote and performed the drama "Life in a Jar." They wrote the play, based on Irena Sendler's life, after they had read an article about her in a newspaper. Students performed the play in the United States, Canada, and Poland.

But why was Sendler, who was awarded the title of Righteous Among Nations in 1965, not part of Polish collective identity before these American schoolgirls "discovered" her? She was awarded the highest Polish honor, the Order of the White Eagle, in 2003 and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2007. But for decades, Irena Sendler had been virtually unknown in Poland.

The murder in 1945–1946 of Jews returning to their homes was the greatest outbreak of violence in postwar Europe. The violence perpetrated by people occupying the survivors' homes was shocking and painful, and emphasized a view of Poland that persisted for many decades. German scholar Gabriele Schwab, who notes her own "belonging to a nation of perpetrators" asks a crucial question: "Why [do] human beings become vulnerable to committing violence against other people if they themselves are victims of systemic violence?"<sup>5</sup> This question is very relevant to the European and particularly the Polish context of the Holocaust. Gross's latest book, *Złote żniwa* (Golden Harvest), written jointly with Irena Grudzińska-Gross and published in Poland in 2011,<sup>6</sup> has triggered another nationwide debate. The book takes as its starting point the fact that in the immediate postwar years, some Poles dug through the ashes of Jewish victims searching for gold. The indifference to the fate of Jews during the Holocaust can be attributed to the advantages obtained by some Poles as a result of the disappearance of Jews.

In 1998, almost ten years after the fall of communism, a survey of the attitudes of Polish teenagers provided evidence that the past had been suppressed for years. But the inconsistency in attitudes toward the Holocaust indicated that some remnants of memory remained. The lack of coherence among responses related to the Holocaust is attributable to the students' lack of knowledge about the topic, their patriotic emotions, and their attachment to the idea of Poles' special role in history. The topic of the Holocaust clearly elicited conflicting feelings and engaged defense mechanisms.

In July 2011, Antoni Sulek commented in *Gazeta Wyborcza* that Gross had touched on a sensitive aspect of Polish (un)consciousness. Nine years after the 2002 study “Polacy o zbrodni w Jedwabnem” [Poles on the Jedwabne crime] the same polling institution, the Taylor Nelson Sofres-Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej [The Center for Public Opinion Survey; TNS-OBOP], repeated the survey. Forty-eight percent of the respondents in 2011, as compared to 37% in 2002, believed that it was good that the massacre in Jedwabne had come to light. The survey indicated, however, that more respondents in each age category had not heard about Jedwabne (total 6% in 2002 and 12% in 2011). The most striking finding was that among 15- to 19-year-old students, 41% had not heard about Jedwabne. Attitudes with regard to the perpetrators became polarized. Both surveys revealed that the Germans were perceived as the main perpetrators of the crime more often than were local Poles. The surveys show a very slow but steady progress in the accumulation of historical knowledge related to the Jedwabne massacre. Professor Sulek attributes Polish reluctance to acknowledge the crime to a narrative of World War II that views Poles as a nation of heroes and victims. He also noted the importance of anti-Jewish resentments and general psychological mechanisms such as ego-defense and cognitive dissonance, emphasizing that we have little influence on these. We can, however, influence attitudes by commemorating the victims of the sixty-six pogroms that took place throughout the Kresy in 1941, educating the young about those crimes, and presenting the whole spectrum of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

First, we must incorporate the Holocaust into collective memory. An outstanding effort in this regard is the Henio Żytomirski project of the Lublin’s Grodzka Gate/Theatre NN Center, a municipal cultural institution whose objective is to reconstruct the memory of Jewish Lublin for its contemporary non-Jewish inhabitants. Every year since 2005, Henio Żytomirski has given a name and a face to the Holocaust experience in Lublin. Schoolchildren write letters to this Holocaust victim, who was killed at the age of nine, each year on Holocaust Memorial Day. In Myślenice, Jews are commemorated in various ways. After two years of conflict with the City Council, the local NGO Wspólnota Myślenice unveiled a memorial plaque on the town square on August 22, 2004—the 62nd anniversary of the deportation of Jews from Myślenice. The organization maintains a database of the Jews from surrounding towns—Myślenice, Dobczyce, Sułkowice, and Wiśniowa—murdered in the Holocaust.

The noticeable rise in Poland in interest in Jewish culture and the memory of the Holocaust began in the 1980s, became more visible after 1989, and surged again with

the publication of *Neighbors* in 2000. In some parts of Poland, this increased attention represents an attempt to loosen the boundaries of culture to incorporate the culture of the Jewish minority. For those involved in this effort, Jewish culture is intriguing and valuable, a missing component of the collective past. But in many towns and villages, the memory of this aspect of shared history appears to be absent.

### **“Memory work” and attitudes among young Poles**

How is this recent “memory work” reflected in the attitudes of young Poles? The study yielded many interesting and important results that will shape our teaching about the Holocaust. However, for the purpose of this presentation only the most striking differences in attitudes with regard to the memory of the Holocaust are presented below. These compare the results of a national sample with those of a sample of students enrolled in programs that focus on the history and culture of Polish Jews. Students were asked if memory of the Holocaust is of any importance to them personally. In the national sample, 38% of all respondents, and 46% of all lyceum students, said memory of the Holocaust was personally important for them; 13% of all respondents said that it was unimportant. In the experimental group, memory of the Holocaust was personally important to 62% of respondents, and unimportant for only 6%. The difference between the national sample and the sample of students in focused programs is sharp—a sign that the creative and involved teachers have achieved genuine pedagogical success, and that such teachers are among the decisive factors contributing to successful teaching at memorial sites. Other determinants include positive attitudes among students and teachers, the high quality of the educational programs and activities, pedagogical methods that activate and empower students, and thorough preparation prior to visits to memorial sites.

### **Reconciliation?**

The process of reconciliation, or coming to terms with the dark past, is complicated by other factors—among them identity formation and a sense of victimization that generates boundaries. Members of a group whose collective identity is based on suffering find it difficult to recognize other groups’ suffering. Victimhood in such cases is one of the core components of identity—an identity surrounded by symbolic boundaries separating the members of one wounded community from those of another. Strict boundaries are obstacles to the process of reconciliation.

I agree with Sabine Reichel and Gabrielle Schwab that the wartime generation in Germany never mourned their victims, and I agree with Maria Janion that the Polish wartime generation never mourned their Jewish neighbors—though there are exceptions, such as the poet Jerzy Ficowski. Postwar generations face the challenge of taking on a collective responsibility and beginning the process of mourning. Dan Bar-On and Gabrielle Schwab argue that the resolution of violent past histories is possible only with the development of collective mourning practices that cross the boundaries between victims and perpetrators.

In his speech in the Polish Senate in April 2008, Shimon Peres noted that the heritage of Polish Jews will influence the Jewish nation for generations, and that it cannot, and should not, be erased. Bronisław Komorowski, then the Marshal of the Parliament (Marszałek Sejmu) and now President of Poland, responding to President Peres, said that just as Poland is proud of its centuries-long tradition of tolerance, it is ashamed about Jedwabne and the events of 1968. Let us hope that the newly evident political will not only is followed by grassroots initiatives, but also helps shape Polish collective memory and identity. That hope is relevant for all of Europe.

## NOTES

I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and for the generosity of the William S. and Ina Levine Foundation in granting me the prestigious Ina Levine Invitational Scholar fellowship. I feel very privileged, as a Polish scholar, to have been invited to conduct research at the USHMM. I understand this award as a sign of recognition that contemporary Polish-Jewish relations and memory of the Holocaust are significant areas of study in my country. I thank you very much for this recognition and trust.

At a September 25, 2011 occasion marking the museum's appreciation of its survivor volunteers and other volunteers, Director Sara Bloomfield remarked that leaders and young people constitute the main target group of the Museum's activities. Young people are also at the core of the activities of the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, where I work. We hope to reach numerous high school students by working with teachers. Gitta Sereny said in a September 26, 2000 conversation with Charlie Rose that "young people do not feel guilty but feel affected by what happened in the center of European culture and want to know why it happened." Asking questions is the first step to overcoming silence, breaking taboos, and creating a space for memory.

<sup>1</sup> Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002)

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *La République* (1984); vol. 2, *La Nation* (1987); vol. 3, *La France* (1992) (Paris: Gallimard); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* no. 26 (1989): 7–25.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, Poland: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2001); English-language edition: Gross, *Neighbors, The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Polish-language edition: Gross, *Strach: Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści* (Kraków: Znak, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Saul Friedländer, "Shoah: Between Memory and History," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, no 53 (1990): 115–26.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 99.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote Żniwa: Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach Zagłady Żydów* (Warsaw: Znak, 2011); English-language edition: Jan Tomasz Gross with contributions by Irena Grudzinska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego: Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, wrzesień 1939–lipiec 1941* (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2006).

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