



# REFLECTIONS

2017

AUSCHWITZ JEWISH CENTER  
ANNUAL ALUMNI JOURNAL

# OVERVIEW

## ABOUT THE AUSCHWITZ JEWISH CENTER

Just three kilometers from the Auschwitz–Birkenau death camps is The Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oswiecim, operated by the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. The only Jewish presence in the vicinity of Auschwitz, the Center opened its doors in September 2000 to provide a place for individuals and groups from around the world to gather, learn, pray, and remember the victims of the Holocaust. The Center is comprised of three buildings: the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue; the adjoining Kornreich House, which once housed a Jewish family and today houses a Jewish Museum and educational programs; and the 100-year-old Kluger Family House, which belonged to the last Jewish resident of Oswiecim, Szymon Kluger, after WWII.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center offers immersive study programs on the Holocaust, Jewish history and heritage, and diversity education for students from around the world. Students from the US may participate in the American Service Academies Program for future military officers, the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program for graduate students, the Human Rights Summer Program, and the Program for Students Abroad. The Center offers award-winning initiatives on Holocaust and diversity education as well as hate crime prevention for Polish students and teachers, programs for Polish and European law enforcement, and public programs for visitors.

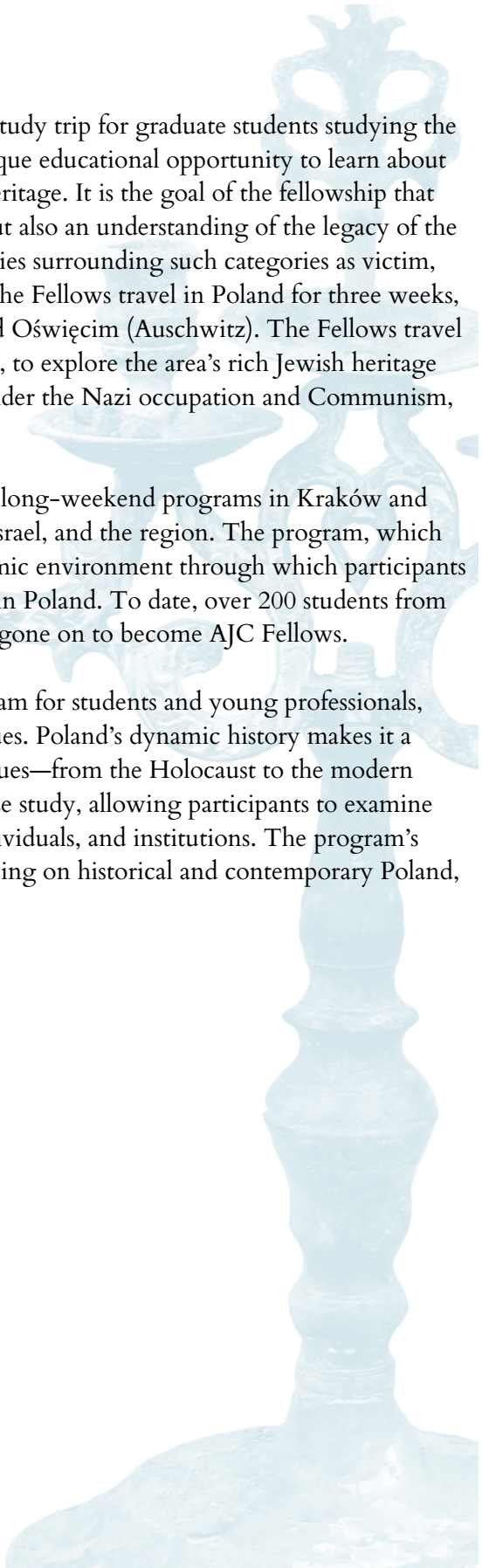
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## ABOUT *REFLECTIONS*

*Reflections* is an annual academic journal of selected pieces by AJC program alumni. Its aim is to capture the perspectives, experiences, and interests of that year's participants. The AJC Newsletter, published three times per year, provides snapshots of the Center's work; *Reflections* is an in-depth supplement that will be published at the end of each year. The following are authored by alumni of the following programs:

The **American Service Academies Program (ASAP)** is a two-week educational initiative for a select group of cadets and midshipmen from the U.S. Military, Naval Academy, Coast Guard, and Air Force academies. Launched in June 2004 with six students, the program has more than doubled in size to fourteen participants. Focusing on the Holocaust and related contemporary moral and ethical dilemmas, this in situ program not only educates students about the past, but also stimulates dialogue about its relationship to the present and the future. Throughout the program, the group works to gain a better understanding of pre-war Jewish life and its subsequent devastation. Within this framework, students are challenged to understand what can happen in the absence of open and democratic governing institutions — when evil is given free reign, when fear overpowers ethics, and when democratic ideals are not defended.





The **Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program** is a three-week study trip for graduate students studying the Holocaust in a variety of fields. The Fellows Program provides a unique educational opportunity to learn about the Holocaust in situ in the context of Poland's history and Jewish heritage. It is the goal of the fellowship that Fellows gain not only knowledge of the Holocaust sites they visit, but also an understanding of the legacy of the Holocaust in Poland, its effects on collective memory, and complexities surrounding such categories as victim, bystander, and perpetrator. After an orientation in New York City, the Fellows travel in Poland for three weeks, during which time they visit Kraków, Warsaw, Łódź, Treblinka, and Oświęcim (Auschwitz). The Fellows travel to small towns in the regions, as well as through southeastern Poland, to explore the area's rich Jewish heritage and meet with local leaders to learn about pre-war Jewish life, life under the Nazi occupation and Communism, and the state of Jewish communities and memory in Poland today.

The **AJC Program for Students Abroad** was established in 2010 as long-weekend programs in Kraków and Oświęcim open to students of all backgrounds studying in Europe, Israel, and the region. The program, which includes a scholarly visit to Oświęcim/Auschwitz, provides an academic environment through which participants engage intensively with the history of the Holocaust and Jewish life in Poland. To date, over 200 students from around the world have participated in the PSA, some of whom have gone on to become AJC Fellows.

The **Human Rights Summer Program** is an 8-day intensive program for students and young professionals, utilizing Poland as a case study to examine broader human rights issues. Poland's dynamic history makes it a unique location to study historic and contemporary human rights issues—from the Holocaust to the modern refugee crisis. HRSP uses Polish-Jewish relations as a background case study, allowing participants to examine activism and social change locally through experienced histories, individuals, and institutions. The program's approach addresses broad concepts in the human rights field by focusing on historical and contemporary Poland, which offers lessons that can be applied globally.

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## The Morality of Medicine During the Holocaust

*Kelsey Melinosky*

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From its earliest Greek form to modern day translations, the Hippocratic Oath has held doctors to three standards: to pass on knowledge, have compassion, and to “above all...not play at God” (Bioethics). The best medical professionals hold these three principles as a system of checks and balances. Otherwise, the doctor engrossed in research can easily lose compassion. At the same time, the one consumed with empathy may try to play God to save his/her patient’s life. An excess of one trait leads to the deficiency of another. The precariousness of this balance is demonstrated by the choices and actions of the Nazi physician Josef Mengele and the Polish gentile pharmacist Tadeusz Pankiewicz during the Holocaust. The different moral codes they subscribed to affected how they treated human beings. As a future doctor, I view their stories as lessons to help me stay true to the Hippocratic Oath I will one day take.

Dr. Josef Mengele was a physician and a scientist with the potential to offer the world a wealth of new medical knowledge. A graduate of the University of Munich, Mengele held both an MD and a PhD degree. Before he became notorious for his brutality, Dr. Mengele could be described at times as “kind and generous” by fellow German soldiers (Posner xv). During 1940 and 1941, Mengele even served on the Russian front, earning an Iron Cross for risking his life to provide medical care to his comrades in arms (Posner 17). By all accounts, Josef Mengele had the capacity to offer compassion and empathy for his patients; he was humane—when they were Aryan. Some of the survivors of his experiments at Auschwitz remember moments when he treated them with compassion. One of the inmate doctors who worked with Mengele recalled a birth that Dr. Mengele personally oversaw, providing complete medical care to ensure a healthy delivery (Posner 49). Yet, this “compassion” was a façade, and it was one that Mengele used *only* to ensure the success of his experiments. For a man to change from that humble beginning to a symbol of the horrors of Auschwitz, a terrifying transformation must have occurred. What prevents others, and me, from changing the same way he did?

Mengele changed from healer to killer when he bought into a damaging doctrine and decided to play God. During his university years, Mengele became interested in the Nazi Party and the racial purity it called for. Mengele’s ultimate moral downfall began when he came to the conclusion that certain individuals were not worthy of reproducing or even existing—in essence, they were not worthy to be given all the rights of being a human being. These beliefs aligned him with the Nazi ideology, according to which Jews and Gypsies were inferior to the Aryan race. The ultimate catalyst for Mengele to abandon the Hippocratic Oath occurred when he was given the power to make life and death decisions at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As a doctor at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mengele played an important role in deciding the fates of the arriving victims, mainly of Jews and Gypsies. It is in this role, standing next to the train station waving his cane to the left or to the right, Mengele is remembered by those who survived (Posner 2). In short, he played God by deciding who would die that day in the gas chambers or have a chance at survival as a camp prisoner. More directly, Mengele's arrogant claim to the power of life and death is seen in his experiments. During selections at the trains, Mengele picked out twins and individuals with physical abnormalities, such as heterochromia.<sup>1</sup> Mengele either allowed his experimental subjects to die due to the experiment or directly sanctioned their death in order to further his "research" on genetics and "purification" of the Aryan race. His indictment after the war stated that "he fully intended the victim to die according to the manner of the experiment and valued their lives very cheaply. They often died merely to further his medical knowledge and academic education" (Posner 33). Mengele's disregard for the sanctity of human life and blatant claim to sovereignty contradicts the very foundational ideals of medicine.

While Josef Mengele destroyed lives in his quest of medical knowledge and power, another man in Poland spent the war years saving the lives of Jews in the Kraków Ghetto. When his pharmacy ended up inside the borders of the newly created Kraków Ghetto, pharmacist Tadeusz Pankiewicz refused to move. He used his position as a non-Jewish Pole to provide medicine and hiding places to the Jews living in the ghetto, thus saving many lives.

Despite Nazi propaganda, Pankiewicz refused to view his Jewish neighbors and customers as inferior human beings. Instead, he had compassion for their situation, and he did his best to aid them in hiding from the Germans during round-ups and deportations. In his memoir, Pankiewicz writes how he would give parents sedatives for children in order to keep them quiet and hidden during the actions. For those who managed to escape outside the ghetto, Pankiewicz did his best to find hiding spots until the "actions" ended (Pankiewicz 157).

The pharmacy also served as a route to bring counterfeit documents into the ghetto (Pankiewicz 54). These papers created the opportunity of escape for those Jews able to obtain them and obtained hiding places on the "Aryan side." Through the documents, Pankiewicz helped Jews escape the hunger, disease, and constant "actions" of the ghetto.

Tadeusz Pankiewicz's greatest contribution to the ghetto came from simply creating a safe place for the ghetto residents. The pharmacy became a hub for intellectual conversations. The discussions of "music, literature, pre-war politics and predictions for the future" offered an escape from reality for the residents (Pankiewicz 141). While Pankiewicz may not have necessarily been preserving medical knowledge, he welcomed and preserved the friendships, conversations, and daily life of the

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<sup>1</sup> Heterochromia is a condition when an individual's irises differ in color. Mengele hoped to develop a way to artificially change eye color ("Josef Mengele").

ghetto. Pankiewicz hid twelve Torah scrolls in the pharmacy, preserving priceless pieces of Jewish history (Pankiewicz 52). Pankiewicz recognized the importance in saving these scrolls and other Jewish heirlooms, keeping relics and recording the history of a people the Nazis sought to wipe out.

Pankiewicz's memoir is filled with stories of Kraków ghetto residents. His writing preserved the stories of those who cannot tell it for themselves. His chronicles of the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Kraków testify to what could happen when an ideology based on dehumanization is carried out. Instead of hiding the horrors, he brought them to light. The fact that Pankiewicz held compassion through those years, seeing the humanity in each customer and visitor, is inspiring. Instead of capitulating to the atmosphere of fear that the Nazis created, he embodied the morals and ideals expected of a medical professional. Pankiewicz provided medicine, saved lives, and ensured that the Jewish people of Kraków would not be forgotten.

The medical profession calls for compassion and the continuation of knowledge, and it commands for doctors not to make the choice of life and death for their patients. This clearly calls doctors to respect the sanctity of personal choice, something Tadeusz Pankiewicz worked to preserve and Josef Mengele destroyed. In the end, their actions come down to the choice of ideals. Pankiewicz believed in respecting a people and their culture, even if they differed from their own. Mengele, however, believed in their inferiority and used his position for his personal gain at the cost of their suffering. Therefore, I must make the choice to respect and preserve the rights of all people. I choose to recognize that my future patients are humans who deserve compassion and understanding as they make their own choices in life and in their medical care. I choose to preserve the history of both Mengele and Pankiewicz and ensure that the lessons learned from them are not forgotten.

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## **Democracy: A Beacon of Freedom Built on Stilts**

*Sam Jaffe*

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Strength is a fundamental pillar of all governmental policy, regardless of political affiliation. Therefore, it stands to reason that a democracy would have safeguards in place to maintain democratic principles and processes. Yet, quite often these safeguards fail, and do so rapidly. It is incumbent upon the modern generation to study these failures of the past and apply this knowledge to the present day, for if this is not done, the aftermath can be horrific. What are the conditions that facilitate the failure of a democracy? The answer can be found in a complex mix of economic, social, and political causes.

The dissolution of the Weimar Republic is a textbook example of a failed democracy. The terminology here is significant; the Weimar Republic did not collapse in the true sense of the word. It was strategically seized from the people in the perfect set of conditions, and transformed into a single-party dictatorship. Here exist two governments at opposite ends of the political spectrum, yet both were born out of the same historical event – just at different moments in history.

The period 1918–1933 under the Weimar Republic was a significant moment in German history, being its first-ever democratic government. Germany immediately granted to women the right to vote (Boak 63), and in this regard, German society was relatively progressive compared to the rest of Europe. A democratic system was established in post-WWI Germany, yet conditions were ripe for revolution. The Treaty of Versailles established two clauses that disenfranchised the German people – war reparations and the war guilt clause. It is not in the scope of this paper to examine the fairness of the Treaty of Versailles, but simply its effects. Economically, the German response to war reparations in combination with the concurrent world market crash contributed to massive inflation and an economic catastrophe in early 1920s Germany. This is in part due to the government's decision to siphon the coal and iron industries, having a devastating impact on the valuation of the German Mark. The nation saw the value of the Mark devalue by December 1923 to a trillionth of its 1914 gold value (Mises Institute). As Dr. Karl Helfferich, a leading economist and policy maker at the time, noted, “The problem of restoring the circulation is not a technical or banking problem; it is, in the last analysis, the problem of the equilibrium between the [war reparations] and the capacity of the German economy for supporting this burden” (Mises). Yet the German people, not being exposed to the higher echelons of national economic policy, developed a mindset of discontent toward the German government, with one civilian stating, “even those people who used to save didn't trust money anymore, or the government” (Knight 60). To the farmer, it is insignificant whether it is weather or insects that destroy their crops – the end result is a destroyed livelihood. Likewise, the German civilian saw a ravaged economy under the Weimar Republic, and was disenfranchised accordingly.



In 1923, this discontent with the Weimar Republic sparked the attempted coup known as Beer Hall Putsch, led by Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). Although this failed, it is significant to note that this was preceded by two other revolution attempts, one by the Bavarian Soviet Republic, and the other by Wolfgang Kapp (Paxton 188). Looking one decade ahead to the successful political coup of Adolf Hitler in 1933, it is apparent that previous coup attempts established the environment of revolution. While it may be a stretch to conclude that previous attempts at seizing power directly cause or are a prerequisite for a subsequent successful revolution, they certainly establish the environment and contribute to the eventual success of such an attempt. This holds true given that the strength of previous government responses was not sufficient to deter future conspirators.

However, it would be inappropriate to label the rise of the Nazi party as solely an economic issue. The previous discussion explains why the Weimar Republic failed, not why it was Hitler and the Nazi party who gained power via democratic processes. The Nazi illustration of the Jewish people as an outsider that must be expelled aligned with their ideological opposition to Communism. Every facet of degradation descended upon the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi party. Whether it was that Jews were an inferior race or that Jews instigated a Communist plot to dominate the world, Jews were a scapegoat for Germany's struggles at the time. These beliefs, having no validity behind them, became a key component of Nazi ideology and, while published prior to WWII and the rise of the Nazi party, were widely disseminated in texts such as *Mein Kampf* and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (first published in 1903). Many better-known historical events based on this ideology occurred after Hitler's rise to power. However, the idea that Jews are an inferior race, seek dominance, and have no living space was in fact circulated and established beforehand. Eventually, the political breakdown in 1933 Germany caused so much disarray that Hitler convinced President Hindenburg to appoint him Chancellor, which Hitler used to subsequently consolidate his power as *Fuhrer* and effectively become dictator of Germany.

The cause of the fall of German democracy can be summarized rather briefly – political sanctions contributed to worsened economic livelihood, which caused social discontent, prompting political revolution. Thus, politics is both the cause and end result in this full-circle failure of democracy, while economic impact and social sentiment are the mechanisms. To introduce a degree of specificity and summarize the Weimar Republic case study, the government's response to war reparations under the Treaty of Versailles wreaked havoc on the German economy in this historical moment of democracy, leading to societal discontent. Hitler and the Nazi party capitalized on these conditions while simultaneously blaming the Weimar Republic and the Jewish people, a convenient target given the prevalent anti-Semitic environment in Europe at the time.

The rise and subsequent actions of Nazi Germany in Europe resulted in the genocide of six million Jews. This was made possible due to the failure of the Weimar Republic – a democracy. The notion of “the Fragility of Democracy”, and the effects of such a failure in Germany and elsewhere warrant the protection of democracy especially if mass atrocity is predicted to be a likely event under the subsequent successor government. *The Early Warning Project*, run by Mollie Zapata in conjunction with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, uses historical data and on mass atrocities to predict the likelihood of contemporary genocide and mass atrocity given modern-day conditions in countries around the world. Zapata claims that there is no recognition/proof that genocide can ever be prevented. It is impossible to assert that certain actions stopped a mass atrocity from happening, precisely because the mass atrocity never happened. Thus, it is imperative to identify areas at risk for mass atrocity and address these areas preemptively.

A contemporary case study draws similar parallels with the persecution of the Jews under Nazi Germany: the state-led persecution of the Rohingya in Burma. Burma’s military-led government in 1962 initiated discriminatory acts toward the Muslim minority in the western part of the country, such as denying them citizenship. Despite the recent transition in the last decade to a civilian-led government, the military has continued to target the Rohingya civilian population in instances of extrajudicial killings while the civilian government remains silent to likely maintain support of the Buddhist majority (Solomon). While Burma’s actions have not officially met the legal definition of mass atrocity or genocide, *The Early Warning Project* and other atrocity prevention organizations, such as the *Sentinel Project*, warn that “the risk of genocide or related mass atrocities is extremely high” (Straus 74). Burma differs from Nazi Germany in that the military is operating independently of the ruling political party. However, the fact remains that Aung San Suu Kyi and the political authorities in Burma have remained silent and denied such events taking place. One striking similarity lies in comparing the Nuremberg Laws to the Burmese Nationality Law, which both stripped Jews and Rohingyas, respectively, of their national citizenship. Both Germany and Burma used this tactic to paint these minorities as outsiders, establishing a basis for expulsion and extermination. The latter has not yet occurred in Burma as widespread official state policy, but, as stated previously, it is a dangerous possibility. Burma’s form of democracy is flawed, which places it at a high risk of failure. If a minority within the population is unable to vote, is Burma truly to be considered a democracy? If Burma is to avoid genocide, its governmental policy must be re-evaluated – if not by itself, then by outside actors.

As I walked through the former Jewish ghetto of Warsaw as part of the American Service Academies Program (ASAP) in Poland, it was difficult to fathom such a failure of humanity taking place. How did a Jewish population in Poland become subjugated so brutally by a foreign nation that was a democracy less than a decade prior? I was horrified after visiting Auschwitz, and again astounded by the short period in which democracy, even having undergone a “Golden Era,” transitioned so drastically into a genocidal single-party state. Democratic governments around the

world seem to be strong until they fail. Often when a democracy fails, or fails to meet the requirements of a true democracy, mass atrocity can ensue. Thus, as seen here, it is necessary to examine the conditions that lead to the failure of democracy. Often, the factor that bridges failed government and state-sponsored mass atrocity is the presence of a scapegoat. For Nazi Germany, this was the Jews, and for Burma, this is the Rohingya. In general, the conditions that lead to the failure of a democratic government are poor economic conditions that contribute to a low standard of living. This drives social unrest and the support for new groups that often place blame on “outsiders” and promise to improve conditions. It is necessary to identify these conditions, and initiatives like *The Early Warning Project* quantify these factors so that countries around the world prone to a failure of democracy and/or genocide are identified. The resources of world powers, international organizations, and NGOs are limited, so it is important to identify at-risk areas around the globe so maximum efforts can be directed to prevent genocide.

My examination of the fragility of democracy after the completion of ASAP feels incomplete to a certain degree, as the intent was not necessarily to examine the effects of genocide, but rather the cause. After studying the Holocaust in the U.S. and seeing the Holocaust-era ghettos and concentration camps in Poland, I feel slightly guilty for not fully reflecting on the victims. Yet, having experienced the program, I feel that seeing the effects of genocide where it occurred has strengthened within me the resolve to fight for doing the right thing, whatever that may be in whatever conditions may exist. In order to do this, I wanted to study what conditions existed for the Nazi party to gain power and for the Holocaust to happen. As I read through Yad Vashem’s list of Holocaust victims in an Auschwitz barracks, I could not help but to have my breath taken away when I read my name. It was a moment that I will not forget, but it is not enough to simply never forget. One must strategically study the past with vigor and resolve so we do not make the same mistakes.

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# **Judging the Impossible: Kapos and Justice After the Holocaust**

***Professor Babafemi Akinrinade***

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## Introduction

In reflecting on the 2017 AJC fellowship experience through the seminar sessions and the tour sites, one cannot but be struck by the magnitude of the victim experience, and the millions of victims of the Holocaust. The number of victims, coupled with the efficiency of the killing process, for which World War II provided a cover, raises the question of complicity of numerous individuals who ultimately facilitated the killings. Ordinarily, in today's international criminal justice processes, those targeted for prosecution are the high officials who bear the greatest responsibility for atrocities. Where there are so many perpetrators, accountability becomes tricky once the pendulum of justice moves beyond the architects and the planners of the crimes to mid-level and lower-level perpetrators.

Visits to the many Holocaust memorial sites inevitably bring to the fore the question of how many individuals facilitated the human destruction that took place. Given the scale of the crimes committed during the Holocaust and the number of perpetrators and facilitators, the criminal justice process must deal with the question of the criminal responsibility of those individuals. While the responsibility of high Nazi officials is beyond debate, with so many of these low-level facilitators, and collaborators, in addition to the main perpetrators, how is justice served? Specifically, within the concentration camp system, many were forced to serve in the camp administration, and some of these individuals committed crimes against their fellow detainees, in the service of the Germans. If it is not very difficult to determine the guilt or innocence of the principal architects of the Holocaust, how might responsibility be determined in the cases of these individuals who had to make "impossible choices" as functionaries within those camps? (Wachsmann 497) Could their conduct be judged by ordinary standards prevalent then and today, especially with the model of international criminal justice developed after the Nuremberg Trials?

This reflection concentrates on the role of kapos within the concentration camp system and the question of justice for those among them implicated in criminal acts. Post-World War II trials of those involved in the Holocaust have included trials of kapos in different countries but this fact does not answer the question of whether these individuals should or could be held criminally responsible for their conduct. Where do we locate Kapo trials in today's international criminal justice? These questions recognize the complicated nature of the entire sequence of events that took place in that period. As Fellows, we grappled with those questions, including issues of memory and memorial sites, a victim's recollection of events, the appropriateness of certain forms of memorialization, the absence of memorials, the handling of historical objects, and much more. While we could not agree



on everything, we all recognize the complicated nature of what we were witnessing and reflecting upon.

### Kapos and Justice After the Holocaust

Within the concentration camp system, kapos, or “Prisoner Foremen,” (Kogon 62) were “trustee inmates,” Jewish and non-Jewish, who supervised other prisoners in the camps (“Kapos – Jewish Virtual Library”). The kapo system in the concentration camps was not a new invention; the use of prisoners as “surrogate guards,” or the “co-opting” of prisoners, had a long history within the German prison system and was firmly entrenched by the mid-1930s (Wachsmann 122–123). Within the camps, kapos were part of the general running of the camps, responsible for maintaining law and order. They served in three different main groups: as work supervisors; as prison life supervisors within the barracks; and as functionaries within camp administration, from camp elders, and deputy camps elders, to workers in the prison kitchen, storerooms, and bunkers, as well as clerks in SS offices (Wachsmann 123–124, 513). In determining and assigning responsibility for actions undertaken in the camps, kapos could be considered collaborators within the death machinery of the Germans who appointed them to serve in that capacity. The fact of coercion does not remove the fact that they served in different roles in the camps. (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 195). Of particular interest is the position of Jewish kapos who served in camps that had predominantly Jewish populations, who became “instruments of their own destruction” and of their fellow Jews (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 195).

Kapos generally served the interest of the Germans, principally the SS. Their privileges as kapos did not exempt them from meeting SS expectations and failure to meet those could lead to punishment and dismissal (Wachsmann 124). Serving SS interests translated into brutality on the part of most kapos, even when they claimed to be serving the best interests of the prisoners, for example, whipping a prisoner to prevent worse brutality from the SS (Wachsmann 516–518). As “demigods” of the concentration camps, some of them were implicated in atrocities against fellow prisoners, including “direct involvement in mass murder, selecting weak and sick inmates, escorting condemned prisoners to execution sites, or killing them.” Some even killed on their own initiative, without much prompting by the SS (Wachsmann 513–516). On the other hand, there were kapos that did not act cruelly towards fellow prisoners, who maintained decency and dignity while fending off SS orders against fellow prisoners. Despite this, the general impression is that all kapos were bad and vicious in the camps, leading the historian Nikolaus Wachsmann to conclude that “the sins of some have led to the slander of all” (Wachsmann 522).

After liberation of the camps, and with the disappearance of many SS functionaries who had served in the camps, kapos that remained behind “bore the brunt of mob violence” with many of them “battered, strangled, and trampled to death” (Wachsmann 607). In rare cases, Allied soldiers also

shot some kapos, in addition to SS men. In liberated Europe, some Jews who were identified by victims as kapos were subjected to violent physical assaults and some were murdered (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 202). Shortly after the war, trials commenced in various jurisdictions, of people accused of involvement in different crimes during the war. The main Nuremberg Trials of the International Military Tribunal focused on individuals whose crimes had no geographic boundaries, while sector trials took place in territories occupied by the Allied Powers in Germany. There were also national trials within many European countries, bringing to justice individuals who committed crimes as well as individuals who facilitated the commission of crimes as collaborators or in other capacities. In rare cases, some of these trials involved individuals who served as kapos in the concentration camps, raising the specter of prosecuting prisoners who were victims of the Nazis for service done in the camps under coercion.

Since kapos were prisoners, should they be prosecuted alongside SS officials who ran the camps? Would/should they be tried as accessories to the crimes of the Nazis? Would their prosecution be focused solely on crimes committed against other prisoners or in addition to facilitating directly or indirectly the crimes committed by the Nazis against all prisoners? If prosecution was necessary or justified, could kapos be tried for violations of local criminal codes in the countries where the Germans established the concentration camps, or would their trials be based on the local laws of their own countries? Could the crimes be prosecuted under the national laws of the Allied countries that had jurisdiction over different zones in Germany after the war? Could a country not in existence at the time of the commission of the crimes, for example Israel, prosecute those individuals if they gained physical custody of them by their presence within the territory? Certainly, not all these questions could be answered in that short time span because of the legal complications that would arise since the kapos were not from a single country. However, most of them were Germans, in line with the racial thinking of the Nazis (Wachsmann 519–521).

In some of the Allied post-war trials that involved kapos as defendants, the Allied powers, especially, considered kapos as part of the criminal enterprise involving the SS. Thus, the kapos were punished harshly, in some cases more severely than SS officials who ran the camps. The kapos were the faces of the obvious brutalities of the camps, doing the dirty work for the SS who could be anonymous to the victims. National trials in some cases followed a similar pattern. In Poland in 1946, Leon Gross, a Polish Jew who had been a prisoner-physician at the German concentration camp Płaszów, was sentenced to death and executed for participation in the selection of Jewish inmates to be murdered, a task he had been assigned by Amon Goeth, the camp's commandant, who met the same fate as Gross (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 199).

In another case in 1949, in the trial of Joseph Weiszl in France for his role in organizing the selection of Jews sent to Auschwitz from the French transit camp of Drancy, Oscar Reich, a Viennese Jew was named as co-defendant. Weiszl, who was one of Eichmann's Austrian lieutenants

was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, while Reich, who had been forced to take part in the selections under threat of being deported himself was sentenced to death. Although Weizl had greater culpability in the categorization and organization of the transports, he got off with a lesser punishment and the French authorities released him six years later, and he was able to draw pensions from Austria upon his release in 1955 (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 199). In the 1947 Dachau Trials conducted by the United States, five Spanish kapos, Joaquín Espinosa,<sup>1</sup> Laureano Nava, Indalecio González, Moisés Fernández and Domingo Félez,<sup>2</sup> were tried and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, some of which were later vacated. The most severe punishment was for González, who was sentenced to death by the military court and hanged in 1949, despite many petitions for clemency from the Spanish Republican government in exile (Alija-Fernández 108–111).

Conceivably, such harsh punishments imposed on the kapos by these courts may have contributed to the pervasive image of all kapos as brutes, without any one of them having acted compassionately towards their fellow prisoners. It stands to reason that if an SS functionary and a kapo were tried by a court in a single case and the SS official received a much more lenient sentence than a kapo, it is easy for the ordinary person to conclude that, based on the facts and the judgment of the case, the kapo was worse than the SS official.

On the other hand, jurisprudence from the various trials revealed no consistency in the treatment of kapos. A notorious kapo in Dachau, Karl Kapp, was acquitted of all charges of murder and prisoner abuse by a Munich court in 1960.<sup>3</sup> This was a troubling decision as Kapp was adjudged by the court to have been “loyal to fellow prisoners [and] protecting them heroically.” For someone reportedly exceptionally cruel as Kapp, such “an unduly clear-cut verdict, given the complexities of his case” (Wachsmann 516–518) excused and justified prisoner abuse, as well as the unjustifiable killing of fellow prisoners on behalf of the SS, and sometimes on a kapo’s own initiative. In the United States, some of the Jewish Holocaust survivors who emigrated as refugees included those who served as kapos. One of them, Jacob Tannenbaum, whose brutality at the Görlitz concentration camp in Germany had been proven by survivors, became the subject of denaturalization proceedings in 1987 (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 201; Rosenbaum 97–99; Jewish Telegraphic Agency). However, having secured a plea deal, he surrendered his citizenship, but avoided deportation.

Another case demonstrating the oddity of the criminal justice process involved a Jewish block elder, Ignatz Schlomowicz in Bergen-Belsen, prosecuted in the first Belsen trials at Lüneburg alongside top SS functionaries in the camp, including the last Camp Commandant, Josef Kramer. Although

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<sup>1</sup> United States v Joaquín Espinosa (Trial)

<sup>2</sup> Lauriano Navas, et al. (Trial)

<sup>3</sup> Karl Kapp

Schlomowicz was acquitted, the decision to place him on trial for war crimes alongside Kramer could be seen as evidence of the ignorance of Allied jurists who were “unfamiliar with the basic organizational structures of the camps, or unwilling to grasp the many “gray zones” inside, ... [and] saw Kapos as part of the wider criminal conspiracy (and occasionally as SS members” (Wachsmann 612).

However, trials of former kapos were not unique. In October 1944, in Lublin, a special penal court conducted a war crimes trial of a kapo and five SS guards, and all were sentenced to death (Finder and Prusin 127). And, after the war, “Jewish community honor courts” also conducted trials of Jewish kapos and others accused of collaboration with the Germans (Laura Jockusch and Finder). In Poland, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, CKŻP), set up a Jewish honor court or “citizens’ tribunal” (*sąd społeczny* or *sąd obywatelski*) to investigate the conduct of Polish Jews during the German occupation of Poland. However, unlike the Allied courts, this tribunal did not consider being a kapo (or membership in the Judenrat, and in the Jewish police) culpable per se. What really mattered was the conduct of the person during the occupation (Finder and Prusin 126, 138).<sup>4</sup> Those tried by the Jewish tribunal and found guilty on the evidence were referred to Polish State authorities for prosecution. This was in addition to moral sanctions imposed by the Jewish community, and some of the defendants were also found guilty by State courts. Five individuals were tried by these institutions, with two convicted in the Jewish tribunal and the State court, while three were convicted by the Jewish tribunal, but acquitted by the State court (Finder and Prusin 139–146).

In 1950, the Israeli Parliament passed the Nazi and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law (NNCL)<sup>5</sup> aimed at punishing three principal crimes committed during the Nazi era. These are crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (Article 1). A few months before the adoption of this law, the parliament had passed the Crime of Genocide (Prevention and Punishment) Law<sup>6</sup> in fulfillment of its obligation under the recently ratified UN Genocide Convention.<sup>7</sup> The NNCL targeted the Nazis and their collaborators who facilitated the commission of crimes against Jewish people in the Nazi era (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 207). Under this law, the Israeli authorities prosecuted thirty to forty individuals who served as kapos in the camps, with most found guilty (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 195–225; Ben-Naftali and Tuval). There is no public

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<sup>4</sup> Similar courts established elsewhere included the Court of Honor and Rehabilitation of the Union of Liberated Jews in the American Zone of Germany, and the Court of Honor at the Central Organization of Survivors in Italy (Bazyler and Tuerkheimer 199–200).

<sup>5</sup> NNCL

<sup>6</sup> Crime of Genocide Law

<sup>7</sup> Genocide Convention

official record of these kapo trials or of how many took place since they were sealed and can only be opened seventy years after each of those trials took place.<sup>8</sup>

Scholarly opinion is divided on the issue of kapo trials, especially of Jewish kapos. There is the fact of the impossible situation wherein these individuals were placed and forced to serve, mostly against their will. But there is also the reality of the fact that some of these individuals committed atrocities against their fellow concentration camps inmates. It is quite difficult to reconcile these two sides, with some saying that such trials should not have taken place, and laws like the Israeli NNCL should never have been passed in the first place. Further, given the circumstances, kapos could and should not be judged by prevailing legal or moral standards in the Nazi-created/imposed gray zones (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 215–218, 223–224).

On the other hand, in those difficult circumstances, there are testimonies of survivors about kapos who did not mistreat their fellow prisoners, who did the “minimum.” If such “choiceless choice” was possible, why exempt from punishment those who went beyond that minimum and mistreated their fellow inmates by subjecting them to physical abuse or even death? Thus, the “fact remains that notwithstanding the horror of the camps, some kapos did just the minimum while others acted with brutality and cruelty beyond what was required. Thus, even in the horrid environment of the camp, kapos could make choices. Those who opted for the brutal should not escape punishment simply because they were Jews or concentration camp inmates” (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 225). According to another scholar, in the case of kapos, “the line is crossed to victimizer with justifiable and moral responsibility when physical violence is used to brutalize camp inmates, despite instances where most kapos may have performed (or refused to perform) acts that thwarted or deferred Nazi designs” (Rosenbaum 98).

In considering this difficult situation, it is possible to argue that the German Nazis generally were in a self-imposed incarceration of their warped ideology, which led to the massive atrocities. The prisoners, on the other hand, were in a physical prison, a much worse condition, and subjected to all sorts of brutalities. Most were coopted into the machinery of destruction. That some acquired a privileged status as officials in the incarceration system did not remove the fact that they were still prisoners. A privileged prisoner was still a prisoner, but that privilege imposed heavy responsibilities from all sides on that individual. The Germans expected them to pacify the prisoners, punish, maltreat, and brutalize them by proxy. However, other inmates expected the privileged ones to act differently from their Nazi oppressors and killers, which put the privileged prisoners in a difficult position. Fellow prisoners could identify privileged prisoners who were “good” or “not bad” or “not

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the trials include that of Else Tarnek, (Attorney General v. Tarnek) a former female Jewish kapo at Auschwitz; Yehezkel Enigster, (Attorney General v. Enigster), a former chief kapo in the labor camps at Graeditz and Faelbruch; and Hirsch Berenblatt, (Barnblatt Appeal), who was not a kapo but was a Jewish police commander of the Polish town of Bedzin (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 211–215; Ben-Naftali and Tuval 150–172).



too bad” as opposed to those who were “bad” or “cruel” or “inhuman.” Some were even characterized as “worse than the Germans” (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 197). In the circumstances, while utilizing prevailing legal and moral standards may be inappropriate, something ought to be done to recognize that some of those privileged prisoners maintained minimum standards of decency even under extreme circumstances. The inadequacy of law and morality at that time does not necessarily call for an abandonment of those as markers, lest we should create another zone where morality and law does not apply, especially in times of armed conflict when those engaged in warfare seek to operate beyond the confines of law and morality. If law and morality does not apply, then what applies? Do we risk creating an impunity gap when individuals commit crimes under the most extreme of circumstances and are not accountable for their actions? Or do we emphasize the legality of specific conduct, while leaving the moral issues aside and, in recognition of the extremity utilize the same as the basis for mitigation?

Bazylar, in his book with Tuerkheimer, disagreed with the criminal prosecution of any Jewish survivor who acted as a kapo in a concentration camp. Tuerkheimer in turn disagreed with this position, calling for the punishment of such individuals. He cautioned however that “their punishment should [not] be the same as that for an SS guard doing the same thing. Their status as kapos should be a mitigator in terms of sentence but not an exoneration for excess and needless brutality.” (Bazylar and Tuerkheimer 225). The fact that the kapos served in dual roles as victims and victimizers “should not be construed as an argument against prosecution but rather as an important consideration in assessing penalty on conviction.” (Rosenbaum 103)

### Concluding Observations

The various trials noted in this reflection showed the difficulty that accompanied bringing victims to justice for crimes committed under duress or coercion. There was no standard by which states, or societies could deal with the problem and the ad hocery of the process resulted in inconsistencies that almost discredits the whole trial process. The key question remains: should there be trials of individuals who served under compulsion as kapos in concentration camps? Beyond this, we can ask other, ancillary questions: are we equipped, partially or fully, to undertake the sort of judgment that is called for in such a situation as these individuals faced? Are we equipped to weigh the probative value of victims’ testimonies in support or against the actions of those individuals? How does our judgment affect or inform the process of accountability for mass atrocities in the world today? While the past cannot be undone, its lessons are still useful for us today.

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## **“44 is very close by”: The Warsaw Rising Museum as Heterotopia**

*Guy B. Aldridge*

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In Kurt Vonnegut’s classic novel *Breakfast of Champions*, the main character quips that mirrors are in fact portals to other universes. “Don’t get too near that leak,” he warns a child, using the slang term for mirror that Vonnegut coined, “You wouldn’t want to wind up in the other universe, would you?” (19). Vonnegut wrote general fiction, but such motifs in his work often earned him the basically inaccurate label of science-fiction writer. His theoretical universe-bridging mirror, however, dovetails with a Foucauldian concept: the heterotopia, and its accompanying ‘mirror.’ A heterotopia is a real space in which someone ‘sees’ him or herself in a utopia—which is, put briefly, an imagined and often ideal space.

Though Foucault did not warn against creating heterotopias, and argued that they exist in every culture, pointing to their theoretical existence does in fact beg the question of what the implications, or outcomes, of heterotopias are in societies. The Warsaw Rising Museum in Poland’s capital provides us with a model example of a heterotopia. It also shows us, as Vonnegut warned, that the danger of such mirrors is their falling into another universe. Put differently, the Foucauldian mirror has the potential, at “full capacity,” of altering the conscience of a society in the real world as it sees itself reflected elsewhere; here are the grave implications for such a heterotopia.

Polish nationalism<sup>9</sup> is a nuanced phenomenon in post-communist eastern Europe. It draws stances and antagonisms from international discourses surrounding history of the Holocaust, as well as shapes those narratives. Communist Poland’s official silence regarding—or outright antagonism toward—the memory of the Shoah meant that Jewish culture and the history of persecution of the Jews were repressed until the 1990s. This developed within the context of the broader Soviet indifference to those issues. As such, this new Polish culture that emerged in the 1990s, particularly in liberal pockets of society, developed a sensitivity toward the *memory* of Jews in their country—which made up some ten percent of the pre-Shoah Polish population.

On the other side of the political spectrum, however, Polish nationalism was directed rather toward distinguishing itself both from Western Europe and communism. This tendency is all the more curious in the post-2015 government that has definite authoritarian leanings. While Russian society

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<sup>9</sup> Though I mention “Polish nationalism” several times in this essay, it is not meant as a set phrase. I simply mean to refer to nationalism as a general phenomenon as it appears in the Polish context; in Poland, as anywhere, nationalism is founded on a certain set of (perceived) common beliefs, a constructed sense of community, a historical metanarrative, etc. This idea of nationalistic relativity is in accordance with Foucault’s heterotopia, to which he ascribes several common characteristics. In fact, the first is that heterotopia exists in all cultures: “Its *first principle* there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias” (Foucault, 24). There is nothing unique about the Polish example—though I argue that it constitutes a potent example.

embraces some aspects of the Soviet regime—its aggressiveness, expansionism, and authoritarianism—Poland cannot do so; its nationalism depends on an antithetical relationship to communism. As such, Polish politics today treads a fine line between socialist authoritarianism and a nationalist equivalent. If the latter sounds like dangerous territory for a country with a twentieth-century legacy inextricably stained by the Holocaust, that is because it is. This emphasis of national hegemony and national heritage has led again to a de-emphasis of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust—which is, ultimately, not vastly different from the anti-Jewish memory politics of the Soviet regime from which they so desperately want to distance themselves.

Battlegrounds for memory politics in contemporary Poland are sites of commemoration and museums. Since the communists did relatively little to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, the post-1990 governments can shape the debates in a significant way by erecting new sites without overcrowding the historical and physical landscape. The texts at these sites generally reflect the nationalist posturing of new post-communist Polish governments, emphasizing, for instance, the suffering of the entire Polish ‘nation’ over the persecution of the Jews, celebrating Polish martyrs for the Jews over Nazi collaborators, and so on. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the Warsaw Rising Museum (henceforth: WRM) in the nation’s capital.

The WRM is a unique space in Poland, designed to encapsulate a national ideal—rather than reality. The museum opened in 2004, well before the election of the current president Andrzej Duda of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS) in 2015 and a hard-right turn in Poland. Yet PiS had been in power since 2005, and an important early proponent for the museum within the Polish government was then Mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński—party cofounder who went on to become President from 2005 to 2010. Although PiS would take a more radical and populist turn in the subsequent decade, those developments were no departure from the nationalistic vision encapsulated in the WRM. Even the museum’s name is a reflection of its educational intentions: the historic event of 1944 that it commemorates is almost always referred to as the *Warsaw Uprising*, not the ‘Rising.’<sup>10</sup> The decision to opt for an obscure and less familiar term in English points to an intent to ‘tweak,’ or even redefine, the meaning of the Warsaw Uprising in the contemporary context. But from whom or what was the Polish government trying to take control of the meaning of the Warsaw Uprising? The name of the museum may answer this question; the subtle semantic difference is in the English language rather than in Polish, indicating the reception the museum designers intended internationally as well. Warsaw is ‘rising.’ Its contemporary purpose thus anchors itself to a historical metanarrative, and it becomes an oasis of propaganda within the capital of Poland. The WRM constitutes, in other words, a heterotopia.

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<sup>10</sup> There has been inconsistent usage of “Rising” by some in the British historiographical context, but by no means all. See, for instance, Jan M. Ciechanowski, *The Warsaw Rising of 1944*, London (Cambridge University Press, 1974), and Norman Davies and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Rising '44 : The Battle for Warsaw* (New York: Viking, 2004).



This essay outlines Foucault's conception of heterotopia, a physical space connected to a utopia. It applies the current situation in Poland and the WRM to this model, and offers supplementary theory and analysis. This essay argues that the WRM embodies what Foucault termed a heterotopia that "functions at full capacity" (Foucault 26). Its format combines a 'walk-through' of the museum with theoretical analysis. This essay then explores the ramifications of this space. What does it mean for a heterotopia to be at "full capacity"—an issue that Foucault does not address? What implications does this have for Polish nationalism? This section shows that a heterotopia such as the WRM is a spawning point for what historian Claudia Koonz described as "ethnic fundamentalism" in her study, *The Nazi Conscience*. The ramifications for the heterotopia are then born in a concerning rewriting of a national attitude that poses a threat to a general human interest—in other words, Polish nationalists peering too closely run the risk of falling in.

Foucault's critical work on spaces ("Of Other Spaces") addresses the connections between spaces in a post-Galilean world. While spaces had been organized hierarchically in the Middle Ages, the discovery of the heliocentric nature of the universe—and of the vast, empty universe itself—prompted a reorganization of our world. Humans no longer merely ordered spaces from holiest to most vulgar, bound by a sacred hierarchical relationship, but imagined them as dots in a huge void. The relation between these spaces, then, becomes the object of Foucault's attention.

One of the main subjects he addresses in "Of Other Spaces" is the heterotopia. This type of space serves as a bridge between real spaces and imagined or ideal spaces—utopias. The heterotopia contains what Foucault describes as a "mirror," in which occupants of the heterotopia can 'see' themselves in the utopia. In other words, the heterotopia is a real, tangible space that contains an entry point to a utopia.

Foucault lists numerous examples of heterotopias, such as graveyards, and explicitly includes museums. The first section of this essay, in arguing that the WRM is a heterotopia, is thus no extrapolation of his logic. However, I will push his argument further to show that this particular museum is what Foucault describes as a heterotopia that "functions at full capacity." Moreover, I will expand his reasoning to argue that the borders of a heterotopia can be blurred, and reflect a utopia, through the Foucauldian mirror, into the surrounding world.

Foucault ascribes several principles to heterotopias. The first, which has already been mentioned, is the fact that these spaces exist in all cultures. There is nothing unique about the Polish example—though I argue that it constitutes a potent example. Beyond that, a few principles are more central to making this point than others. First, we must explore the idea that the heterotopia is a "closed space," in which "one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures." Of course, the WRM is a public museum, and the entry fee is not expensive. Nonetheless, one cannot simply wander into the museum. It is a space with a ticket counter, walls, security, and so on; that

constitutes the permission of which Foucault speaks. As for the “certain gestures,” Poles are not yet in the situation of, for instance, Turkish, Russian, and Egyptian dissidents, places where those who counter the official narrative for the national past and present are either expelled from the country or persecuted and censored. Nonetheless, Poland is becoming increasingly intolerant of those who focus on the “wrong” aspects of the national narrative—see, for instance, the recent scandal with historian Jan Grabowski.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there is a degree to which museum-goers need to have permission and make “certain gestures” to gain entry.

Once inside, the discrete world of the heterotopia becomes pronounced in the WRM. For instance, rather than placing the museum café outside the exhibit, where anyone off the street could have a cup of coffee, the café is inside the WRM—in fact, deep inside the exhibit, far away from the entryway. The museum-goer is thus encouraged not only to stay on site for longer, but in fact to remain inside the world of the museum itself. The décor of the space is based on the style and kitsch of 1940s Poland. The politics of everyday life are further reflected in the presence of a Catholic chapel—again within the museum itself; unsurprisingly, there is no synagogue, as though early 1940s Poland was nearly ridded of its Jewish influence and life. The chapel is more or less styled after the 1940s as well, but it is not simply a cute reminder of bygone times. It is a functional chapel with weekly services and events.

The most important principle to which the WRM adheres in Foucault’s outline of the heterotopia is the concept of the heterochrony. The WRM is thus “linked to slices in time,” functioning at “full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.” The slice of time to which the WRM is linked is, of course, the moment of resistance to the Nazis and betrayal by the Soviets during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. It is a space in which, through the Foucauldian mirror, museum-goers can make that break with their time, and imagine themselves in the eternal uprising. This collapse of time-space is manifest in countless ways, a few of which may be mentioned here.

Walking through the WRM gives the impression of being transported to another time and space—put differently, another universe. The first room of the museum opens into a children’s space. While most museums generally install these rooms to keep children busy with exhibits that may be dull to them or considered too mature by their parents, the WRM children’s room is a propagandistic display of violence and war. It features a wall dedicated to the so-called “Little Insurgent,” a statue of a child soldier of the resistance. Standing at probably five years old, the tyke wears a helmet with the red and white stripes of the Polish flag and totes a machine pistol. This statue is no memorial to the suffering children underwent in Nazi occupation, but a celebration of national sacrifice by *all* members. Adding to the horror I, personally, felt in this room filled with

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<sup>11</sup> Grabowski has been the target of a smear campaign by various Polish institutions that claim he has falsified evidence in his works that mention willing participation by Polish collaborators in Nazi anti-Jewish measures.

crayon drawings of violent imagery is the soft lullaby playing in the background, a horrifying tune sung by a few children. Not fluent in Polish, I cannot speak as to what the song was about, but it was eerie and unsettling to hear. The Room of the Little Insurgent thus invites child visitors into the world of national sacrifice, placing a metaphorical gun in their hands, if not an actual one.

Near the beginning of the WRM is a wall of text and images orienting the visitor to the world of the 1944 Uprising. A noteworthy poster is an enlarged print of the order from the Polish commander in September 1939 who announced the invasion of the Nazis and set the stage for a nation in resistance. The depiction of the Germans as Poland's "ancient enemy" is particularly striking. Naturally, this is simply a copy of a historical document and I do not mean to imply that the museum designers fabricated words to match the priorities of the present. Nonetheless, this document was chosen, and therefore has symbolic significance. A so-called ancient enemy is one, which supersedes recent developments, free from the burden of temporality. Calling on this terminology, then, places the museum-goer in time-space much larger than the present, an eternal world of resistance against Germans. This slice of time in September 1939 is thereby linked to a timeless space.

The wording of the museum texts also reinforces the feeling of eternity in the WRM. The word "we" represents the Polish nation, and refers to the combatants of 1944 as integral members of the Polish nation. This phenomenon is by no means absent from, for instance, the patriotism surrounding events of American nation-building. However, this subtle point was driven further home for me after conversing with two staff members (or perhaps volunteers). I was in a room that displayed and demonstrated the printing press equipment used by the resistors during World War II, and I wanted to ask a question about typewriters. The primary expert on the equipment spoke no English, so he called over a younger employee. In broken English, he tried to answer my question, using phrases like "we printed" rather than "they." The older man, at perhaps 60 years old, could not have been an active resistor more than 70 years ago, and his twenty-something co-worker even less so. Their response, however, is noteworthy. They were not actors or re-enactors, but simply Polish nationals. Their word choice represents the conflation of the 1944 Uprising with the Polish nation, eternally in resistance. Moreover, assuming that they were not coached to speak this way, we have an example of people who, as Vonnegut wrote, have 'wound up' in the other universe.

The WRM is not solely devoted to the "slice" of time of 1944; a medium-sized exhibit on the top floor has nothing to do with the 1944 Warsaw Uprising whatsoever. It is instead devoted to the current Polish military generally, and the elite GROM units specifically. Similar to Navy Seals or Army Rangers in the United States, these units are the cream of the crop of the Polish military. They have been deployed since the fall of communism in 1989—a far cry from 1944. The museum-goer enters the room in shock and awe at the huge numbers of guns lying around. The thumping

heartbeat sound effect, audible throughout much of the museum is especially strong here. The décor of the space is modeled after a military camp deployed for Middle Eastern counter-terrorism. I passed through heavy, bullet-pierced rubber tent flaps into what I can only describe as the seizure room, which had a strobe light continuously simulating gunfire—accompanied, naturally, by sound effects. At a corner of the next open space, past more television screens looping propagandistic recruitment videos is a tall plexiglass column, perhaps eight inches in diameter and somewhat taller than I at 6'4." The column is filled with empty machine gun rounds, with the caption: "Empty shells of cartridges fired by the GROM operator within two weeks of military drills." The implication: want to join and shoot some guns? Want to serve the 'Rising' Polish nation and resist ancient enemies? Become an insurgent. Join the military.

The collapsing of time into one eternal moment is not mere interpretation here; it is communicated explicitly by the museum designers. In the museum exterior there is a wall with the name of Polish resistance fighters similar to the Vietnam War Memorial in the United States. On the back of this wall is an exhibit featuring both drawn illustrations of Polish resistance and photos from the struggle. The wording on the explanatory placard is telling. Spelling and punctuation errors aside,<sup>12</sup> it is a clear mission statement for the museum: "We would like [...] to inspire you to look at these photographs in a different way. [...] Colour [...] eliminates the distance separating us from the past. [...] We are in that distant Warsaw which still has an existence of a few weeks or days before it perishes. [...]. The Warsaw Rising 44 is very close by – it just takes a bit of careful looking to realize it."<sup>13</sup> The museum, then, is an invitation to see the world of the Warsaw Uprising reflected in the surrounding landscape of Poland's contemporary capital. It tells the museum-goer that the space within the walls is not just a brief exploration of the past, but a declaration of the Warsaw Uprising's perpetuity—which Poles continue to experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Such as the American, i.e. Oxford spelling of "immobilized" with otherwise British spelling, the inconsistent use of double and single quotation marks, and occasional self-contradictory sentences.

<sup>13</sup> Here is the text in full: "The idea to add colour to photographs of the Warsaw Rising may at first seem puzzling. For we are used to black and white illustrations we have always seen reproduced in documentary sources or books of photographs devoted to the Rising. Such black and white pictures have become a permanent component of our general intellectual idiom and imagination. We would like, however, to inspire you to look at these photographs in a different way. The traditional black and white pictures make the past an isolated area, closed and separated from the present with an impassable barrier. The past events seem set for ever, immobilized by the passing time. Colour, however, eliminates the distance separating us from the past. Human faces, streets of that past Warsaw and scenes captured by the photographer are immersed in an exactly the same present day reality as we are experiencing it here and now. It is August and September of 1944. We are in that distant Warsaw which still has an existence of a few weeks or days before it perishes. We do not claim that such a reconstruction can attain anything but a degree of perfection [sic]. Even the best computers cannot produce a picture toying real life and even the most meticulous research will not yield absolutely precise answers to all our questions concerning the colour of the clothes worn sixty years ago or the hue of the plaster covering the walls of long gone houses. The photographs you can see here are no more than an attempt to bring that past time into our reality, an endeavor to fathom the sense of the events still alive in our memory – nor only among the witnesses to those days but also with people born decades later. "*The past – is today, only a bit further on*" [sic] – wrote Norwid. The Warsaw Rising 44 is very close by – it just takes a bit of careful looking to realize it."

In addition to the immersion induced by color photographs, physical exhibits in the WRM are meant to be hands-on, immersing the museum-goer in the world of the 1944 Uprising. This engagement with the past further blurs the gap of time between that generation more than 70 years ago and our own. In my time in the museum, I saw eager museum-goers, for instance, grab hold of the machine guns mounted throughout the museum; they could feel the same metal in their hands as the heroic insurgents decades before. Clearly, this kind of human contact with historic artifacts is generally forbidden in museums. Outside the museum, there is even a reconstructed concrete bunker that is designed for tourists to climb into. This little bit of elevation gives one the ability to see over the fences onto the street, viewing contemporary Warsaw quite literally from the vantage point of resistance during the Uprising. This interactive, physical engagement with the historical event lapses the gulf of time that separates us from the past. And the placement of the bunker outside the paid exhibit indicates the blurring of these lines further, including contemporary Warsaw, within a certain distance from the museum, in its heterotopic orbit.

The physical interaction with the WRM goes beyond being able to watch museum staff use a printing press similar to that the Polish resistance used in the 1940s. I found the immersion of the museum-goer most overwhelming in the recreated sewer system downstairs. I followed the tunnel system through a relatively small loop, complete with sound effects of water dripping and rodents scurrying. But the most noteworthy component of this tiny sewer labyrinth is the toe-hold ladder leading to a manhole cover above. A short climb up this ladder and the museum-goer can actually spy on others. It leads, moreover, not to a room where actors, volunteers, or staff know that they may be covertly monitored by museum-goers, but instead to a primary room of the museum. This small part of the museum went unnoticed by most of my colleagues, and most likely by many museum-goers in general. There is no sign above the manhole that mentions that someone may be peering from below. As such, the reconstructed sewer perhaps best demonstrates the conflation of historical episode with contemporary society. In other words, the heterotopia reaches full potency in rooms like this.

What happens to Polish nationalism in spaces such as this? The answer may be in the conscience of the nation itself. In *The Nazi Conscience*, Koonz defines the conscience as what “guides individual choice by providing structures of meaning within which identity is formed” (5). Her study of German society under Nazi rule examines the ways in which the party leadership sowed the ground for widespread complicity with or participation in genocidal projects. Their careful use of propaganda, state control over institutions, and fear-mongering techniques were keys to this creation of an alternate conscience in Germany in the 1930s; what may have conflicted with prior social mores became acceptable in the new society. This analysis opens a new way to think about the transition to Nazism in German society as a historical phenomenon, but from a sociological standpoint, and to a certain degree, it may be reflected in other times and places.

It is easy, on the one hand, to find elements in contemporary Poland that increasingly fit in Koonz's model of "ethnic fundamentalism." For instance, "ethnic fundamentalism merges politics and religion within a crusade to defend values and authentic traditions that appear to be endangered" (274). Poland has placed a Catholic chapel in the WRM; it mentions the Jews as no more than a mere footnote to their national past despite the museum's proximity to the former Warsaw Ghetto, separated by only a couple blocks. Moreover, Koonz writes, "Long after the demise of Nazism, ethnic fundamentalism continues to draw its power from the vision of an exclusive community of 'us,' without 'them.'" Indeed, the WRM is a model of hegemony, a Catholic Poland in resistance against an onslaught of "ancient" enemies.

On the other hand, however, contemporary Polish society is far from Nazism. Occasional harassment of scholars or vocal dissidents aside, the government of Prime Minister Beata Szydło does comparatively little to silence those who defy the state-approved narrative. However, there are signs that Poland is at risk of getting too close to that mirror, of finding itself in that alternate universe of nationalistic paranoia. For instance, the software plugin called "Remember," developed by an advertising agency in Warsaw with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, automatically corrects historically inaccurate phrases—or, "memory errors"—in Microsoft Word: it "searches the text, for the term 'Polish death camp' or 'Polish concentration camp,' highlights it as a mistake and suggests an appropriate historical term" (Auschwitz-Birkenau News).

In this universe, such a software plugin is nothing more than a triviality, useful to perhaps no one. It may be merely a publicity stunt for various agencies in Poland to promote themselves. However, the techniques deployed here are concerning; should they be put to use as a coercive measure or in an authoritarian society, they would indicate mass repression. Ascribing the Nazi death camps to the Poles rather than the German Reich is an error. But the idea that control must be taken to correct this—called 'prevention' in official language—reflects a Polish society that is much too close to the mirror. They are testing the fences of a nationalist utopia, in the country at large, but in the WRM specifically. To a nation founded so firmly these days in anti-totalitarianism of both the Hitlerian and Stalinist varieties, this author would warn: "Don't get too near that leak. You wouldn't want to wind up in the other universe, would you?"

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## **A Present Absence: A Day in Warsaw and Treblinka**

***Professor Kurt Borchard***

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Several Holocaust historians and writers (Pearce 2014, p. 10; Feinstein 2005) have evoked the notion of a “present absence” in attempting to describe something once there but now gone and remembered. Here I specify the relevance of this concept through our 2017 Study Tour’s visitation of sites in Warsaw and Treblinka. The phrase captures a profound disconnect in contemporary Poland, a place where traces of pre-war Jewish life still remain despite the attempted extermination of European Jewry. Such traces, though, belie a profound trauma, one that contemporary residents and tourists alike encounter through objects, spaces, and memories.

The paradoxical nature of the phrase came to mind for me on July 7th, as our group visited Treblinka, the site of approximately eight hundred and fifty thousand murders. The site is far from Warsaw by car, and isolated in the woods. No structures remain of the camp itself. We visit an exhibition space about the camp, contained in just three rooms. There I see few objects, mostly damaged and metal, including small keepsakes of victims such as bracelets and necklaces, as well as everyday items like bowls and spoons. Buttons from clothing lay in glass display cases, now potentially all that is left of someone who once stood and likely died on this land. These are fragments, as are the broken tombstones in another room, where small placards interpret what on them that is still readable. Some of these may have been tombstones that Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, described as being used to pave what the Nazi SS called the “road to heaven” (Lanzmann 1985; Sereny 1974, p. 148). Nazis ordered Jews to use such broken tombstones in paving a path they would ultimately walk to a gas chamber.

I think about fragments, layers, desecration, and murder. I walk alone to the primary site of the camp—as our tour group notes later, nearly all of us in the group separated, experiencing the space individually. James Young, who has studied Holocaust memorial sites and Holocaust memory, called Treblinka “perhaps the most magnificent of all Holocaust memorials” (1993, p. 186). The profundity of the memorial arguably lies in its starkness and minimalism. On my walk through the woods, I hear the sound of bees, the chirping of birds. Large trees cast shadows on the path to the site where the camp stood, hidden in the woods. On the side of the path, I see the evenly spaced concrete beams evoking the railroad tracks once there. I had been teaching for years about how death camps like Treblinka and Sobibor were hidden from view in forests away from large population centers, but I am struck by the height of the trees. I initially see only a few jagged stones with names of key sites from which those who would be murdered had arrived.

Around a corner of the forest, I see a large clearing. In it lies a massive center stone, an obelisk marked with a menorah, ringed by thousands of smaller, jagged stones. Several stones have the

name of a single town or village from where Jews came from. I wander through the granite stones, which Young has noted are “set in concrete to resemble a great, craggy graveyard” (1993, p. 186). I note the names of towns, and that one stone is marked with the name “Janusz Korczak,” the educator who accompanied orphans from a children’s home to their deaths here. I see wreaths and small candles nearby, and candles and smaller stones placed on many of the larger jagged stones.

Treblinka is a difficult site to get to, and far less visited than Auschwitz. The neglect of this site by tourists in favor of Auschwitz, though, belies its importance in understanding the Holocaust. At Auschwitz, the Nazis murdered approximately 1,100,000 people. At Treblinka, a smaller site, they murdered about 850,000 people. At Auschwitz, large portions of the camp buildings remain. At Treblinka, the Nazis razed the buildings, Jews were forced to unearth and burn bodies, and the Nazis replanted the land and built a farm to hide their crimes. At Auschwitz, the government of Poland legally mandated preservation of the site. At Treblinka, if the memorial of stones had not been erected, there would hardly be a trace of what happened there.

Memorials concern not just what is visible at a place, or a statement in stone or metal noting an historical event. Memorials concern the knowledge that a visitor brings to them. At Auschwitz, many placards exist inside and outside of buildings to help explain to visitors the importance of what they are seeing. Official, extensively trained tour guides also inform a visitor’s experience. At Treblinka, the “present absence” for me comes in the form of the few people I have seen on screen discussing the camp, such as the survivors Richard Glazar and Abraham Bomba in the film *Shoah* (1985). The “present absence” also comes in the form of the extensive interviews that historian and journalist Gitta Sereny conducted of Franz Stangl for her 1974 book, *Into That Darkness*, an account of Stangl’s life and experiences as commandant of Treblinka and Sobibor.

For some reason, I think of Stangl the most as I wander the site. I wonder: did he walk on this patch of land? Is it here, by the line of concrete markers symbolizing the train tracks, that he made selections? Is it there that he perhaps smoked a cigarette, surveying waves of people, mostly Jews? Did he think how they would soon be dead?

I think of him when I am in front of what, in camp terms, was called, “the grill,” the place where the bodies of victims that had been exhumed (at times by hand by other victims) were burned in a mass pyre. Hundreds of thousands of bodies reduced to ash, here. The space where the grill stood is now commemorated/symbolized by a large patch of black, lava-like rocks, covering the ground’s surface. I stare at the rocks, my throat dry, hearing the bees. I have told students that although many people learning about the Holocaust try to sympathetically enter the minds of Holocaust victims and reel at what that experience must have been like, it is arguably more important to enter the minds of perpetrators, an imaginative act crucial to understanding how such a place as Treblinka came to exist. The phrase “Never Again,” in different languages near the large center obelisk of the

camp, notes the imperative of acknowledging who died there, but also reminds me to remember the minds and actions of those who created, lived in, and daily reproduced what is now symbolized through thousands of stones.

Later on this same day, we return to Warsaw. We meet with Dr. Lena Bergman, former director of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, who discusses the importance of Ringelblum for the Institute's collection. Ringelblum, a Polish Jewish historian in Warsaw, began recording the history of the Warsaw ghetto in 1940. He realized what was happening to Jews in Warsaw at that time was radically different from anything that had happened before. He led the development of an organization in the ghetto, code named Oyneg Shabes (Joy of Sabbath), dedicated to documenting and collecting artifacts, both physical and textual, so as to create an archive for historians to later write a history. The vast archive brought together many things, including first-person accounts through diaries, and interviews with people who came from elsewhere to the ghetto. Oyneg Shabes collected all they could, even what might seem to be ephemera like restaurant menus and train tickets, preserving specific material documenting the details of everyday life. They placed twenty five thousand items in milk cans and metal boxes, and buried them deep underground. The Institute is now publishing a volume based on the recovered material.

In contemporary life, individuals (and institutions) arguably feel a strong need to document and collect more than ever. The rapid proliferation of material on the Internet testifies to this—there is now more written, photographic, and auditory material accessible by people today than at any point in history. The Ringelblum Archive, though, is everyday material compiled to document an extraordinary event. I think about the importance of documentation in human existence. Through an avalanche of recorded material, it could be easy to forget or ignore the everyday materials of a ghetto that no longer exists. Yet it is there, in documents and physical traces, that a history, and a process of destruction, is alive.

We then move from contemplating Ringelblum and Oyneg Shabes' need to collect and preserve material from the ghetto to considering the contemporary work of Helena Czernek and Aleksander Prugar, our group's next speakers. The couple created Mi Polin, a company dedicated to producing contemporary Judaica from Poland. Their small office, right next door to the Jewish Historical Institute, is many floors up in a tall building.

There the couple discusses arguably their most innovative project, their "Mezuzah From This House" series. They find doorposts from once Jewish homes that held mezuzahs, and make plaster casts of those deep impressions left in the wood. The couple then uses the casts to make new mezuzahs out of bronze, a durable metal that can hold form for a thousand years. Czernek and Prugar note that they have sold several mezuzahs from a particular town or city to families who can trace their family history to the region.

In an article about Mi Polin, journalist Katarzyna Markusz quotes a local museum specialist on the importance of the project:

‘In contrast to synagogues and cemeteries, mezuzah traces are the least visible part of the material legacy of more than 3 million Jews who once lived in Poland,’ said Krzysztof Bielawski, who runs the Virtual Shtetl project at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. ‘Few people are turning attention to them. Helena’s and Alexander’s (sic) design is not only a documentation of the traces, it shows that each mezuzah is linked to the history of specific individuals.’

# # #

At Treblinka, the phrase “Never Again” is physically central in a site marked by craggy stones. I use my knowledge of history and imagination to contemplate what occurred on that land. At the Jewish Historical Institute, everyday material objects from life in the Warsaw Ghetto are featured. I think about how material traces of everyday life and oral testimonies of individuals document the experience of people trapped in, and deported from, the largest ghetto during the Holocaust. Finally, at the office of Mi Polin, I learn of a couple’s efforts to create bronze casts of mezuzahs long removed. I consider how the bronze mezuzahs are a stand-in signifier for Jewish family homes, a religious object holding a prayer that was to keep a family safe from harm. The traumatic process of the Holocaust lies around me in Treblinka and Warsaw, in the form of things and places once connected to people, now connected to their loss.

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## The Duality of Commemorative Spaces

*Megan Maggi*

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Across the vast green space, silent observers are met with the unyielding sounds of nature. Bees buzz and birds chirp, breathing life into the forest amidst a sea of stone. This is Treblinka — a place both alive and dead. Like other sites of memory, Treblinka exemplifies the juxtaposition of life and death; it is an undisturbed natural space swarming with insects and plant life, and it is also a site of mass atrocity, where nearly nine hundred thousand innocents were murdered during the Holocaust. Spaces such as Treblinka exist all throughout Poland — and across the globe. Sites that witnessed the deaths of hundreds of thousands of victims are now blooming with life. Today at the former Płaszów concentration camp, locals ride bikes along a path that runs parallel to a memorial commemorating the deaths at that same site over seventy years ago. It is an inescapable phenomenon that runs throughout Poland's complex historical landscape: people live, work, and play in spaces that served as sites of horror during World War II. This contrast initially seems problematic to the visitor and raises several questions. Are the locals respectful of their grievous history? Are they not entitled to enjoy their own land? Such questions reveal an inherent duality that is present at commemorative spaces — life and death are simultaneously present.

It is important to reconcile the difference between actively seeking the tragic past of a space, and simply living in a space with a tragic past. When choosing to engage with the history of a place like Płaszów, it is almost impossible to view the grounds as anything other than a former concentration camp. But when Płaszów is in one's backyard, why would it not serve as a space for jogging? The presence of both mourners and passersby embodies the duality of many sites of memory within Poland. It is a phenomenon I continuously grappled with throughout my visit. Striking a balance between honoring a troubled history and refraining from judging Polish residents presents one of the many challenges in navigating sites of memory.

To understand the complexity of commemorative sites, it is helpful to consider the spaces, their function, and their reception. The setting, presence of individuals, and intention behind such sites have the capacity to dictate one's perception of the space. Perhaps it is helpful to begin by considering the concept of memory sites. The very phrase "sites of memory" can hold various meanings, but within the field of memory studies, it is closely tied to French historian Pierre Nora. *Lieux de mémoire*, as Nora observes, exist "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7). These sites "are created by a play of history and memory, an interaction of two factors that result in their reciprocal overdetermination" (8). The ways in which history and memory interact are at the forefront of commemorative spaces, be they physical sites, memorials, or institutionalized museums. Following Nora's interpretation of the history-memory relationship, it seems that a tension exists between both entities. Memory, he claims, "is a perpetually actual phenomenon," while history "is

the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). The contentious relationship between history and memory also emphasizes the duality that exists at commemorative spaces. The function of memorials — and their reflection of both history and memory — becomes more complex when contemplating Nora’s ideas.

Several sites resonated strongly with me, most notably because during my visit they reflected an inherent duality of life and death: Treblinka, Auschwitz, Płaszów, and Zbylitowska Góra.

Treblinka, with its vast sea of stones in the quiet of the forest, struck me as one massive juxtaposition. The grounds of the former death camp, the remains of which have been destroyed, exist in the forest as a memorial space. The presence of death is inescapable. In the center stands a tall sculpture where a gas chamber once stood, surrounded by a large field of grass overwhelmed by individual stones, each representing a town from which the hundreds of thousands that were murdered hailed. Yet amidst the heavy history of death, I was caught off guard by the omnipresent sounds of life. As awestruck visitors circle the plot, the sounds of bugs ring in their ears, as if those who were murdered have been given new voices, with no intention of remaining silent. Wildflowers, accents of yellow, purple, and blue interspersed throughout the grass, bring unexpected color and light to the memorial. The wind reverberates through the trees — a reminder that Treblinka lies within the forest, a place synonymous with natural life. The coexisting symbols of life and death at the site exemplify the duality present at commemorative spaces.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, though vastly different from Treblinka, also exhibits a juxtaposition of life and death. Both the remains of the death camp and the reconstruction symbolize death, reminding the visitor of the more than one million victims who were murdered on its grounds. The camp’s iconic images such as the “Arbeit Macht Frei” sign and the barbed wire fences — both of which are reconstructed — are so embedded in popular memory, actually *seeing* them feels surreal. Yet despite the overwhelming presence of death, Auschwitz on an average day is swarming with life. In 2016, more than two million people visited the site, a statistic which is easy to believe upon visiting. The presence of tour groups fills the grounds of the museum and memorial, and the stairs of the pavilions are sunken in from the steps of wide-eyed visitors. During visiting hours, the space never seems to be silent. In contrast, at the grounds of Treblinka, silence can be inescapable, and the visitor is left only with the sounds of nature. Treblinka attracts far less yearly visitors in part because of its location — in the forest, nearly two hours from Warsaw — and in part due to its lack of “things to see.” Though both spaces are overwhelmed by differing forms of natural life, the juxtaposition of life and death at Auschwitz and Treblinka can be jarring.

The infamous sites at Auschwitz are part of its “appeal,” whereas the lack of physical sites related to the death camp at Treblinka make it a less common tourist attraction. Auschwitz lives in society’s subconscious, in what French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory.” Halbwachs observed that “it is in society that people acquire their memories,” and

essentially, the most predominant forces in society are responsible for shaping public memory (38). Auschwitz has appeared in numerous films, books, and aspects of popular culture associated with World War II; it is a name synonymous with the Holocaust. Treblinka does not carry as much name recognition, and the destruction of its facilities by the German army in 1944 inhibited the preservation of any iconic sites associated with the camp.

In some ways, the contrast between Treblinka and Auschwitz exemplify the complications of Pierre Nora's history-memory relationship. Treblinka's destruction sets the site apart from the remnants of facilities like Auschwitz, which have retained some original features, though much of the site is reconstructed. Auschwitz, then, fits in with Nora's interpretation of history, "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer," and "a representation of the past" rather than "a perpetually actual phenomenon." (Nora 8). Treblinka, through its lack of reconstructed sites is more closely aligned with Nora's definition of memory. Visitors, upon entering, are encouraged to view the space in its present state, using their imagination to conjure images of the past. Treblinka embodies Nora's concept of "memory" by "taking root in the concrete" and existing within the space itself rather than a reconstruction. Conversely, Auschwitz's facilities exist more as a representation of the past (Nora 9-10). Both sites, in addition to containing their own internal dualities of life and death, also juxtapose each other when considering their respective representations of history and memory.

These dualities — of life and death, of history and memory — exist at Holocaust sites within Poland other than former death camps. Two sites in which I was surprised and disturbed by the presence of both life and death were at the grounds of Płaszów, a former concentration camp, and Zbylitowska Góra, the site of a mass grave. Płaszów, like Treblinka, contains no remains from the original camp, and is instead a vast open space with memorials interspersed throughout the grounds. However, unlike Treblinka, the space exists near residential areas and contains paths that enable locals to utilize the land for leisure activities.

Upon entering the grounds of Płaszów, a sign greeting the visitors in both Polish and English reads, "Dear Visitors! You are entering the site of the former Nazi German Concentration Camp 'Płaszów.' Please be respectful of the grievous history of the site." Initially I was pleased with the language used, at least in the English translation, as it aptly instructs and reminds those entering to do so with a certain decorum. And while I did not witness outright disrespectful behavior, I was caught off-guard by the actions of the locals.

While searching for the central memorial, a few Fellows and I encountered locals riding bikes along a path running through the grounds. The resident Polish speaker of our group inquired where the central memorial was located. The locals briefly conversed with each other, and looking a bit puzzled, pointed to the left. We thanked them, continuing our separate ways. After that

encounter, I could not help but think — how is a resident of the area unsure of where the central memorial is located? It demonstrated that the space was more than the grounds of a former concentration camp to Poles. Płaszów, only about thirty minutes via public transportation from Kraków, is, for some, the most convenient open space to go for a nature walk or ride a bike. As a student visiting the site to engage with its grievous history, it initially seemed impossible to think that these grounds existed for anything else.

As we made our way toward the central memorial, we saw other groups approaching the smaller commemorative stones and paying their respects. Within the same breath, we also witnessed more locals riding bikes, jogging, and playing with their dogs. It is a strange phenomenon, to read the words “commemorating the deaths at the hands of Hitlerites” on a memorial, and seconds later make room for joggers crossing your path. Initially, I was stupefied.

I reminded myself not to be so critical. I live in Washington, D.C., our nation’s capital, surrounded by war memorials along which I have gone jogging. Is that the same? I tried to draw parallels to sites of memory in American history, reminding myself that each nation has their own troubled past with which to cope. And while, in my opinion, there is nothing inherently disrespectful about using the grounds of Płaszów for leisure activities, it felt off-putting. Again, it reflects the duality of sites of memory; throughout the space of a former concentration camp, a place associated with death, there exist various forms of natural life. Insects, trees, and plants thrive in the lush green spaces, while people jog, bike, and perform daily tasks in a suburban setting minutes from central Kraków.

But stranger than the behavior I noticed at Płaszów was the encounter my group and I witnessed at Zbylitowska Góra, a mass grave memorializing roughly ten thousand individuals murdered at the hands of the Nazis. Upon entering the space, we observed the central memorial and began walking the grounds, circling the smaller commemorative stones, including a space dedicated solely to the children killed in the forest. A small group of teenagers sat in the center of the memorial behaving like...teenagers. In the midst of a mass grave, two young girls and a boy were conversing, joking, and glancing in the direction of my group disapprovingly. Their behavior was not overwhelming until the boy rode his dirt bike over a hill, riding directly on top of the graves in what was a clear show of masculinity to impress the girls. The contrast of visitors attempting to show respect, and the perceived blatant disrespect left us quietly unsettled.

It is hard to convey the awkward tension amongst my group as we internally grappled with what we had just witnessed. While trying to honor the grievous history of the site, we were reminded that we were merely visitors. These teenagers live in the neighborhood surrounding Zbylitowska Góra — they are not asking to engage with this dark history, but rather are forced to encounter it everyday. There is a level of desensitization that occurs when a cemetery lies near one’s home,



which does not necessarily excuse their behavior, but rather explains it. Their actions were, perhaps, the duality of commemorative spaces in its most dramatic form. Within a mass grave, literally surrounded by death, there are local teenagers coming of age. I will never forget the encounter at Zbylitowska Góra, as it was the most powerful form of juxtaposition I witnessed in Poland.

It is difficult to grapple with the ways in which locals interact with the historic sites near their homes. Perhaps the best way is through empathetic comparisons — considering the spaces nearest to one's own home, or well-traveled locations in which atrocities have occurred. For example, the beaches on the northern coast of France's shoreline in Normandy are popular vacation destinations, but they are also the site of atrocity for more than ten thousand Allied soldiers who lost their lives in the fight to liberate France. Is it wrong for visitors to vacation near spaces such as Omaha Beach? At the same time, were these shores not liberated so that citizens would have the freedom to enjoy them? The Battle for Normandy is vastly different from the genocide that occurred during the Holocaust, but Normandy is a site of atrocity nonetheless. Perhaps there is no one answer to these questions, and these sites are not mutually exclusive. Normandy is a vacation destination *and* a site of atrocity. Płaszów is a space for locals to ride bikes *and* a site of atrocity.

Sites of memory are as complex as they are significant in the context of historical remembrance. Spaces in which atrocities have occurred are marred by not only personal trauma and memory, but also by the politicization of collective memory at the national or even global level. The ways in which locals, visitors, and observers interact within these places are arguably as important as the space itself; such interactions heavily shape the environment in which the events are memorialized. Commemorative spaces shape public or "collective memory," and have the capacity to alter how the histories of these places are remembered. One piece of advice from my experience which has continually proved true comes to mind: it is always more complicated than it seems.

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## Expressing the Inexpressible: Marian Kołodziej and Artistic Representation of the Holocaust

*Jennifer Lauren Popowycz*

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Marion Kołodziej was one of the first prisoners of Auschwitz. At the age of seventeen, encouraged by his village priest, Kołodziej joined the Polish resistance following the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Poland in September 1939. However, he was soon captured by the Nazis, and arrived, on June 14, 1940, with the first transport of prisoners in Auschwitz, where he spent the next five years of his life. Like many Holocaust survivors, Kołodziej chose not to speak about his experiences for several decades. It was only during a rehabilitation session following a stroke in 1993 that Kołodziej began to speak about the Holocaust through his drawings. His testimony started slowly, with only a few pieces, but they gradually increased in number, and eventually he chose to have them permanently displayed in the basement of the St. Maximilian Kolbe Center in Harmęże, Poland, located only about five miles from Auschwitz. In his own words, Kołodziej states, “This is not an exhibit, nor images, but words contained in designs. It is a rendering to all those who have vanished in ashes” (*Labyrinth*).

The topic of survivor artwork has been a slowly growing field since Holocaust scholars began incorporating cultural and visual evidence into their research in the 1990s. However, such scholarship tends to focus solely on art created in the camps, emphasizing the relationship between historical conditions and the artists’ creative intentions, the availability and access to materials, and the styles and subjects artists chose to represent (Blatter and Milton). Scholars who have written about postwar visual representations of the Holocaust have either focused on artistic representations in general, incorporating paintings and drawings into studies of other types of artistic representation such as literature and film, or have concentrated their research on artwork created by children of Holocaust survivors.<sup>1</sup> Art historians have also addressed the topic of survivor artwork created after 1945, but are skeptical about the documentary validity of Holocaust art, especially art

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<sup>1</sup> On literature Michael G. Levine, *The Belated Witness: Literature, Testimony, and the Question of Holocaust Survival*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Jeremy D. Popkin, “Holocaust Memories, Historians’ Memoirs: First Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust,” *History and Memory* 15 no. 1 (2003): pp. 49–84; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “The Holocaust and the Shift in Boundaries of Art and History,” *History and Memory* 1, no. 2 (1989): pp. 77–97. For general studies focusing on different types of Holocaust art see Henry W. Pickford, *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analysis of Holocaust Art*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013; Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Peter M. Daly, Karl Filser, Alian Goldschlager, and Naomi Kramer, eds., *Building History: The Shoah in Art, Memory, and Myth*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) and Randolph L. Braham, ed., *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). On second generation artists see Shelley Hornstein, Laura Levitt, and Laurence J. Silberstein, eds., *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003) and Matthew Baigel, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

that exhibits high artistic quality “as though the artistic, in emphasizing aesthetic considerations, would have automatically distorted the factual accuracy of their subject matter” (Blatter 21).<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to fill the gap in the historiographical literature on Holocaust survivor art, this paper will look closely at Marian Kołodziej’s collection of drawings in order to provide insight into the issues, challenges, and values of incorporating postwar survivor artwork in Holocaust studies. Kołodziej’s artwork demonstrates that there are similarities and differences between written, oral, and visual survivor testimonies, and that survivor art not only adds to the diversity of source material for Holocaust scholars, but is an alternate way of narrating the past, providing another layer of understanding, while also opening up new questions and areas of research.

Janet Blatter, an art historian who was once the curator of the Montreal Memorial Holocaust Centre, explains that postwar artists who create visual representations of the Holocaust later in life are more inclined to depict scenes of destruction with broken bodies, screaming victims, and mutilated corpses. They also tend to incorporate familiar Holocaust symbols such as barbed wire fences, concentration camp numbers, and train tracks. She argues that these types of visual representations, heavily reliant on grotesque distortions, stem from the fact that many survivors who create artistic representations of their experience are unable to speak about the Holocaust. They, therefore, purposely express the horror of mass murder and constant death in images that will shock viewers (Blatter and Milton 35).

Marian Kołodziej’s collection unquestionably fits into Blatter’s characterization of postwar survivor art. In the documentary film, *Labyrinth: The Testimony of Marian Kołodziej*, which pans through Kołodziej’s collection as he narrates his testimony, Kołodziej states that his motivations stem from his inability to find appropriate language to describe such an unimaginable and horrendous experience. He also describes his work as a moral obligation to provide testimony while paying homage to those who were murdered alongside of him, and hopes that his work might help prevent such an event from reoccurring. He asserts, “These are my rock engravings, my cave drawings made for those who come in the future, as evidence of bestiality in the twentieth century, but also an attempt to save ones humanity...my labyrinth is an homage paid to my fellow inmates burnt to ashes, but they have remained with me forever” (*Labyrinth*).

The first thing one sees before entering the basement where Kołodziej’s collection is displayed is a large, shattered, glass window, symbolizing both the artist’s broken life and the catastrophic destruction of humanity that occurred during the Holocaust. A small door to the right and a dark, narrow hallway provide the entrance to the display. Upon entry, the viewer is immediately confronted with thousands of skeletal, corpse-like bodies, mythical and biblical monsters, apocalyptic scenes, and images of hell. Most of Kołodziej’s pieces have been created on large

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<sup>2</sup> For an art historian perspective, see Nelly Toll, *When Memory Speaks, The Holocaust in Art*, (New York: Praeger, 1998).

boards, painted white, and drawn with both pencil and black ink. The exhibition itself is congested, with many pieces hung closely next to one another, some propped up on the ground, and others hanging from the ceiling, which creates the effect that each drawing seamlessly moves into the next.

One of the most prominent images in Kołodziej's work is the repeated use of skeletal figures, which are present in nearly all of his drawings. By consistently using hundreds of withering and decaying bodies, he is able not only to illustrate the insufferable physical aspects of being imprisoned in Auschwitz, but it also allows him to subtly differentiate between living and dead prisoners. The fine line between life and death in the camps is a discernible theme in Kołodziej's collection, and one of the ways in which he illustrates this is through the eyes of the prisoners in his drawings. Those that are alive have their eyes drawn in detail, usually represented larger than proportionally normal and full of fear, whereas dead bodies have blank spaces where the eyes should be located. At times, the viewer is able to determine which figures are alive due to the scene in which they are portrayed, but in other instances the viewer has to look closely at the eyes of each individual to see if the artist is portraying someone who is dead or alive.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to other postwar survivor artists, Kołodziej also uses familiar Holocaust iconography in his depictions of mass death. One of Kołodziej's first jobs in Auschwitz was taking corpses to the crematorium or, in many cases, when the crematorium was not burning bodies fast enough, tossing the corpses onto a large pile of dead bodies. As a result, piles of bodies, smoke, and a black sun surrounded by a barbed wire halo, feature prominently in his drawings. In several pieces, the viewer is confronted with bodies seamlessly transforming into smoke. While in some pieces the transformation of bodies into smoke is the main focus of the drawing, in others the image appears in the background as a constant reminder that despite what may have been happening in the camp at the time, the constant mass murder of innocent individuals and the anonymity of death was always on his mind.

Kołodziej's artwork not only has commonalities with other postwar survivor artists, but with written and oral testimonies as well. Immediately one can recognize familiar themes that are present in many survivor testimonies such as suffering and dehumanization, the loss of individuality, and persistent hunger and starvation. Kołodziej illustrates the barbarity and depravity in the camps in several ways, including scenes of brutal suffering, images of large *Kapos* towering over prisoners, and drawing specific horrific memories he has of the camp. In the documentary, Kołodziej describes one piece depicting a skeleton orchestra on the parade ground with dancing prisoners and threatening guards. He explains, "the orchestra was like death," since the prisoners were forced to march to the beat of the music, "which was sometimes difficult or impossible especially after work,

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of Marian's artwork, see "Marian's Artwork," *The Labyrinth: The Testimony of Marian Kołodziej*, <http://thelabyrinthdocumentary.com/gallery/marians-artwork.html>, (accessed August 23, 2017).

or when we were beaten with rifle butts...we did not listen to the melody, but only tried to march to the beat, fully aware that within five minutes we could be dead" (*Labyrinth*). The fear of death comes across in this drawing as the marching prisoners are depicted with open, screaming mouths, watching as those who fall out of line succumb to death.

In several drawings, Kołodziej uses the image of a bowl to represent persistent hunger and the thin line between life and death in the camp. He explains that a prisoner's bowl was not only a vessel for holding one's food, but also a container for clean rain water and melted snow, a coffee mug, a wash basin, a toilet, and a pillow at night. "So, the importance of possessing a bowl cannot possibly be exaggerated. Whoever lost his bowl basically lost his life. Bowls were precious" (*Labyrinth*). In one drawing where Kołodziej depicts himself and two other prisoners as *Muselmänner* the bowl holds a central significance. All three men are holding the bowl in order to illustrate a time in the camp when Kołodziej was "so close to becoming a zombie" that he thought he was going to drop his bowl, and consequently, lose his food (*Labyrinth*). However, his friends helped him hold onto the bowl since they knew if he dropped his bowl, imminent death would follow. Bowls also appear in other drawings in different ways: symbolizing hunger where prisoners are lining up with their bowls to receive their meager food ration for the day, representing death and starvation when prisoners drop or lose their bowls, and illustrating the dehumanization prisoners faced in scenes of guards laughing as they purposely splash soup out of the prisoners' bowls.

There are not only similarities between the iconography and themes present in Kołodziej's collection and other forms of survivor testimony, but also familiar challenges concerning the best ways to incorporate survivor testimony into Holocaust studies. Issues associated with the relationship between history and memory have been a topic of debate among Holocaust scholars for decades, raising questions about whether the Holocaust can and should be represented decades after the fact, the relationship between individual and collective memory, and how the passage of time affects the ways in which survivors represent the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> In artistic representations of the Holocaust, whether in literature, film, or artwork, the conflict between the imaginative or fictive aspects artists chose to include for dramatic effect and actual historical events further complicate the issues involving history and memory (Ezrahi, 87).

Kołodziej himself does not deny that since he did not talk about the Holocaust for over fifty years, he does not remember all aspects of his experience in Auschwitz. He states that his drawings are "snapshots of [his] memory," of "deeply carved wounds," that remained with him throughout his life (*Labyrinth*). Literature scholar Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi argues that although the gap between

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<sup>4</sup> See Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews,* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985); Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis,* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001).

“information and knowledge is never fully bridged” in artistic representations of the Holocaust, “art is not really a measure of the degree of historicity but of the operation that makes sense in history” (Ezrahi, 90). Although Kołodziej affirms, “I certainly don’t want to be wiser in my drawing than I was then,” and tries to retain his “youthful naivety” when recreating specific traumatic events, historical accuracy should not be the focus of his collection (*Labyrinth*). Instead, his art tells us more about the mental and psychological impact the Holocaust had on him and other survivors.

Despite the similarities in Kołodziej’s artwork, other postwar survivors, and other forms of survivor testimony, his visual representation of the Holocaust is unique in several respects. First, Kołodziej’s artwork was created over fifty years after his internment in Auschwitz, and only after the artist had suffered a stroke. Returning to a suppressed psychological trauma after a near-death experience and using artwork as a rehabilitation mechanism comes through in Kołodziej’s artwork as there is a strong focus on the relationship between his prewar, prisoner, and old age self. In his collection of drawings he distinguishes between himself before he was imprisoned, a proportional human figure with hair; his prisoner self, either represented by wearing striped clothes, or a skeletal figure, usually hunched over, with his prisoner number tattooed somewhere on his body; and his postwar self in old age, with a balding head and beard. He explains in the documentary that when he entered Auschwitz he was a teenage boy, completely inexperienced in life, and tried to protect himself with the “boy scout ideals” he had grown up with. In his drawings, he often juxtaposes his prewar self with his old age self, symbolizing his effort to come to terms with the pieces of himself that were lost inside the camp and to try and “put in order and preserve only what survived with me; only what I managed to save and what is now in me” (*Labyrinth*). For example, in one drawing Kołodziej depicts himself, in old age, drawing a piece in his collection while his prisoner self stands behind him, holding his hands, helping draw a group of skeletal bodies and prisoner camp numbers. It is as if Kołodziej’s prisoner self, who endured significant trauma during the Holocaust, carries Kołodziej’s old age self through the psychological trauma of a near-death experience, giving him emotional and physical strength while also helping him to remember and come to terms with both traumas. The result is a window into the psychological wounds Holocaust victims carry with them throughout their lives.

Secondly, Kołodziej was a Catholic political prisoner in Auschwitz and chose to have his installation housed in the basement of the St. Maximilian Kolbe Center in Harmęże, Poland, located near Auschwitz. The fact that Kołodziej was a Catholic political prisoner adds to the diversity of Holocaust survivor testimonies and, as a result, he employs additional iconography in his artwork that is not found in Jewish representations of the Holocaust. At the end of the narrow hallway that leads to the installation, the viewer is confronted with a semi-circle of eight large drawings of chaos, suffering, human degradation, and mass death. One enormous drawing depicting the apocalypse hangs above the semi-circle, and one drawing, framed by broken glass, rests on the floor. The drawing on the floor highlights a mechanical balance scale, symbolizing the

last judgment, with a verse from the Book of Revelations placed in front of it stating, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

Themes of the apocalypse and the last judgment figure prominently in Kołodziej’s designs. One way that Kołodziej represents the last judgment is through the repeated use of mechanical balance scales, which he calls the “weights of justice” (*Labyrinth*). One drawing shows a couple prisoners hunched over a makeshift scale, weighing bread. Kołodziej explains the scene stating,

“Many hands grabbed their share of the bread ration as it was distributed from the kitchen *Kapo* and company, the barrack boss with his court, the room supervisor, and his pals. It was only at the end that we the prisoners got the remnants, and with our primitive scales made out of a stick we weighted the remaining pieces. Then we divided up those crumbs so that everyone received an equal share. That was our internal justice” (*Labyrinth*).

Although this seems to be the initial source of the scale, Kołodziej uses the scale as a symbol of justice and injustice throughout the collection. Toward the end of the exhibition, there is a multimedia sculpture of the same mechanical balance scale, and Kołodziej implores viewers, “before making a decision, or actually doing something, to weigh it carefully, and to act after only thinking things over. We can never be sure how we might harm other people by our deeds so mind the scales” (*Labyrinth*).

Other Christian imagery is also paramount in Kołodziej’s work, including Christ’s crown of thorns, images of a suffering Christ dying on the cross, and representations of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, who unselfishly took the place of a man chosen for death after an inmate escaped. Kolbe and nine other men were held in a starvation cell with no food or water, and it is said that Kolbe prayed with the other men, heard their confessions, and survived in the cell for three weeks before a guard injected him with carbolic acid. Although it is unclear whether Kołodziej personally knew Kolbe, his actions had a profound affect on Kołodziej, who states, “For me the only true man in the camp was Father Maximilian Kolbe” (*Labyrinth*). Consequently Kolbe is repeatedly represented in the artist’s drawings either carrying Kołodziej, who is clearly identified by his camp number, or looking down on Kołodziej while he is in the camp.

Kołodziej’s collection also poses its own unique problems. The location of the collection poses important challenges to those wishing to view Kołodziej’s work as well as for Holocaust scholars. The artist’s religious affiliation and the geographical space both have an effect on how the artwork is preserved, presented, and shown to viewers. In order to view Kołodziej’s collection, one must take a guided tour of the exhibition with a priest from the St. Maximilian Kolbe Center. Inside of the exhibition, there are very few words framing the visual representations. While some of the

drawings contain a short title displayed underneath the piece, most do not, and there are no informational placards or dates describing when each piece was created, making the viewer entirely reliant on the information provided by the guide. This proves problematic since different guides give tours of the collection and it is unclear whether they explain the same drawings, point out different features, or focus on the same themes present in Kołodziej's work.

Nonetheless, the religious affiliation of the guides is undeniable. The best example comes from the ways in which our guide chose to emphasize drawings with prominent Christian symbols, maintaining that Kołodziej's Christian faith gave him the strength to endure and survive his imprisonment in Auschwitz. For example, during our tour, our guide maintained that Kołodziej's admiration for Kolbe and the prominence of Kolbe in Kołodziej's work stemmed from Kolbe's unwavering religious conviction. However, in his documentary testimony Kołodziej states that "we may talk about his [Kolbe's] religion but it doesn't matter here. He proved to be a man and that is the only thing that really counts...this man decided to give up his life in exchange for the life of a man he didn't know. None of us would have been able to do something like that" (*Labyrinth*).

Our guide also emphasized scenes where Christ is holding Kołodziej or where Kołodziej depicts himself as Christ affirming that this meant that the artist felt Christ with him in the camp. However, this is also contradictory to Kołodziej's own testimony in which he states, "There was no religion in the camp" (*Labyrinth*). Both of these examples demonstrate that the geographical spaces in which artistic representations are displayed must be taken into consideration when analyzing collections or displays of artistic representations of the Holocaust.

Despite the challenges that Kołodziej's collection may present, in many ways his artwork provides an additional perspective on the Holocaust experience. Although it is unclear to what extent Kołodziej's religion factored into how he came to terms with his imprisonment in Auschwitz, the role it played in his postwar life, or its function in his artwork, his testimony adds diversity to the sources available to Holocaust scholars. His testimony not only provides a Catholic view of the Holocaust, but it also challenges normative representations of camp life in Auschwitz. For example, Kołodziej focuses on the uniformity of the camp experience and there are only two drawings in the online gallery that depict Jewish symbols. His choice not to distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners suggests an equality of human experience in camp life and in death. Kołodziej also pays close attention to camaraderie within the camps instead of animalistic survivor tendencies that set prisoners against one another. This is seen in the drawing of his friends helping him hold his bowl, the scene in which his fellow prisoners share crumbs of bread equally, and in one drawing where Kołodziej finds and carries an old friend from school straight to the crematorium instead of having him thrown on an anonymous pile of corpses. These new insights also open up new questions and potential areas of research including on relationships between prisoners, whether Jewish or non-Jewish; the role religion played in Christian prisoners' experiences in the camps; the impact psychological trauma and PTSD have concerning how survivors deal with the Holocaust,



and the impact it may have on how they chose to represent their experience; as well as on the correlation between artistic representations and geography of space in which they are displaced.

Some Holocaust scholars have questioned whether imaginative art can represent or profoundly illuminate the meanings of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> Kołodziej's artwork demonstrates that even though there are similarities between written, oral, and visual survivor testimonies, survivor art not only adds to the diversity of source material for Holocaust scholars, but is an alternate way of narrating the past, providing another layer of understanding, while also opening up new questions and areas of research. Primo Levi, the Italian writer who survived Auschwitz, famously wrote about the Holocaust, "our language lacks the words to express this experience" (Levi 18). In a way, visual and artistic representations of the Holocaust do just that; provide another language for understanding the Holocaust such that they "raise our awareness of particular qualities that make the image function differently than the written documents on which historians traditionally rely" (Farmer 115). According to the art historian Irving Howe, art "restores to us the terrible truth – without glib catchwords, without reductive phrases – of what it has meant to live through the Holocaust" (Howe 11). Viewing visual representations of the Holocaust requires the use of sight, which is a powerful sense that can allow the viewer to glimpse, although momentarily, into another universe. In this case, a universe that is unique in its horrors and beyond comprehension.

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<sup>5</sup> See Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) and Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

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## Material Culture and Memory: Objects from the Holocaust in Poland

*Ashley Valanzola*

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On July 12, 2017, our group of Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows exited the conservation lab at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (henceforth ABMM). The sun was shining and the weather mild, a beautiful day that contrasted with the presentation we just heard. During our visit to the lab, we spent an hour learning how the museum conservation staff preserves artifacts. A quarter of the presentation focused on recent work to photograph and catalogue toothbrushes. It was remarkable to learn about how the conservationists preserve them, the sheer number of these items in their collection, and the uniquely rapid decay rate of the brushes. As we left the presentation, the personal nature of the toothbrushes struck me. To a colleague walking close by, I remarked how incredible it was the ABMM kept these objects, and that the conservationists worked tirelessly to preserve them. Each toothbrush tells us about the individuals who were at Auschwitz, for example: how old they were, their socio-economic backgrounds, and their decision to bring a toothbrush to the camp. Skeptical of my enthusiasm and the importance I seemed to place on a toothbrush, we engaged in a discussion over the significance of objects related to the Holocaust.

Many of the items we acquire during our lifetime outlive us long after we are gone. The physical property of Holocaust victims, which includes everyday objects such as toothbrushes, purses, spoons, and candlesticks, is present in museums and towns across Poland. These belongings are known as material culture, or the class of all human-made objects as defined by historian Leora Auslander (1015). As historical sources, the property of Jews who perished in the Holocaust tells us about their individual lives before the war, as well as their experiences until their deaths. The same is true for Holocaust survivors whose belongings were never returned. Material culture also has the potential to generate memories of the past for people who view these objects in the present. Two encounters on the Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC) trip—one in the town of Chmielnik, the other at the ABMM, reveal the complexity of Holocaust-related objects in Poland.

During a day trip to five different areas of Poland, one of our stops was the small town of Chmielnik. In prewar Poland, Chmielnik's Jews made up the majority of residents in the town, and they were prominent in local trade and craftsmanship. All written accounts show that Chmielnik was about 80 percent Jewish. There were 6,602 Jews out of a total population of 8,440 inhabitants in 1897. By 1939, the town's Jewish population had increased to 10,275 people out of 12,500 total residents (Maciag 85, Newman 2).

Accounts of prewar Chmielnik offer contrasting stories about everyday Jewish life in the town. Even though Jews constituted the majority of Chmielnik's inhabitants, several accounts emphasize

the blatant anti-Semitism and discrimination they faced. In a history about the Garfinkel family and other Chmielnik Jews, author Suzan Hagstrom writes that Jews were second-class citizens, unable to hold government positions, teach in public schools, or work for the railroad companies (21). Regina Garfinkel recalled constant bullying at school because she was Jewish, and her brother Nathan was frequently involved in fights with other students who mocked his Jewish heritage. Depending on where a family lived and their socio-economic status, the level of anti-Semitism they experienced varied. Hagstrom interviewed several other Chmielnik Jews who stressed the tranquility of a town that revolved around the Jewish holidays and Shabbat. David Newman's memoir of prewar Chmielnik similarly discusses a flourishing Jewish community.

Education, culture, and politics played a prominent role in the life of many Chmielnik Jews. In Newman's memoir, he recounts how his father began work as a Yiddish language and general music teacher in 1919 (3). He organized theatre productions in Hebrew and Yiddish, which contributed to the reputation of Chmielnik as a center for theatre-goers. Local Jewish involvement in political and economic life was also strong; Poalei Zion exerted significant influence throughout the prewar years. Contrary to the work discrimination Hagstrom mentions, Newman explains that "because of the Jewish majority, small trade law was in Jewish hands, so that when the stores were closed on Shabbes and yom tovim holidays [*sic*], one got the impression that the population of Chmielnik was 100 per cent Jewish" (2). While life before World War II fluctuated between blatant and subtle anti-Semitism, after the German invasion and occupation of Poland, the Germans destroyed Jewish life in Chmielnik.

On September 14, 1939, German soldiers entered and occupied Chmielnik. Shortly after their arrival, they banned Jewish children from attending schools, closed Jewish businesses, and seized bank accounts (Hagstrom 50-52). The theft and forced sale of property accompanied official anti-Jewish decrees and daily violence on the streets. Not long after the initial decrees were in place, the Germans established a ghetto in Chmielnik where they forced Jews to move. As conditions in Chmielnik worsened, the Germans sent many Jews to forced labor camps and deported others incapable of work to Treblinka. While a few Jews returned immediately after the war, today, no Jews remain in Chmielnik. Knowing about the background of Chmielnik's Jewish community helped me understand the places we visited in town.

Our main destination in Chmielnik was the newly restored synagogue, but first a local man showed us the mikveh (Jewish ritual bath) he discovered while doing construction on what used to be an Egyptian-themed night club (images 1 and 2). According to *The Story of Jewish Chmielnik* by Marek Maciągowski and Piotr Krawczyk, in pre-war Chmielnik a man named Szmul Mappa leased many of the ritual baths in town, which possibly included the one we saw (82). The first fully excavated section of the mikveh contained the main ritual bath and smaller areas on the side for cleaning objects. In another room behind the main bath, we saw a near-empty room with several

columns and with, what looked like, a small circular well. On one side of the room, there was an opening in the wall that the man claimed led to a vast underground tunnel that he was in the process of uncovering. After visiting the mikveh, the man had more to show us from his excavation. He met us in front of the rebuilt synagogue where he waited next to the trunk of his black luxury sedan. A young man and woman, who we assumed were the man's relatives, stood alongside him. With the trunk of his car open, the man began to take out bags and buckets filled with objects he found in the mikveh.

The first two objects he pulled out of his car were a stone with the name "Klepacki" on it and a street sign that read "Berka Joselewicza." Klepacki could be the last name of the family who lived there, or the name of a family-owned raw material business, similar to the one that operates in the city of Lublin today. The street sign designated one of the main streets of Jewish Chmielnik, a common street name still found in other parts of Poland, including in the Jewish district of Kazimierz. Next, he took out a blue plastic bucket filled with objects such as the base and stem of a candlestick, both heavily eroded. At the bottom of the bucket, there were several smaller pieces with the same level of corrosion. For many of us, the contents of the man's blue bucket spoke to the personal nature of the objects in ways the street sign and block did not.

After seeing the sign, stone, and candlesticks, we had no idea what he was about to pull out of an ordinary looking plastic shopping bag. He emptied the contents of the bag out onto the stone ground and revealed about a dozen spoons and four forks of all sizes and corrosion levels. Compared to the candlesticks, the cutlery was in relatively good condition. It seems possible he polished the silverware after excavating it from the mikveh. After the forks and spoons, he brought out a woman's black, medium-size purse with two small straps and a gold buckle. Inside the purse, he kept a small, transparent plastic bag that contained a Jewish prayer book.

He slid the book out of the plastic covering for us to get a closer look. Parts of the book were covered in mud, the binding was broken in several sections, and there were water spots along the book's edges. He allowed a few of us to handle the book and skim the pages (image 3). While we looked through the book, he pointed out the writing on the bottom of the first page, which was in a language he was unable to read. The young man with him asked the group if anyone could understand the typed and handwritten words in the book. Both the writing and typeface were in Hebrew, and, fortunately, someone from our group could read it. As one of the fellows examined the prayer book, these two men asked him again if he could find the name of the book's owner. They wanted to learn about the family that owned the book, and possibly find out if there were any living descendants. While many of us disagreed with the mikveh owner's reluctance to call in professional archaeologists to study the mikveh and the objects, he nevertheless took pride in the way he cared for the site and artifacts. Without the discovery this man made, he would never have begun an investigation into Chmielnik's Jewish past. About two and a half hours from Chmielnik

at the ABMM, there is a drastic difference in how the conservation team works with material culture.

At the ABMM, conservationists work to preserve millions of artifacts left behind by victims of the Holocaust. As opposed to the objects that remain in Chmielnik, the Jews deported by the Germans to Auschwitz made a conscious choice about what few items they needed to take with them. The Museum conservationists make an effort to preserve as many artifacts as they can with the goal to learn information about the object's owner. Unfortunately, there are cases when an object's rate of decay is faster than the speed at which the conservationists can work. In these circumstances, museum staff makes decisions about which objects they intend to preserve, knowing that this will result in the complete decay of other objects in the future.

Individuality is a constant theme for the conservationists at the museum. On the ABMM's website under the section that discusses the preservation of children's shoes, the site states that although the objects are part of mass displays, the museum's intention is to preserve the authenticity and individuality of each object. "The examination of a single shoe reveals the story of an individual human being. In the case of the shoes that underwent conservation, these are the stories of children" (Preservation *Auschwitz.org*). While many people criticize the mass display approach of the museum, their guiding philosophy of conservation emphasizes individuality. Each item represents one life.

In addition to recognizing the personal nature of each item, the museum maintains objects for scholarly research. Conservationists preserve SS documents created at the camp for another project on the SS-Hygiene Institute Archival Collections. These documents tell us about the intentions of the perpetrators, and they reveal information about what prisoners at the camp endured. As part of the preservation process, conservationists create a digital record of each item for use in detailed historical studies. Digital documentation of the objects at the ABMM is not just a process unique to the SS-Hygiene Institute Archives; museum staff records all other objects similarly (Projects *Auschwitz.org*). As we learned about the work of the ABMM and their team of professional conservationists, many AJC fellows, including myself, recognized the importance of their preservation and documentation for our research.

Our group of fellows spent July 10-12 at the ABMM, and on the third day, we toured the conservation labs on the periphery of Auschwitz I. During our tour of the conservation areas, we walked through the chemical laboratory, photography studio, metal conservation room, and finally a larger conjoining room where conservationists work on texts and other items. The toothbrushes were in one of the last rooms where conservationists packaged them carefully in multi-layer storage containers. Looking into one of the containers, we saw several toothbrushes in the late stages of decay. Instead of the shape of a normal sized toothbrush, we observed small pieces no larger than

beads. The ABMM's conservation department decided the toothbrushes would not undergo further preservation. With so many objects in the ABMM's collection, the conservation team and other advisors must decide what objects to preserve. Visiting the conservation lab helped me understand more about the professionals who work on the belongings seen in the mass displays and their passion to preserve the objects of individuals who died at the camp. After our visits to the ABMM conservation lab and Chmielnik, I wondered what we could learn from the remaining Jewish property in Poland.

Unlike certain textual sources, the study of Jewish personal property from the Holocaust is about the individual who owned the object, and his or her relationship to it. Each item brought to Auschwitz, or left in Chmielnik, originated with a person who bought that object for a reason. In Chmielnik, a family purchased candlesticks to light their house at night, and also for decoration. The candlesticks were tall, decorative, and classic in a way that suggested the wealth of their owner. Auslander links the material culture of everyday life with the formation and projection of an individual's identity; buying an object for display conveyed "to others the person they think they are (or hope to be)" (1043-4). Outside of the family, guests would have marveled at the style and elegance of the candlesticks as they visited that family's home. In viewing the objects found in the mikveh, we understood how a Jewish family's home might have been decorated, and how their decision to own and display furnishings like candlesticks reflected upon what kind of people they were at the time.

The belongings of Holocaust victims become significant to contemporaries because they were the objects used in the victims' everyday lives, which makes the Jewish items embodied (Auslander 1016). The term "embodied" implies that an individual's connection to an object and the object's closeness to her or his everyday life imbue it with a unique quality that makes it representative of that person. Additionally, objects related to the Holocaust are embodied for contemporaries who view them because of the way their original owners died. The objects take on a second life as a reminder of the present absence of the person who owned them.

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, Bożena Shallcross, a scholar of literature and visual arts, argues that material culture has actually come to represent the Holocaust for us now. Regardless of the temporal distance between the Holocaust and today, these objects represent the past through metonymy. Jewish property has come to signify the Holocaust in its entirety for certain viewers in a symbolic way (2). If you ask visitors what they remember most after leaving the ABMM, many of them will say it was the shoes in the permanent exhibition. The remaining property of Holocaust victims, alongside recorded survivor testimony and written accounts, will teach future generations about the Holocaust in the absence of living survivors.

The objects that remain at Auschwitz are disassociated from their original context, but they remain on display because of how their owners died. The mass displays are powerful because each visitor

understands the objects represent the lives of men, women, and children killed at the camp. The aura of the object produces a connection between the contemporary viewer and the item in lieu of the object owner's absence. For the suitcases on display, each suitcase held the belongings Jews took to Auschwitz. Often, names are visible on the suitcases, and in rare instances, conservationists find hidden notes or other identification marks within them. The preservation and documentation of the suitcases allow researchers to find additional information about the victims of the camp. Connecting an object at Auschwitz to a name is important for the conservationists who work there, but many visitors often find the mass displays diminish the memories of individuals.

Not every visitor to the ABMM believes the objects on display represent individuality or serve as a personal connection to an embodied object. James Young addresses his disdain for the ABMM's displays in a short section within his book on Holocaust memorials. Material culture for Young only represents a person's death. The mass displays of objects reduce the experiences of Holocaust victims to what happened as the Germans murdered them. He explains that in the ABMM displays, "victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as the brokenness of lives" (Young 133). There is nothing in material culture for Young that represents the lives of Holocaust victims. While Young is not alone in his critique of the mass displays, his analysis does not consider the behind the scenes work on each item.

Objects on display in the permanent exhibition have been worked on in the conservation labs we visited during our stay. Conservationists took the time to preserve and photograph each item to learn about the victims of the camp, one by one. In addition to the mission of the conservation lab, Young does not address the fact that Holocaust survivors decided mass displays would be the best way to show the atrocities of the camp. Survivors wanted to provide concrete material evidence of the Nazi's crimes in order to prevent denial.<sup>6</sup> Although Young dismisses the potential to learn about the individual through material culture, he does not discard the possibility to learn about the individuals responsible for the Holocaust.

The material culture we saw during our visits to Chmielnik and the ABMM revealed a lot about the intentions of the perpetrators. Many non-Jews throughout Poland exploited Jewish families for personal gain during the war. Vast shortages swept throughout Poland, pushing some people to make ransom deals with Jews in circumstances they would have never considered prior to the war. Regardless of their intentions, historian David Gerlach argues that, "things became equated with lives even before the Holocaust had begun."

(<http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/wc3BUCKWZnAuhieWSgjh/full>) The wartime mentality in

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<sup>6</sup> We learned about this from our guide, Paweł Sawicki, during our tour of the ABMM. He mentioned that within the next decade, the permanent exhibit will undergo a drastic remodeling in order to bring in more individual stories to accompany the mass displays.



Poland encouraged unimaginable bargains and deals where giving someone valuable possessions in return for protection took the place of sale and consumption between equal partners.

Many of the objects we saw in Chmielnik might also have been purposefully hidden during the war. Hiding and selling personal belongings was a sign that Jews realized their circumstances could get much worse (Gerlach). The objects found in the Chmielnik mikveh were objects Jews left behind when forced to leave their homes. The candlesticks and spoons might have been left behind because it was not practical in this family's circumstances to take them along. The prayer book was probably left for much different reasons.

Chmielnik's Jews were not ignorant of their persecution under the Nazi occupation, as repeatedly stressed in Newman's memoir. There was an understanding that any object associated with Judaism, particularly a prayer book, would attract negative attention from the Germans. Throughout the war, Germans and their collaborators forced Jews to hide their culture and religion from public view. The prayer book was a very important and intimate family belonging, and the decision to leave it behind must have been an extremely difficult one.

In Chmielnik, there were several possible reasons why Jews left objects behind in the mikveh. When the Germans forced Chmielnik's Jews into the ghetto, the Germans prohibited Jews from taking their belongings, or the Jews had no space for them in much smaller homes. Jews also left their property when the Germans sent them to forced labor camps or to their deaths at Treblinka. The items at the ABMM, on the other hand, were objects that Jews deemed necessary to bring with them during deportation. It is interesting to see that both a purse and a spoon could belong in either location. The decision of what to bring versus what to leave behind was another way of understanding individual choice within the Holocaust. The kinds of choices made in wartime Poland were unique in ways indicative of the extraordinarily brutal German occupation. In concentration camps like Auschwitz, the Germans immediately appropriated the items that Jews brought with them.

The theft of Jewish property did not only occur at Auschwitz, but the artifacts in the museum's collection show one aspect of the Nazi operation to steal and repurpose Jewish material culture. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, the Germans sorted the Jews into two lines in groups of five—men on one side and women and children on the other (Delbo 6). In both cases, camp workers took and sorted their belongings, including their own clothes. Many Jews brought their most prized possessions with them, items they were afraid to leave behind. There were several different destinations for the objects taken from Jews at Auschwitz. Officially, these stolen items were used to support the German wartime economy. Informally, some camp officials grabbed them for personal profit. In this context, the objects hold meaning as theft (Gerlach). They represent illegally taken personal property put to use for another's benefit. The profit from Jewish property was even

funneled back into the operation of the camps responsible for carrying out the Final Solution (Rydell 19). For the objects that remained in the camp after the Nazi evacuation at the end of the war, they served as physical evidence of wartime crimes.

Objects from the Holocaust can serve as evidence, but they can also take on a second life if they were purchased, stolen, or found by someone else. When the man from Chmielnik conducted the excavation of the mikveh, he became the second known owner of the black purse found there. The purse's purpose changed for its second known owner; it became a link to the absent Jews of Chmielnik. Disassociated from any original context, the purse alone tells the story of the missing Jewish woman who once used it when she lived in the town. The purse demonstrates how an object can have layers of meaning for different people who come in contact with it. Due to the tragic nature of remaining Jewish property, material culture is but one component of Poland's modern memory of the Holocaust. While these objects maintain historical specificity, their modern day usage in museums or personal collections can shape the memory of individuals who view them.

The Jewish property in Chmielnik and the ABMM differ in the private and public nature through which their objects interact with different viewers, but they are both excellent examples of the relationship between objects and memory. By accident, the man in Chmielnik became the owner of the former mikveh when he purchased a nightclub in town. While he may or may not have known the property was once Jewish-owned, he certainly was unaware of the mikveh underneath the main floor of the building. He found the objects in the mikveh by coincidence. More so than at Auschwitz, the objects found in the Chmielnik mikveh are in their original historical context, but there is no remaining knowledge of their owner. The mystery surrounding the original owner was what motivated a non-Jewish man to begin a search for more information about the town's Jewish heritage, and the individual Jews who lived there.

When the man repeatedly asked for any information our group could tell him about the handwriting inside the prayer book, he was hoping to learn more information about the book's owner. His ultimate purpose was unclear; it could have been a desire to return the objects to their original owner, curiosity, or local awareness. Whatever his motivations may be, we know that in a town that has no remaining Jewish residents, these objects inspired one man to resurrect information about Chmielnik's Jewish past. For this man and his family, the Holocaust is not only a part of Poland's World War II history, it is personal. They have a connection to the Jews of Chmielnik that other locals do not have. His eagerness to show the objects from the mikveh to visiting groups indicates his willingness to engage with the town's Jewish history.

The incredible story of the mikveh demonstrates the powerful agency objects from the Holocaust have today. Objects are active agents in history, not just products of it (Auslander 1017). Property that belonged to victims of the Holocaust makes an impact on the world and helps to promote

memory of what happened to Europe's Jews during the war. In museums and individual collections, material culture from the Holocaust contributes to the formation of Holocaust memory that centers on the object's individual owner. Arguably, sites like the restored synagogue in Chmielnik also contribute to the memory of their Jewish community, but the synagogue lacks the connection to individuals that seeing a purse or prayer book inspires.

Objects have agency by helping people cope with loss (Auslander 1019). Sometimes belongings are the only objects family members have to remember their relatives. Holding on to these items helps keep the memory of an individual alive. Being able to cope with loss is also important for Chmielnik's collective memory. Jewish tradition was a visible part of Chmielnik's culture, and the loss of Chmielnik's Jews was a partial loss of the town's identity. By putting Jewish property from prewar Chmielnik on display for the public, contemporary residents can grapple with the absence they feel. While Chmielnik keeps the memory of Jewish life present through its restored synagogue and the objects from the mikveh, the ABMM has a mission to promote Jewish memory through its own collection.

Displays in Holocaust museums reflect an institution's choices about how it wants to teach visitors about the Holocaust. Even though the ABMM consults Holocaust survivors and historians, it also operates within the national borders of Poland. In a sense, the objects at Auschwitz are part of Poland's national cultural heritage and memory (Hallam 8). Part of the ABMM's funding comes from the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, so certain decisions made there are the result of government initiatives.<sup>7</sup> But the Museum allows former barracks to be used by other countries to display their own national memory of the Holocaust. We visited several national pavilions and the differences in how they display their country's memory of the Holocaust are drastic. For example, the pavilion of France in block 20 uses new technology and modern displays to explain the Holocaust in France, which contrasts sharply with the aesthetics of the ABMM's permanent exhibition.

The mass displays of shoes, hair, kitchenware, and combs comprise the objects within the ABMM's permanent collection. For the display in the permanent exhibition, national boundaries are not significant. The intentional arrangement of objects such as colored kosher dishware and prayer shawls calls attention to the magnitude of Jewish loss. By staging the objects together in large display cases, the museum develops the memory of universal suffering. Regardless of a visitor's national, religious, or cultural background, each person is struck by the scale of the displays. From a bucket of objects in the back of one man's car, to a state-of-the-art conservation lab, material culture in Poland is part of how visitors and locals engage with the history of the Holocaust.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on funding at the ABMM, please see <http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/finances/>.

Studying personal property from the Holocaust allows scholars to gain insight into the lives of individuals. An object from that period tells us about the owner in ways we might not be able to learn from a written record of the time. Their possessions reflect their identity, and the identity of communities that had a significant Jewish presence before the war. At the ABMM, the conservationists work to preserve and document objects with the ultimate goal of matching items to people who were at the camp. Their work gives a voice to Holocaust victims who were never able to tell their own story. Similarly in Chmielnik, one man strives to discover more information about the Jewish family who owned the objects found within one of the town's mikvehs. The work at the ABMM and the Chmielnik man's decision to show us the Jewish objects ensure that others will have the opportunity to learn about the memory of Jews at Auschwitz and in the town of Chmielnik.

Objects shape modern memory of the Holocaust. When found in Polish towns with no remaining Jewish community, property can revive Jewish memory in a town. In this way, material culture has agency to remind locals of a past where Jews and non-Jews lived alongside one another. In order for objects to shape modern memory of the Holocaust, individuals must take the time to care for them and show them to others. This was the case in both Chmielnik and the ABMM. Written accounts of the Holocaust and recorded testimonies tell the story of Holocaust survivors. Material culture can reveal the lives of Jews who were unable to leave any record of themselves before their deaths. The study of objects adds to a rich body of literature all dedicated to preserving the memory of European Jews.



*Inside the mikveh in Chmielnik*



*Outside the former nightclub Sfinks with a local man from Chmielnik*



*Prayer book, candlesticks, stone, black purse found in the mikveh*

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## Between Ruin and Rededication: Polish Synagogues and the Jewish Space

*Jonathan Zisook*

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In 1996, historian Diana Pinto coined the term “Jewish space” to express the growing phenomenon of Jewish memorialization in Europe that (re)creates Jewish culture in the post-Holocaust present. Pinto explains:

“There is now a new cultural and social phenomenon: the creation of ‘Jewish space’ inside each European nation with a significant history of Jewish life. There are two aspects to this ‘Jewish space.’ The first is the gradual integration of the Holocaust into each country’s understanding of its national history and into twentieth-century history in general. And the second is the revival of ‘positive Judaism.’” (Pinto 6)

According to Pinto, the first aspect of Jewish space is the recognition and incorporation of the Holocaust into national and European histories through memorials, monuments, and museums. This is apparent to most observers of post-war Europe. By “positive Judaism” Pinto refers to a form of expressive living Judaism, irrespective of whether there are or are not any Jewish actors in the Jewish space. Examples of Pinto’s “positive Judaism” thus include Jewish cuisine, literature, art, and music. The annual Jewish Cultural Festival in Kazimierz, the historic Jewish quarter of Kraków, is one such concrete example of a “positive” Jewish space in Pinto’s second formulation. The sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann has similarly described the recuperation of Jewish culture and intellectual life as taking place within a “Judaizing milieu” (*judaisierendes Milieu*) and as part of a “theater of memory” (*Gedächtnistheater*) connected to Kristallnacht and the Holocaust more generally. For Bodemann, however, actual living Jews are tangential to this development, while Pinto implies some, if only minimal, participation of “real” Jews as a means of constructing European Jewish identity. Building upon Bodemann’s and Pinto’s conceptualizations, journalist and researcher Ruth Ellen Gruber labeled this phenomenon “virtual Jewishness.” Gruber writes:

“‘Universalization’ of the Jewish phenomenon and its integration into the mainstream European consciousness, this emergence of a ‘Judaizing terrain’ and ‘Judaizing milieux’ in all their widely varied, conscious and unconscious, manifestations [can be understood] as a ‘filling’ of the Jewish space. This is a process that in turn encompasses the creation of a ‘virtual Jewishness,’ a ‘virtual Jewish world,’ peopled by ‘virtual Jews’ who perform... Jewish culture from an outsider perspective, alongside or often in the absence of local Jewish populations.” (Gruber 11)

In her formulation, Gruber combines both Pinto and Bodemann’s observations in developing a theoretical framework to analyze the development of Jewish culture across contemporary Europe. It

is with this theoretical framework in mind that I now turn specifically to Poland and its Jewish material remains.

Prior to World War II, 3.3 million Jews lived in Poland. Ninety percent of this population was murdered in the Holocaust. The majority of the surviving 10 percent emigrated to the United States, Israel, and Western Europe immediately after World War II—especially following outbursts of local violence against Jews in Kraków (August 1945) and Kielce (July 1946)—and following the “anti-Zionist” political campaign of 1968 (see, among others, Gross, *Fear* 31–166; Stola). As a result, few people identified themselves as Jewish during the Communist period, and today Jews are demographically less than one percent of the Polish population.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the material remains of this once vibrant community are ubiquitous throughout Poland, including cemeteries, synagogues, and ritual baths. How these remnants are remembered, forgotten, neglected, preserved, renewed, and situated within Polish Jewish space is the focus of my reflections. I concentrate exclusively on synagogues and the various functions they now occupy in contemporary Poland, but it is important to note that these reflections are applicable to other material traces of Jewish memory in Poland. I focus on five categories of synagogues, each with one example. These are: (1) museums (2) preserved ruins, (3) rededications (4) commercial exploitations, and (5) the forgotten and unmarked. These synagogue categories are representative of divergent trends present in contemporary Poland and play an essential role in the return of Jewish memory.

## Museums

In 2013, the town of Chmielnik unveiled a new museum—the only museum—devoted to the history of the region’s Jews in a beautifully renovated 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue. Housed inside the synagogue is the Ośrodek Edukacyjno-Muzealny Świętokrzyski Shtetl, or Świętokrzyski Shtetl Education and Museum Center. Like many other synagogues in Poland, the one in Chmielnik remained dilapidated until the town began renovations in 2011 thanks largely to the financial commitment of the town mayor and European Union grants. The museum and exhibition designer, Nizio Design International, described the function of the museum as follows: “The key creative premise of the Swietokrzyski Shtetl Museum is the reproduction of the multifaceted cultural and social life, where the architectural context will become the central space for the activities of Chmielnik’s residents. The project is inscribed in the context of two masses: the symbol of light (a modern exhibition that brings back the times of the pre-war shtetl), and the

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<sup>8</sup> Current demographic estimates of the Polish Jewish population range anywhere between 8,000 and 40,000 people. There has been a small renaissance of Jewish life in Poland in the post-Communist period with the creation of new Jewish institutions, such as the opening of the Lauder Jewish day school in Warsaw and Jewish Community Centers in both Kraków and Warsaw. Poles of Jewish heritage are becoming more comfortable with openly acknowledging their Jewish background and seeking opportunities to learn about Judaism. Some are actively involved in the Jewish community, while others remain unaffiliated but increasingly identify as Jewish (see, for example, Krajewski; Gebert; and Reszke).

symbol of shadow (an outdoor monument referencing to the remembrance of the Shoah). The refurbished synagogue from 17th century will give room to a theatre, a prayer room with the characteristic glass bima, and a conference room. The minimalist nature of the exhibition will perfectly harmonize with the story of the former Jewish town, such a synthetic form determinant of the present together with the history of the shtetl.” (“Świętokrzyski Shtetl”)

While I am not sure the museum is truly minimalist in nature, nor is it clear to me that the former synagogue has become the “central space for the activities of Chmielnik’s residents,” the museum synagogue memorializes the town’s rich Jewish past in an attempt to reconstruct a multicultural life in the town’s monocultural present. It therefore reflects both aspects of Pinto’s Jewish space and, as such, the museum is more than a monument to the past Jews who lived and were murdered in Poland. Just consider the following remark by the mayor of Chmielnik, Jarosław Zatorski:

“For our towns and villages the history of the shtetl is the greatest opportunity for a future. Quite simply, this is the past of these places, and without it we will not succeed in building an identity for the present.” (As quoted in Sabor 120)

The synagogue museum in Chmielnik is a meditation on the present responsibility of local Poles to tell the Jewish history of their towns as part of Polish history and Polish identity. The Jews are not returning to Chmielnik to tell this story.



Fig. 1: Świętokrzyski Shtetl Education and Museum Center in Restored Synagogue, Chmielnik. Photograph by Babafemi Akinrinade.



Fig. 2: Constructed Glass Bima, Świętokrzyski Shtetl Education and Museum Center, Chmielnik. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.

In a small town of approximately 1000 residents sits the noble ruins of the 19<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical Działoszyce synagogue. Photographer and artist Wojciech Wilczyk describes the synagogue in Działoszyce as follows:



“Large ruins with no roof, with traces of its onetime splendor. Apparently, this was one of the most beautiful classicist synagogues in pre-war Poland. I go inside; I find the smell so prevalent in abandoned places. Empty alcohol bottles and beer cans lying about everywhere in the nettles and undergrowth, of course.” (Wilczyk 683)

The Działoszyce synagogue, which fell into disrepair during the Communist period, is an ode to the Holocaust and the former shtetl. Fortunately, you will no longer find empty beer bottles lying around. With a significant financial commitment by the town government and the help of European Union funds, the residents of Działoszyce recently preserved the synagogue in its ruined state. Regrettably, the synagogue’s accompanying building, which housed a cheder,<sup>9</sup> library, mikvah (ritual bath), and rabbi’s apartment (“The Synagogue in Działoszyce”), could not be preserved. Unlike the museum-synagogue in Chmielnik, the decision to preserve but not restore the Działoszyce synagogue remnants serve as a constant reminder to the present community of Działoszyce and to its visitors of the unnatural absence of Jewish life in the town. Before World War II, Działoszyce was approximately 80 percent Jewish. Today, no Jews remain in the town and there is no attempt to recreate a virtual Jewish life in Działoszyce, as is the case in Chmielnik. The synagogue in Działoszyce is a monument to the past and a characteristic example of Pinto’s first approach to Jewish space. Działoszyce, therefore, represents another possibility. Ruins.



Fig. 3: Preserved Ruins of Działoszyce Synagogue. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.



Fig. 4: Preserved Ruins of Działoszyce Synagogue. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.

A third and increasingly common option since the fall of Communism in 1989 is rededication. Opened originally in 1918 as a Beit Midrash,<sup>10</sup> Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot (Association for the Study of Mishnah) in Oświęcim is one of the most sensitive examples of this phenomenon that I

<sup>9</sup> A cheder, literally a “room” in Hebrew, is a traditional school for Jewish boys, where the basics of the Jewish religion are taught, including Hebrew language, the Hebrew Bible, and rabbinic literature.

<sup>10</sup> A Beit Midrash, or “house of study” in Hebrew, is an important communal institution of Jewish learning and traditionally attended by men. A Beit Midrash is often located in larger synagogue complexes, as well as *Yeshivot* (Talmudic academies), and is frequently used interchangeably as a small synagogue for prayer.

have seen in Poland. Rediscovered by anthropologist of Galician Jewry, Jonathan Webber, Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot is the lone surviving synagogue in the town of Oświęcim, only 2.5 kilometers from the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and death camp. In 1998, it was returned to the Jewish community of Bielsko-Biała, the closest Jewish community to Oświęcim, and subsequently donated to the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation. The restitution of Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot was the first Jewish communal property returned in Poland. Based upon survivor testimony, the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation restored the synagogue to its pre-war condition as a fully functioning house of worship for Jewish visitors to pray and for Polish and foreign visitors to learn about Jewish religion and social life (“Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue”).

The synagogue is a part of a larger museum and cultural complex, but the synagogue space is preserved as a synagogue, with a complete set of the Talmud, prayer books, and a kosher Torah scroll. Unlike in the case of Chmielnik, where the sanctuary of the synagogue is used as the central exhibition space of their museum, the Auschwitz Jewish Center created a permanent exhibition on the Jews of Oświęcim in what appears to have been part of the adjacent women’s section of the synagogue. Thus, in Oświęcim, the majority of the building which had formerly housed the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot is once again a synagogue. I therefore categorize Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot as a rededicated synagogue and not a museum synagogue even though it is an integral component of the Auschwitz Jewish Center educational program.



Fig. 5: Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot and Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oświęcim. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.



Fig. 6: Interior of Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot in Oświęcim. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.

How best to preserve and commemorate Jewish material remains in locations without any living Jews is not any easy task. It is ultimately the responsibility of local communities who live with the remnants. The fact that large numbers of Jews will visit Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot annually because of its proximity to Auschwitz-Birkenau was certainly a factor in the decision to return the synagogue to its original state. The decision to restore Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot as a functioning synagogue therefore has practical relevance beyond the symbolic importance of being located next to the most infamous Nazi death center. Chmielnik, by contrast, is not a tourist destination and receives nowhere near the number of visitors. For the present Polish community of Chmielnik, it is perhaps more appropriate and practical to use the sanctuary of their synagogue for exhibition and education purposes. It is simply unlikely that enough Jews will return regularly to Chmielnik to use the synagogue as a synagogue. While the Chmielnik initiative is not beyond criticism, it is difficult to blame those instrumental to the synagogue's restoration for creating a museum inside the sanctuary, thereby precluding its return to its pre-Holocaust status, as is the case in Oświęcim.

### Commercial Exploitations

The Hevre Café in Kraków, formerly the Mezcal Night Club, is an example of a synagogue exploited for commercial use. Opened in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as Beit Midrash Chewra Thilim (Association of Psalm Reciters), its post-war history is complicated and unfortunate like so many other synagogues. How and why this former synagogue became a night club and café is less than clear, but what is clear is that Hevre Café uses the beautiful and unprotected Jewish wall art to tap into the popularity of Kazimierz as an expanding Jewish space populated by real and virtual Jews. Unlike the many Jewish-style restaurants on Szeroka Street that commercialize Judaism by serving a mishmash of Ashkenazy and Israeli cuisine surrounded by stereotypical images of Hasidic Jews, menorahs, and nightly klezmer music, in an attempt to provide a Jewish experience to non-Jews, Hevre Café appears far more insensitively disingenuous. Hevre Café is located in an actual former

house of worship, unlike the Jewish style restaurants, and it pays little regard to the building's historical significance or the proper conditions necessary to preserve the outstanding paintings that are featured on the walls. The building's venerated Jewish past seems to be nothing more than a good way to sell drinks in an artsy and vibrant neighborhood.



Fig. 7: Hevre Café in former Beit Midrash Chewra Thilim in Kraków. Entrance in location where Torah Ark once stood. Photograph by Jonathan Zisook.

Commercializing Judaism is not necessarily objectionable. The fact that Judaism sells in Poland is quite a remarkable feat, often confusing to Jewish and non-Jewish tourists alike, but generally a positive phenomenon in my opinion. Nevertheless, what is objectionable is the way that Hevre Café has exploited the synagogue's past without indicating the irreparable damage it has done to the synagogue in order to increase foot traffic. In a provocative essay, photographer Jason Francisco recently pointed out that a second entrance to the café was erected by "smashing through the Aron Hakodesh [Torah Ark]" ("Hanukah in Holocaustland"). The blatant disregard for the focal point of the synagogue's sacred space and the continued vulnerability of the wall art is one of the most problematic forms of exploitation of Jewish heritage I have come across in Poland. It is all the more problematic because the building was leased, according to Francisco, by the

president of the Jewish community of Kraków following its restitution, despite repeated objections by many Jews and non-Jews concerned with the synagogue's preservation ("Hanukah in Holocaustland").

The contrast between the three previous categories of synagogues as reflected by the synagogue museum in Chmielnik, the synagogue ruins in Działoszyce, and the rededicated synagogue in Oświęcim, could not be starker from the commercial exploitation apparent in the Hevre Café. All of these options are real possibilities in the post-Holocaust and post-Communist period. The first three are genuinely sensitive to the past even if not always perfect. The fourth possibility of commercial exploitation represents at best a blasé attitude to Jewish material remains and at worst flagrant neglect. The case of the Hevre Café is all the more shocking given the number of extremely well preserved and important synagogues in Kazimierz. There is, of course, a limit to the number of former synagogues that can be restored in Poland, and ultimately some will become



cafes. In Kazimierz alone, there are numerous unmarked former synagogues. The Jewish communities of Poland cannot maintain all of the synagogues, cemeteries, and other restituted communal properties. Some of these properties are put into secondary use for commercial profit with the knowledge of the Jewish communities. This is a regrettable but understandable fact. The Hevre Café, however, is unique in its overt and problematic exploitation of Jewish heritage in the Judaizing milieu of Kazimierz.

## **Forgotten and Unmarked**

The final category of synagogue that I explore is the unmarked and forgotten synagogue. This category shares certain similarities with the above-mentioned commercially exploited synagogue in so far as unmarked synagogues are also often used commercially and neither category accords the Jewish past great significance.

Large numbers of German speaking Jews settled in the town of Pszczyna (Pless in German) in Upper Silesia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1852, the Jewish community built an impressive synagogue for a relatively small Jewish community that was used by German and later Polish and Yiddish speaking Jews, who arrived in Pszczyna following World War I when the town was incorporated into the reborn Polish state. The majority of the German Jews migrated westward to larger German cities, but some remained. In the interwar period, Galician Jews arrived in Pszczyna in search of economic opportunities (“Pszczyna”). During World War II, the synagogue, like so many others, was devastated by the Germans, and converted into a cinema in 1941, a purpose it continued to serve throughout the Communist period. The exterior still boasts two large red signs for “Kino” and “Wenus,” or Venus Cinema, and there is no indication anywhere that it once was a synagogue.

Today, the cinema synagogue is a movie-themed escape room entertainment center called “Cinema Escape.” Upon transforming the old cinema into Cinema Escape, the new owners, Adrianna Nowińska and Michał Olejnik, explained in 2016 that “together we want to revive the forgotten space of Venus cinema and make it possible again for everyone to come and enjoy visiting” (W budynku Kina Wenus).<sup>11</sup> The owner’s use of the word “forgotten” is both striking and ironic because nowhere do they refer to the fact that what really is forgotten is that the cinema was an active house of worship for nearly a hundred years!

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<sup>11</sup> The quote in Polish is as follows: “Razem chcemy ożywić zapomnianą przestrzeń kina Wenus i sprawić, by znów mogła przynosić radość każdemu, kto w niej zawita” (“W budynku Kina Wenus”).



Fig. 8: Venus Cinema in the former synagogue of Pszczyna.  
Photograph by Babafemi Akinrinade.

The absence of memory expressed by the owners of Cinema Escape reflects a discursive absence shaped largely by silence during the Communist period of the once vibrant Polish Jewish past. It was not uncommon for synagogues to be used for alternative purposes following World War II. One can hardly blame war-torn and economically depressed communities for utilizing Jewish material remains for ulterior purposes. This was in fact the case in Oświęcim, where the one surviving synagogue served as a carpet warehouse after the Communists nationalized the building during the 1970s. The difference, however, between Oświęcim and Pszczyna is the recovery of memory. Due to the hard work of the Auschwitz Jewish Center, the memory of Oświęcim's Jewish past is being recovered and the synagogue is once again recognized as a Jewish space. In Pszczyna, there is no corresponding organization devoted to recovering its Jewish past. As such, its synagogue remains a place of entertainment without any acknowledgment of its former life.

Recovering Pszczyna's Jewish past is further complicated by the fact that up until World War I, its Jewish population was German speaking. Pszczyna's Jewish legacy therefore does not fit neatly into today's national categories. The cinema synagogue is on contemporary Polish soil, but its heritage is largely German. Who then should recover this Jewish heritage?

Synagogues are physical structures, and therefore visible reminders of a once vibrant culture exterminated on Polish soil. Synagogues are constantly present and unavoidable in the Polish landscape and are a central feature of what Diana Pinto refers to as "Jewish space," what Y. Michal Bodemann calls a "Judaizing milieu," and what Ruth Ellen Gruber classifies as "virtually Jewish." As I have demonstrated, there are at least five categories of diverse possibilities for the fate of Polish

synagogues, which range from ruin to rededication and others in-between. The first three categories—museums, preserved ruins, and rededications—represent a sincere coming to terms with the past following years of suppression of Jewish topics and critical reflection upon the dispossession and murder of Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust (e.g., Gross, *Neighbors*).<sup>12</sup> Some are more successful than others, but all are at minimum attempts to memorialize the Jewish past in some meaningful way. The first and third categories are often concerned with the present and the future as well. The last two categories, on the other hand—commercial exploitation and unmarked and forgotten synagogues—reflect a crass, but nevertheless, realistic outcome. Together, all of these possibilities occupy a Polish Jewish *lieu de mémoire*, to borrow Pierre Nora's terminology.

The existence and quantity of Jewish material remains in Poland raises many difficult questions. How should the Jewish past be remembered? What is the best approach to preserving that memory? What should be done with all the physical remnants of Jewish life in Poland? How should virtual and non-virtual Jews interact in the Judaizing milieu? Ultimately, if Jewish heritage is to be preserved and celebrated in Poland as a part of Polish culture, then it is up to Poles—both Jewish and non-Jewish—to answer these questions. One thing I am certain, the Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oświęcim gives me hope.

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<sup>12</sup> Jan Gross' rousing and path breaking book, *Neighbors*, uncovered the gruesome murder of the Jews of Jedwabne, Poland, where the town's Jews were rounded up and burned alive in a barn by their Polish Catholic neighbors in July 1941. These revelations sparked a vigorous national debate that continues in Poland until today.

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## **Black & White**

*Natasha Caudill*

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“Nothing here is black and white,” our tour guide explained. “The world is very complicated.” He continued gesturing towards the rows of black and white faces lining the walls. This discussion of color or lack thereof continued throughout our tours of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. In fact, everything we saw and did during the week of the AJC’s Human Rights Summer Program seemed to involve the debate of experiencing history in color or black and white. Our tour guide had not been wrong; except in the case that quite literally, everything is black and white for me.

I was born with Achromatopsia, a disorder that among its various vision impairments is often defined by a lack of color vision. I have only ever seen the world in black and white and in shades of gray due to this. This lack of color is also how we must view most of history before the development and use of colorized media. For anyone who can see color, this impairment in viewing historical photographs and video is understandably unnatural. I have learned that many people see the black and white as a barrier that makes it hard to truly feel the impact of what is being seen. So, is the authenticity of viewing and experiencing history defined by seeing it the way it was originally presented to us or in the way that is most comfortable to our own standards? While this question would probably produce more debate than answers, I can at least offer my own literal view.

Seeing a gas chamber that aided the murder of 1.1 million people in black and white did not make it any less horrifying. Looking at a lake containing human ashes in black and white did not make the scene any less painful. Seeing the rows of faces of men and women who perished at Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau in black and white did not make me any less sad than anyone else. For me, there is no barrier that needs breaking when touring a site like this in person. In black and white or in color, we must first be grateful that we get to see and preserve it at all for the memory of those who suffered there.

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**Kelsey Melinosky** (Class of 2019) is a Chemistry major at the U.S. Naval Academy, a Stamps Scholar, and member of the Junior UK and International Scholarship Program. With a focus on becoming a Navy doctor, she has earned her Emergency Medical Technician certification and studied tropical diseases in Peru. Outside of the classroom, Kelsey is an avid runner, starting the track program at her high school and completing the 2016 Baltimore marathon in the fall of 2016. Within her company, she participates in intramural soccer and has led the freshmen as a training corporal. In her free time, Kelsey plays piano, leads a Bible study, dances, and volunteers in the Annapolis community.

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