



Cultural Discourse on the Holocaust in East-Central and Eastern Europe

edited by
Tiziana D'Amico


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UZ. La Shoah e l'Europa centro-orientale

diretta da Tiziana D'Amico,

Cinzia Franchi e Antonio D. Sciacovelli

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SANGUE E ORO

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Cultural Discourse
on the Holocaust
in East-Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The volume consists of articles related to the Conference **Memories of the Shoah Narrative Forms and Cultural Discourse in East-Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe** (11th and 12th May 2023, Venice- Padua), organized by The Czech Language and Literature Teaching of DSLCC, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and The Seminar Uz The Shoah and Central-eastern Europe of DISLL, University of Padua. The conference focused on investigating cultural productions (literature, cinema, comics) dealing with the memory of the Shoah in the geopolitical-cultural area of East Central, South Eastern, and Eastern Europe, to strengthen pluralistic, interdisciplinary, and transnational approaches.

The Seminar Uz. The Shoah and Central-eastern Europe of DISLL, University of Padua.

We use the expression "East-Central Europe" merely as a matter of communicative convenience, with a view to the immediacy of recognition, since, in practice, it looks at that part of Europe that shares the experience of the socialist regime. Thus, these are the countries that were part of the Warsaw Pact (now Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria), some republics that were once part of the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and, finally, the countries formed in the area of the former Yugoslavia: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Although it is misleading to speak of a Central-Eastern Europe as a "bloc," it should be emphasized that all the individual realities of this area (Central and South- Eastern Europe) share the phenomenon of the accumulation of experiences, albeit profoundly different from each other (partitions

and cessions of territories, enclaves and linguistic minorities, migrations of large parts of the population, abrupt changes of political regime, etc.) that succeed each other abruptly without leaving time or a way to undertake their mature acquisition at the political, economic as well as cultural level.

At the basis of the idea of the Seminar lies the conviction of the need to create a space for in-depth study of the Shoah that includes the Central and South-Eastern European macro-area, in its Central and South-Eastern components, in the students' cultural horizon, that is, to place alongside their (perhaps presumed) familiarity with the Italian experience first and foremost and "European" experience, developed in the compulsory schooling, an (inevitably limited) awareness of what happened in these areas. This belief moves from the specific reality of Central and South-Eastern European areas regarding the history and memory of the Shoah. If in the countries of so-called "Western Europe" this means first and foremost a removal of the Jewish subject - first from the social fabric and then physically from the territory, loaded onto a carriage train wagon that takes them away - the geographic areas considered here are the destination many of those freight cars, as well as the scene of the massacres perpetrated there, i.e., of that part of the victims who did not even have the "right" to die in a concentration camp and thus have an identifiable place of their disappearance. The construction of the Seminar's annual programs, from topics to guests, moves from the desire to input insights and highlight friction points on some open issues.

Each cultural product about the Shoah and its memory goes into the images and stories that constitute the collective imagination about the Holocaust and reinforces, less often refutes, the cornerstones of the collective imagination about it. This imagery, however, is primarily based on representations from Western Europe and the U.S. It is in this context, whose interpretive grids

are already somewhat established, that the Holocaust memories of Central and South-eastern Europe and the cultural products born from them fit. If we look at the Italian context, the one in which the UZ Seminar acts, speaking of the Holocaust and Central and South-eastern Europe means to talk of the Holocaust in "little known and little diffused" realities, as the languages and literatures of these areas are identified in the academic world. More commonly, the adjective "minor" is used to separate these languages and literature with low numbers of students, therefore in comparison (in reality, competition) with "major" ones, as in the case of English, Spanish, French, or German.

The position of "minority" is delineated as something other than the "majority": the latter is what is "normally" studied, while studying different languages and literatures means choosing "diversity." This dynamic is, in turn, a consequence, or perhaps it would be more accurate to use the term spillover, of the general perception toward these areas of Europe, constantly referred to as a bloc within umbrella terms such as Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Mitteleuropa, and the Balkans for the south-eastern area. In these expressions, it is the adjective that performs the dominant role since what it specifies is not a geographic area but a historical-cultural geopolitical interpretation: the overlapping uses of Central, East-Central, and Eastern Europe to speak of Poland, Czechia, Hungary, and other countries is a demonstration of this.

The Uz Seminar fits into this complicated context of minorities and otherness and largely pre-constructed Holocaust imagery.

Cultural Discourse on Holocaust in East-Central and Eastern Europe

The first contribution offers an overview of the "question" of Holocaust memory in German. Constanza Calabretta (*Memory of the*

Shoah, between the end of the GDR and the reunified Germany (1985-1996) reconstructs the last years of the GDR and the very early phase of Reunification and how political and cultural discourses on the Holocaust played a crucial role during the Cold War and thereafter.

In the face of the contemporary picture, where not only the mode of Holocaust remembrance but its very validity is being questioned, offering mystifications of responsibility and manipulations of history, he retraces the steps taken to deal with a challenging and complex past.

Mechanisms of mystification and manipulation of the past characterize non-democratic regimes, both left and right. As Eva Filová observes in her article, *Holocaust in Slovak Film: From Amnesia to Memory. The forgotten, invisible fates of the "others"*, processing the memory of the Holocaust can be difficult as it can never absolve one from responsibility for what happened both during and after. For Slovakia, the memory of the Holocaust intersects with the question of the state and the figure of Josef Tiso. It is in recent years that it has been possible to broaden the field of research to those subjects deemed "secondary," the female subject, or openly ignored for racist reasons, the Roma community and the Porrajmos. Within cultural discourses, documentary audiovisual production is often at the forefront of opening up spaces for discussion.

In *Lau tiskoch (Don't forget!) Jewish memory in the Hungarian cultural public sphere (1958-1967)*, Tímea Jablonczay analyses cultural discourse for the Hungarian case. Reflection and historical re-elaboration of the Holocaust cannot be separated, in fact, from the political-cultural context of the following decades. In the case of the area under consideration here, it means analysing the positions that the communist regimes supported, imposed, and disavowed

from time to time during the period 1948-1989. These four decades are not monolithic blocs, as the article well illustrates.

Discourses of cultural memory of the Holocaust cannot disregard the individual voices of those who lived through it and how these are, or are not, acquired and made central. Giovanna Tomassucci presents us an example of such a process in her contribution *Adolf Rudnicki's task of commemorating the martyrdom of Polish Jewry*. The Polish writer Adolf Rudnicki can be taken as a model of the complex selection processes underlying memory-related cultural processes.

The last two articles examine the dimensions of performance and personal participation. Mischa Twitchin reflects on Julia Aug's play *Mum, Is Our Cat Also a Jew?* and illustrates how memory never really acts in the singular. Holocaust memories intersect with the question of the marginality of certain realities, national (such as Eastern and post-Soviet), minorities within the nation, and so on, as encapsulated in the *Remembering (in) the absence of memorials*.

Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair's article (*Contested Ground: Public Commemorations of the Shoah in Lviv*), which addresses the public perception of Holocaust commemorations in Lviv, closes the volume. Indeed, to understand the cultural dynamics of Holocaust memory(s), one cannot ignore how the commemorations in themselves, their organisation, guests, lineups, and location have an essential impact on creating historical narratives and their transmission.

*The memory of the Shoah, between the end
of the GDR and the reunified Germany (1985-1996)*

Costanza Calabretta

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the role of remembrance of the Shoah during the last years of the GDR and the first period of reunified Germany, considering this phase as a crucial moment for German public memory.

During the Cold War, the GDR denied any responsibility for Nazi crimes and created a hierarchy between political and racial victims, leaving aside the persecution of Jews.

In 1985, members of the peace movement declared that responsibility for Nazism couldn't be placed solely on West Germany, breaking with the official master narrative. In the brief transition period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the government acknowledged the guilt of the whole of Germany for the Holocaust. In the 1990s, when xenophobia and anti-Semitism were on the rise, the institutions emphasised the link between remembering the Shoah and respect for democracy and pluralism. This process culminated in the creation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January, which signalled the transition to a post-national memory.

Keywords: Cold War, GDR, Holocaust, reunified Germany, German public memory.

Abstract

Ziel dieses Artikels ist es, die Rolle des Gedenkens an die Shoah in den letzten Jahren der DDR und in der ersten Zeit des wiedervereinigten Deutschlands zu analysieren und diese Phase als einen entscheidenden Moment für das öffentliche Gedenken in Deutschland zu betrachten.

Während des Kalten Krieges leugnete die DDR jede Verantwortung für die Verbrechen des Nationalsozialismus und stellte eine Hierarchie zwischen politischen und rassistischen Opfern auf, wobei die Verfolgung der Juden ausgeklammert wurde.

Im Jahr 1985 erklärten Mitglieder der Friedensbewegung, dass die Verantwortung für den Nationalsozialismus nicht allein auf Westdeutschland abgewälzt werden könne, und brachen damit mit der offiziellen Meistererzählung. In der kurzen Übergangszeit nach dem Fall der Berliner Mauer erkannte die Regierung die Schuld ganz Deutschlands am Holocaust an. In den 1990er Jahren, als Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Antisemitismus auf dem Vormarsch waren, betonten die Institutionen die Verbindung zwischen der Erinnerung an die Shoah und der Achtung von Demokratie und Pluralismus. Dieser Prozess gipfelte in der Einführung des Internationalen Holocaust-Gedenktags am 27. Januar, der den Übergang zu einem postnationalen Gedenken signalisierte.

Keywords: Kalten Krieges, DDR, Holocaust, deutsche Wiedervereinigung, Nationale Gedenkfeiern in Deutschland.

Introduction

From September 2023 to January 2024, the Jewish Museum Berlin hosted the special exhibition *Another Country. Jews in the GDR*. Inaugurated in 2001, it is the first time that such a major cultural institution displayed a large collection on Jewish life in East Germany. The two co-curators, Tamar Lewinsky and Martina Lüdicke, chose to present several contrasting first-hand accounts, some of which visually screened, along with artefacts such as a silver Torah shield, a handmade flag and a prayer shawl (Siegal 2023). The aim was to illuminate the mosaic-like diversity of the Jewish experience in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), through different, sometimes contradictory, individual perspectives. The exhibition began in the aftermath of the Second World War, when some Jews who had either returned from exile, survived the deportation in concentration camps or had gone into hiding during the conflict, decided to settle in the Soviet Occupied Zone, driven by a shared desire to build an anti-fascist State in East Germany. Although the exhibition did not seek to simplify the

Jewish experience, the various rooms seem to follow a downward path, streaming from the initial enthusiasm for the opportunity to build 'another country', an anti-fascist one, to an increasing sense of disillusionment. In the GDR, even after the end of anti-Semitic persecutions in the early 1950s (begun with the Slánský trial in Prague), prejudice and suspicion remained. Moreover, contacts with Israel were discouraged, as well as any manifestation of specific identification with the Jewish communities. The activities of the communities were essentially restricted to religious practice, while their membership declined over the years. In one of the rooms, the photographs of an abandoned and ruined synagogue seemed to symbolise the neglected role of the Jews in Eastern Germany, a message also suggested by the title of the contribution in the exhibition catalogue – «Singled out and viewed suspiciously: Jews in the GDR» (Leo 2023). The exhibition also drew attention to the question of Shoah remembrance in the GDR and to its relationship with the State of Israel. Indeed, the issues were interrelated: both the State remembrance policy and the international position on Israel influenced the behaviour towards the Jewish citizens and communities.

Beyond its contents, the exhibition is an expression of the widespread interest in Jewish history during the GDR period. Since the collapse of the GDR, the above mentioned issues – the Shoah remembrance culture; the relationship between East Germany and Israel; the space allocated to the Jewish communities in the public sphere – have been subjects of historical research. In fact, the end of the SED regime (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) stimulated new research questions, while the rapid opening of the institutional archives greatly expanded knowledge on the GDR.

Dealing with the Eastern German past also took on a profound significance for reunified Germany, as signalled by the work of two parliamentary commissions in the 1990s and by the establishment of a new federal institution to handle the Stasi archives

(*Bundesbeauftragter für die Stasi-Unterlagen*) and to process the GDR past in the public sphere (*Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur*). The reappraisal of the GDR past was intertwined with questions about the new German identity, linked to a shift in public memory frameworks, and the development of new master narratives. In this broad field, the GDR's relationships with the memory of the Shoah were of particular importance, because its reappraisal was linked to ethical and moral questions relevant to the new Germany, which had to find the right place in Europe without alarming its neighbours.

Both the way in which reunified Germany came to terms with the GDR's communist past and the way in which it re-examined the Shoah and the legacy of Second World War have been subject of extensive studies. This essay aims to examine a particular phase in this process of reappraisal, which resumed under the GDR in the mid-1980s and ended in the mid-1990s, when the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) consciously developed new master narratives for remembering the Shoah. The focus of the analysis is mostly on the institutional level, on the decisions taken from above regarding the politics of remembrance. After a brief introduction to the European situation during the Cold War, the essay focuses on the German case.

European divided memory during the Cold War

The Shoah holds a central place in the public memory of the Western countries, especially in the USA and in Europe. However, this is a recent outcome: the Shoah memory has developed over decades, going through different phases in various countries. They could be grouped into three general stages: a silent period immediately after the Second World War, when the Jews persecution and extermination was not recognized as a unique event; the rising awareness in the 1960s; the development of a global memory of the Shoah from the 1990s onwards. Shoah

remembrance underwent various transformations, also influenced by different heterogeneous social actors. In the 1960s, for example, a new narrative emerged as a result of the Eichmann (Jerusalem, 1961) and Auschwitz (Frankfurt, 1964) trials, which were extensively covered by the media. During the 1970s the Shoah became more present in the public debate, also thanks to certain media products, such as the US series “Holocaust”, while the attention paid to the witnesses globally increased (Wieviorka 1999).

Instead, in the Soviet-dominated countries, as well as in Yugoslavia, Shoah was dissolved into a larger narrative of the Second World War, in which resistance, communist triumph and antifascism heroism predominated. Public memory in socialist States (such as Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, GDR), built by the one ruling party, was hegemonic and remained somewhat closed to the underlying moods within society. The Shoah remembrance remained more static, and the Jewish identity with its religious elements was generally de-emphasised in favour of the building of a supranational and secular identity, based on political values and beliefs.

The German case

This split European memory of the Shoah can also be found, on a smaller scale, in Cold War Germany, that was divided into two different and opposing States: the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Indeed, the structural differences in political, social, and economic systems between a capitalist democracy and a socialist authoritarian regime also affected the culture of remembrance (Danyel 1995; Herf 1997; Reichel 2001; Hammerstein 2017). While the process of remembering Nazism and Shoah in the Federal Republic was dynamic, changing according to historical phases, governments in office and social impulses, the process in the GDR was more static,

driven almost exclusively by the State and the ruling party. However, the interests and attitudes of particular groups were still present in the field of public memory, and they intertwined and resonated in peculiar ways (Walther 2022, 186-7).

Regarding the FRG's cultural remembrance, this could be traced in different phases: from the initial reluctance in the first decade after the end of Second World War, under the chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer (Frei 1996), to the gradual acceptance of the responsibility for the Nazi crimes under the chancellorship of Willy Brandt. The Federal Republic's assumption of responsibility was symbolised by Brandt's gesture of kneeling in front of the monument to the Warsaw ghetto uprising in December 1970, while negotiations were taking place with Poland to recognise the post-1945 borders. During the 1968 mobilisations, the student movement also focused on the question of German guilt, questioning the responsibility of the "generation of fathers". The political and social renewal of the FRG thus became intertwined with the process of dealing with the past, in line with the developments in other Western countries. Nevertheless, in the 1980s the conservative government of Helmut Kohl marked a different phase in the process of coming to terms with the legacy of Second World War. Kohl's attempt to normalise German history produced visible effects during the *Historikerstreit*, the major intellectual debate in the post-war Federal Republic, devoted to the question of the uniqueness of Shoah and to its role in the German national identity (Maier 1988).

The GDR developed a normative *Geschichtspolitik* (politics of history), in which antifascism became a kind of State official doctrine (Olsen 2015). Antifascism emerged as a powerful instrument to legitimate SED's predominant role in the political system and to give legitimacy to the GDR itself (Münkler 1998; Sabrow 2004). Fascism was interpreted as a stage in the development of reactionary capitalism, from which the GDR had

distanced itself by building a socialist society and dismantling capitalism. Antifascism was used to attack the Bonn Republic, to discredit it for its (alleged) militarism, revanchism and the survival of reactionary elements, which emphasised the FRG's continuity with the Third Reich. Proclaiming itself an antifascist State, the GDR refused the burden of the Nazi dictatorship, omitting and forgetting that East Germany was also a successor State of the Third Reich, where the Shoah had been planned and conducted. Furthermore, the celebration of the victory of the Soviet Union in 1945 was linked to the communist legacy under the Weimar Republic and brought back to life the long-term idea of building another, better Germany. This master narrative helped also to strengthen the alliance with the URSS and the socialist bloc.

Within this context, other elements of controversy between GDR and FRG were the different policies of denazification after 1945 – deeper and broader in the Soviet Occupied Zone than in the Allied one – the payment of reparations and the attitude towards the State of Israel. While, also due to Allied pressure, the FRG took care of paying compensation and reparations, the GDR refused to pay collective reparations to Israel and to compensate Jews who had left Germany and who were not recognized as victims of fascism. Between 1950 and 1953, the campaign against cosmopolitanism and Zionism (carried out in all Eastern Bloc countries, starting from Moscow) reached its peak, leading many representatives of the East German Jewish community to leave the country. Furthermore, East Germany was the only socialist country that did not recognise Israel, denounced as a capitalist and colonialist State (Timm 1997). The antifascist master narrative was combined with an anti-imperialist message directed against Israel, but also against the USA and the FRG. In the context of international relations, GDR developed thus a pro-Arab policy, supporting the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) and condemning Israel's Zionism. A particularly tense moment came during the Six Day

War in 1967, when the GDR media attacked Israel and at the same time the Federal Republic, which was accused of supporting Israel by selling it arms.

Representing the GDR as an antifascist State seemed by definition to preclude any development of antisemitism or racism. Nevertheless, anti-Zionism «as a recent manifestation of hostility towards Jews was part of the State doctrine in the GDR, disseminated in anti-Israeli pamphlets and repeatedly invoked in declarations of solidarity with the Palestinians and the Arab States» (Benz 2016, 63). Anti-Semitism as open discrimination or persecution did not exist in the GDR, but forms of hostility towards Jews or their marginalisation at the political and social level were a side-effect of officially practised anti-Zionism.

Ultimately, in the GDR the antifascist doctrine led to a hierarchisation among the victims of the Nazi dictatorship. The most prominent role was assigned to the politically persecuted antifascists, while a subordinate role was given to the Jews and to all the victims that did not fight and did not oppose an active resistance to Nazism. The Jews' suffering was recognised but not legitimised into the public sphere, mainly because the victims of the Shoah did not have the status of antifascist combatants. As a statement of the German communist party in the Soviet Occupied Zone underlined already in July 1945: «[The Jews, the Jehovahs'Witnesses, and the work-shy] They have all endured much and suffered greatly, but they did not fight» (Reuter and Hansel 1997, 80-1). In terms of public recognition, the difference between being persecuted for one's political activity and for racist or anti-Semitic reasons was crucial.

Changes in the 1980s

Taking as reference point the commemoration of *Reichspogromnacht* (or *Kristallnacht*), when on 9th November 1938 Jewish synagogues, shops, houses were vandalised and burned and circa 30.000 Jews were arrested (Steinweis 2009), a shift in the GDR's culture of remembrance became more evident in the 1980s. Indeed, little attention was given to the memory of the *Kristallnacht* for the first three decades after the war. The commemoration, which took place only on the jubilees rather than every year, remained under the State's control, which never institutionalised it. The level of participation by the civil society was low, and the Jewish communities commemorated the date in separate events. During the 40th anniversary in 1978 there was a notable increase in the number of religious ceremonies, depositions of flower crowns, and local commemorations, while for the first time the regime sponsored a major commemoration. From the 1970s onwards, as a result of generational shift and Cold War détente, a growing number of groups, often associated with churches, became interested in Jewish history. Within the Jewish communities a greater awareness began to develop (Wenzel 2022, 131-2). Concurrently, a growing emphasis on the Jewish cultural inheritance could also be observed in GDR cultural politics. Moreover, the reconstruction of the Synagogue in Oranienburgerstrasse began in 1984, which housed the foundation Centrum Judaicum, supported personally by Eric Honecker, GDR's head of State.

The commemoration on 9th November 1988 highlighted the growing interest in the Shoah. Guests from USA and Israel were invited to participate in the commemorative events. Exhibitions, concerts, and different happenings were organized within an extensive programme. The evangelic Church played an active role in the commemoration, organizing shared commemorative services. The Jews communities' initiatives were supported by the

State, yet it consistently sought to exert control over them. This event undoubtedly constituted a pivotal moment in the process of recognition between Israel and the East Germany, as well as in the Shoah remembrance. Nevertheless, the historical content of the commemoration remained vague and formulaic. The *Reichspogromnacht* was incorporated into the antifascist master narrative as «a day of remembrance for the six million Jews as for all the victims of fascism» (Offenberg 1988, 234). The GDR's leader Eric Honecker spoke about the Jews persecution as an «alive admonition» for the country, but never assumed in first person the State's responsibilities (Honecker 1988, 3). Agency for the pogrom was attributed to "Hitler-Fascism"; a critical engagement with the past and the Germans' responsibilities was largely avoided. Consequently, the Shoah served as a way to bolster the GDR's narrative within the context of antifascism, without altering it.

Some observers pointed out that the reason for this increased attention to the Shoah and to the Jews in the GDR was connected to foreign political issues. Because of the economic crisis, Honecker wanted to improve relations with US, and the treatment given to the Jews was a dowel in this manoeuvre. In 1987 East Germany began negotiations with representatives of the World Jewish Congress; the process of normalising relations with Israel was underway, when the collapse of the Berlin Wall significantly altered the situation. Ultimately, prior to GDR's dissolution, the government did not establish diplomatic relations with Israel nor make restitution payments (Muschik 2012).

A more profound reflection on Germans' responsibility for Nazism and the Shoah emerged within the Evangelic Church and notably in the opposition against the GDR's dictatorship. On 8th May 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945, usually celebrated in the GDR as *Liberation Day*, Markus Meckel and Martin Gutzeit, two members of the Evangelical Church active in the peace movement, published a

document entitled «Our Responsibility for Peace». The text explicitly mentioned the horrors of the war and the campaign of extermination against Jews, Sinti, Poles... Furthermore, the declaration represented a breach in the official antifascist narrative, challenging one of its central arguments: the responsibilities for the Nazi crimes should not be placed exclusively on West Germany. Indeed, in both German States guilt was often absolved. Even if GDR representatives had been members of the resistance and had gone into exile, they represented a minority. The majority of GDR citizens had supported or helped Nazism, at least through passivity and silence. Neither the antifascist attitude of the State nor the process of denazification was sufficient to properly assume historical responsibility: the GDR has failed in this process. «The guilt is not alien to us», wrote Meckel and Gutzeit.

The statement, moreover, traced a link between the engagement with the German past and the present. The commitment to peace did not stop at a theological level, but turned to the relationship with German history, emphasising the link between taking responsibility for the past and protection of human rights in the present.

Coming to terms with the past includes the commitment to act against the system of fear and threat also within the society, to stand up against injustice and abuse of power, to promote civic courage and the ability to assume political responsibility, and to work to ensure that the rights and dignity of all people are respected and that they can participate actively and equally in the shaping of society, regardless of their beliefs, race or gender. (Meckel and Gutzeit 1994, 272)

The statement was not intended for a wider public discussion, but is nevertheless an important record, as it underlines how the challenge to Eastern German authority was intertwined with a different attitude towards responsibility for the Nazi crimes and

historical consciousness in general. The hope for a democratisation of Eastern German society was linked to the request for a more open representation of the German past.

The GDR's collapse

By a strange coincidence, the opening of the border between East and West Berlin took place on the evening of 9th November 1989, the same day as the *Reichspogromnacht* in 1938, the Hitler putsch in 1923 and the end of the *Kaiserreich* in 1918 (Willms 1994). It was not only the occurrence of the date, but also the sudden possibility of German reunification that worried the Jewish community. In December 1989 the writer and Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel published an article on the German weekly *Die Zeit* in which he expressed his joy for the GDR's citizens, but also his fear of a new German nationalism. He responded to the mayor of West Berlin, who had said that 9th November would be remembered as an historical date, by arguing that the date already had a place in history because of the *Reichspogromnacht*. Would today's happiness replace the past? – asked Wiesel concerned (Wiesel 1989).

After the fall of the Wall, GDR government, led by Hans Modrow, continued its attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, strengthening its ties with the World Jews Congress. The international community's concerns about the comeback of a powerful Germany were used to try to prevent reunification and preserve the GDR alive. At the end of January 1990, the GDR and Israel representatives met in Copenhagen and talked about the beginning of diplomatic relationships, while in February Modrow promised a compensation for Israeli Shoah victims. In a letter addressed to the Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Modrow asserted that the GDR recognized the German shared responsibility for the past, underlying that Hitler's fascism had committed the most

horrendous crimes against the Jews in the name of the German people (Lorenzini 1998, 228).

During this period, in addition to government initiatives, civil society movements in the GDR continued to mobilise for democracy. In February 1990, the group *Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte* issued a statement calling for Jews in the Soviet Union, who were under anti-Semitic threat, to be welcomed in the GDR¹. For the group the anti-Semitic attacks threatened both human rights and the development of perestroika, as well as being a reminder of the dark Nazi past. In the period following the reunification, the migration of Jews from the post-Soviet States to Germany, facilitated by the introduction of exceptional regulatory measures, continued and intensified.

The 18th of March election gave to East Germany a new government, the first democratically elected, designated to lead the country towards reunification. On 12th April 1990, the first act of the new Parliament was to publish a resolution, accepting joint responsibility for the Nazi crimes, expressing the willingness to pay reparations and to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. The parliamentarians declared:

We, the first freely elected parliamentarians of East Germany, admit our responsibility as Germans in East Germany for our history and our future [...]. Parliament admits joint responsibility on behalf of the people for the humiliation, expulsion, and murdered of Jewish women, men and children. We feel sad and ashamed and acknowledge this burden of German history. We ask the Jews of the world to forgive us for the hypocrisy and hostility of official East German policies towards Israel and also for

¹ Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte, *Aufruf zur Aufnahme sonjetischer Juden in der DDR*, 12. Sitzung des Runden Tisches, 12. Februar 1990 Berlin.

the persecution and degradation of Jewish citizens after 1945 in our country.²

This declaration broke definitively with the GDR's previous master narrative and with the view that West Germans alone should bear the burden of the crimes of the Nazi regime. The admission of the GDR responsibility and the will to provide compensation for the victims led to a rapprochement with the Jewish community and Israel, but also with West Germany, ending the Cold War antagonism. Pointing out the ambiguity and limitations of the GDR's politics of history was an important step on the road to reunification.

The united Germany in early 1990s

With the GDR's collapse, the new German State adopted the Federal Republic's model of public remembrance, both in form and content. On the one hand, the GDR State-sponsored rituals – in which the party played a leading role – disappeared to make way for a more democratic, pluralistic, and socially oriented form of commemoration. On the other hand, the dominant master narrative was no longer an antifascist one, but an anti-totalitarian one, neglecting the previously heroic communist rhetoric. This anti-totalitarian approach recognised the burden of the Shoah and the Nazi past, while at the same time condemned the SED dictatorship and the communist system. The emphasis on Soviet crimes and repression in the GDR characterised the early 1990s. This approach did not lack the risk of equating the two

² Volkskammer der DDR, *Antrag aller Fraktionen der Volkskammer der DDR zu einer gemeinsamen Erklärung der Volkskammer*, 10. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 4 (12. April 1990).

dictatorships, without taking into account their ideological and organisational differences (Rudnick 2011).

Having overcome the division of the country, Germany felt the need to come to terms more adequately with its Nazi past, leaving aside the rhetoric of the Cold War. The relationship with the past no longer implied a confrontation with a competing German State, but remained a sign of the democratic and self-critical development of the country. With international observers fearing the return of German nationalism on the scene, this process took on particular significance. There were also fears that the country would forget the darker sides of its past as a result of the positive event of German reunification.

At the same time after '89, the East-West divide had to be overcome by the project of a unified Europe, with a shared framework of public memory, called upon to provide cultural foundation and legitimacy to the new European asset (Pakier and Str ath 2010). Driven by Western countries, the Shoah remembrance has contributed to the construction of a common European memory, becoming «a contemporary European entry ticket» for the post-socialist States, as written by the historian Tony Judt (Judt 2005, 803). Germany contributed to the Shoah being recognised as a «formative event» and «one of the foundational stories of the European Union» (Subot ic 2019, 17).

Many examples of the transformation of German culture of remembrance could be mentioned, such as the reappraisal of the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial, one of the most significant in the GDR's anti-fascist master narrative (Overesch 1995). After a debate led by a joint commission of experts with deep political nuances, the new presentation of the camp recognised that there were many victims in Buchenwald – not only political persecutes, but also Jews, Roma and Sinti – including

prisoners of the Soviet special camp that operated between 1945 and 1950 (Zimmer 1999). Another important case worth mentioning, was the Schinkel's neo-classical New Guard, located on Berlin's Unter den Linden avenue, which served as a memorial to fallen soldiers after the First World War. The GDR changed its display and built a memorial to the victims of fascism and militarism. After reunification, at Kohl's instigation, the New Guard became the *Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny*, including all the groups of victims – Jews, homosexuals, Sinti... – named on a plaque at the entrance. Inside the memorial remained bare, except for Käthe Kollwitz's statue of a mother with her dead son, a kind of contemporary pity. The two memorials showed a common evolution, since the aim of their reorientation was to modify the previous antifascist narrative, which was mainly dedicated to the memory of the resisters. The new narrative included all groups of victims of the Nazi persecution, giving space to Jews, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, victims of the euthanasia programme, but also to soldiers and displaced persons... in a broader victimizing narrative, softening the distinctions based on political affiliation.

Two brand new projects were undertaken by unified Germany, unrelated to the GDR's legacy: the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* and the Jewish Museum. Both projects were conceived in the second half of the 1980s in the FRG, with the active mobilisation of civil society and Jewish community. After a rather complex process, they were taken over and completed by unified Germany at the beginning of 2000. Above all, Peter Eisenman's memorial has helped to centralise the memory of the Shoah by giving it a physical space in the centre of the German capital (Leggewie and Meyer 2005).

Returning to the 1990s, the changes in the culture of remembrance also included the choice of the national holiday of united Germany.

The previous dates of the GDR and FRG had become obsolete, and 3rd October was chosen as national holiday, because in this day in 1990 the reunification of the two German States became effective. The date, however, referred to a formal act with little emotional impact (Calabretta 2019). The case of 9th November was different: the fall of the Wall was a joyful event of which many Germans had vivid memories. However, it remained an ambiguous date, linked also to the negative memory of the 1938 anti-Semitic pogrom. Over the years, the idea of moving the national holiday to 9th November has been put forward several times, including by important political figures (such as the Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in 2000). Historians were divided between those who believed that 9th November was an appropriate date to commemorate the whole of German history (Domansky 1992, 84) and those who felt that it was impossible to celebrate the joy for the fall of the Wall and the mourn for the anti-Semitic pogrom at the same time (Winkler 2000). The proposal to integrate the stratified memories of 1938 and 1989 remained, without one dominating the other.

We should stop pitting one 9th November against the other, but rather integrate images of history. [...] The day of remembrance of 9th November 1989 cannot be overshadowed by the memory of 9th November 1938 – any more than the anniversary of the November pogrom 1938 cannot be overshadowed by the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. (Steinbach 2008, 882)

The celebrations of the fall of the Wall and the commemoration of the *Reichspogromnacht* followed two different but intertwined paths. In the 1989 anniversaries (especially in 2009, 2014 and 2019), when festive celebrations were organised in Berlin, official speeches referred briefly to the memory of the pogrom, linking the Nazi dictatorship with the division of Germany and the joy of regained

unity. However, the commemoration of the pogrom continued to be carried out by Jewish communities, mainly at a local level and broader commemorations were organised only during the 1938 jubilees.

Consciousness of Germany's past influenced not only the date of the national holiday, but also the way it is celebrated. On 3rd October nationalist tones and patriotic pathos were avoided from the outset. An example of the attention given to the past was the central celebration on 3rd October 1991 in Hamburg. On this occasion, a group of citizens proposed that a visit to the memorial at Neuengamme concentration camp, south-west of Hamburg, be included in the day's programme. The camp was the largest in north-west Germany, where more than 100,000 people were deported, about 90% of which were foreigners. They promoters declared:

The division of Germany was the result of a criminal, barbaric war that has left many open wounds to this day. Neuengamme is still the epitome of inhumanity, terror and extermination, especially among our European neighbours. To ignore Germany's past on 3rd October has strengthened the forces at home that are working towards a new German nationalism and has given rise to fears abroad of a new striving for power by a united Germany. A memorial event for the victims of Nazi terror in Neuengamme, on the other hand, can send a signal that is also understood across borders as a gesture of the will to be good neighbours and to live together peacefully.³

³ Stadt Archiv Hamburg, 131-1 II-9042, *TDE. KZ Neuengamme*, Initiative Dokumentationsstätte KZ Neuengamme, *TDE* (9. September 1991).

Thus, the Day of German Unity on 3rd October 1991 began with the laying of wreaths at the Neuengamme concentration camp memorial.

These initiatives in the field of the remembrance politics have also been confronted with a wave of racist and anti-Semitic violence, due to the resurgence of neo-Nazi groups. From 1991 to 1993 an high number of injuries, murders, attacks to Synagogues spread on all Germany. The government officials listed 4.500 acts of violence attributed to right-wing extremist groups directed mostly at immigrants and Jews. The attention paid by the international community – Israel, US and European countries – to a possible resurgence of the German nationalism began to be a real concern.

Nevertheless, the civil society and the institutions answered swiftly, organising marches in the streets, silent commemorations and stressing that no space would be left to xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the new Germany. The memory of the Shoah was strongly connected to democratic issues and underscored an institutional commitment to oppose not only anti-Semitism but racism and xenophobia in general. One example is Rita Süßmuth's speech on 9th November 1993, on the 50th anniversary of the *Reichspogromnacht*. Indeed, the Bundestag president linked the memory of the Nazi past with the defence of human rights in the present. She also recalled the civil courage of the GDR protest movement, saying: «a vigilant and alert memory is the protector of freedom. If we forget unfreedom, persecution and annihilation, we endanger our own freedom»⁴. In applying the lesson of the Nazi past to the defence of human rights and democracy, Süßmuth also drew on the legacy of East German dissidents.

⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, *Stenographischer Bericht*, 187. Sitzung, Bonn 9. November 1993.

The last milestone in the culture of remembrance of the Shoah in the 1990s was the proclamation by Federal President Roman Herzog in 1996 of the 27th January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, as Day of Commemoration for Victims of National Socialism. There were several reasons for this decision: the desire to highlight the uniqueness of the Nazi persecution of Jews and other groups, the need to give an official response to xenophobic and anti-Semitic violence, the fear that public memory might fade over time, and the desire to strengthen Germany's international position. The initiative was also encompassed in the context of the numerous commemorations held to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War the previous year. In his speech to the Bundestag to mark the Day of Commemoration for Victims of National Socialism, Herzog did not minimise the extent of participation in Nazi murders but emphasised how the Nazi racial ideology «gradually became part of public opinion»⁵. Memory again served as a warning, because Germans should recognize the danger of totalitarianism and racism in order to protect democracy and human rights.

Conclusion

From being a German day of remembrance, 27th January became a European day of remembrance in 2005. The following United Nations' decision to institutionalise the date as the Holocaust Day of Remembrance marked the transition to a global and post-national memory (Assmann 2010). The willingness of the newly unified Germany to discuss its responsibility for the genocide served as a model in this respect.

⁵ Roman Herzog, *Ansprache zum Gedenktag für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus im Deutschen Bundestag*, 19. Januar 1996: https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Roman-Herzog/Reden/1996/01/19960119_Rede.html.

In the 1990s, Germany was compelled to confront the memory of the East German regime, including its culture of remembrance, while simultaneously grappling with the memory of the crimes of Nazism and the Shoah. In this process, it relied on an anti-totalitarian reading, which profoundly reshaped the anti-fascist master narrative of the GDR, leaving aside heroic overtones to accommodate a victim-based reading. Federal institutions played a decisive role in establishing the new frameworks of public remembrance. This encompassed the reshaping of GDR memorials, the design of the national holiday, and the creation of new memorials.

Peter Monteath argued that «the centrality of the Holocaust could be linked to trends in the commemorative practices of both the GDR and the old FRG» (Monteath 2013, 246). However, the analysis of the Shoah culture of remembrance in the GDR from the mid-1980s has shown that some changes did indeed take place, but without leading to decisive transformations, until the State's collapse. Nevertheless, even if it is difficult to measure their weight, it is important to recognise that in the former East Germany there were social pressures from the civic movement, which first started a revision of official narratives and an assumption of responsibility for the German past. These messages were then supported by the GDR during the transition period, especially in the few months following the end of SED rule.

On an official level, the risk for the memory of the Shoah to be neglected by reunified Germany did not materialise. In contrast, the country responded to both the concerns of external observers and the surge in right-wing violence by attempting to reinforce the references to the memory of the past. This, used as a warning and a moral teaching, was closely linked to the necessity of developing and protecting democracy and human rights. Also, on a wider level the Shoah began to be anchored in the emerging narrative of global human rights, and to be seen as a warning against other ethnical or

racial crimes (see the case of the civil conflicts in Yugoslavia and Rwanda).

The general consensus among political forces on the importance of remembering the Shoah has changed in recent years with the rise of far-right movements and the AfD, which, in addition to the presence of forms of anti-Semitism, has distanced itself from the official culture of remembrance, downplaying the importance of remembering the Shoah in order to convey a positive image of German national identity (Grimm and Kahmann 2017, 49-51). The party's entrenchment in the eastern *Länder* has reopened the debate on the legacy of the GDR's political culture, but also on the difficult process of reunification, reminding us of the importance of studying the crucial decade of the 1990s.

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*Holocaust in Slovak Film: From Amnesia to Memory
The Forgotten, Invisible Fates of the “Others”¹*

Eva Filová

Abstract

Dealing with the past and accepting responsibility for the Holocaust has a long and difficult trajectory in Slovakia. Critical self-reflection was prevented first by the communist regime, after the fall of the Iron Curtain by the rise of nationalism and the cult of the war criminal, President Jozef Tiso. Despite the fact that the first compilation film dealing with the Holocaust was made immediately after the war, the right time for other films came only during the period of liberalization of the 1960s. Causing this deficit was not a lack of interest in researching one’s own history, but instead politics and communist anti-Zionism. There was plenty of material, for example the testimony of the escape of Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba from Auschwitz. My paper aims to present little-known Slovak documentary films and contribute to the discussion about the media representation of the Holocaust in East Central Europe. It follows on from several years of research on the reflection of World War II and the Slovak National Uprising in Slovak documentary films after 1945 (Filová, Eva, and Eva Vženteková, 2020. *Slovenský štát vo filme: dokumentárna a braná tvorba po roku 1945*. Bratislava: Vlna, Drewo a srd.).

Keywords: Slovak cinema, documentary films, holocaust, labour camps, transports, Romani people, Jewish women.

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Abstract

*Holokaust v slovenskom filme: Od amnézie k pamäti
Zabudnuté, neviditeľné osudy „tých druhých“*

Vyrovňavanie sa s minulosťou a prijatie zodpovednosti za holokaust má na Slovensku dlhú a ťažkú trajektóriu. Kritickej sebareflexii bránil najskôr komunistický režim, po páde železnej opony zas vzostup nacionalizmu a kult vojnového zločinca, prezidenta Jozefa Tisa. Napriek tomu, že prvý kompilačný film o holokauste vznikol hneď po vojne, na ďalšie filmy prišiel správny čas až v liberalizačnom období 60. rokov. Príčinou tohto deficitu nebol nezáujem o skúmanie vlastnej histórie, ale politika a komunistický antisionizmus. Materiálov pritom bolo dosť, napríklad svedectvo o úteku Alfréda Wetzlera a Rudolfa Vrbu z Osvienčimu. Vo svojom príspevku predstavím málo známe slovenské dokumentárne filmy s cieľom prispieť k diskusii o mediálnej reprezentácii holokaustu vo východnej a strednej Európe. Text nadväzuje na niekoľkoročný výskum obrazu 2. svetovej vojny a Slovenského národného povstania v slovenských dokumentárnych filmoch po roku 1945 (Filová, Eva, and Eva Vženteková, 2020. *Slovenský štát vo filme: dokumentárna a braná tvorba po roku 1945*. Bratislava: Vlna, Drewo a srd.).

Kľúčové slová: slovenská kinematografia, dokumentárne filmy, holokaust, pracovné tábory, transporty, Rómovia, židovské ženy.

1 History as a Political and Cinematic Battlefield

In Slovak cinematography, in fiction and documentary films, we can find quite a few examples of failing collective memory, a false image of the past and efforts to reconstruct it again. An example can be (anti)war films, which before the 1989 Velvet Revolution constituted a large (and obligatory) part of film production. War dramas accounted for 15% of over 290 feature-length films produced for cinemas, and 3% of the almost 3,500 non-fiction

productions were documentaries. It is problematic to determine their exact number for the simple reason that war and insurrection themes were purposefully associated with the post-war reconstruction and building of Slovakia, with the history of the labour movement and the communist party, etc.² However, we are interested in films that deviate from political propaganda and try to represent the trauma associated with the “final solution” through specific stylistic procedures or authorial approach. Problematic historical events and names that had to be forgotten for political reasons were removed from history, books and films: politicians and diplomats of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918 – 1938), war heroes in domestic and foreign resistance, fascist collaborators and the president of the wartime Slovak state Jozef Tiso, faces of the Prague Spring in 1968, emigrants, etc. The Jewish question – a phrase that sounds like a euphemism, much like the women issue or the Hungarian card – was still present in Slovakia long after the war. Antisemitism, deep-rooted prejudices and the return of the Holocaust survivors invoked tensions and led to bloody anti-Jewish pogroms and demonstrations in several Slovak cities.³ Behind the fear of Jews stood our own guilty consciences and issues about how to deal with traitors, murderers and thieves of Jewish property. The short compilation film *Sú osobne zodpovední za zločiny proti ľudskosti!* (*They are personally responsible: for crimes against humanity!*, 1946)⁴ will long remain the most powerful accusation. Director Ján Kadár used the new definition of the crime as an

² Newsreels and TV films are not included in this summary and they require separate research.

³ Topoľčany, Nitra, Kolbasov, Ulič, Bardejov, Prešov (1945), Bratislava (1946, 1948) and more. See Apor et al. (2019); Kubátová (2016).

⁴ In the text, I will use the original movie title and the English translation in parentheses. Translations of movie titles are from official sources. Other Slovak to English translations are by the author.

appeal,⁵ and also identified the main victims of the Holocaust: Jews. Kadár personally lived through the hardships of a labour camp, and from his immediate family, only his brother Štefan survived until the end of the war. Inspired by Soviet montage (editing) theory, he combined foreign and Slovak war materials, stop-frames, slow-motion scenes, repetition and an emotional commentary. The visual material (the Jewish Code and anti-Jewish bills, newspaper titles, photographs and footage from Slovak labour camps and the transports) used by Kadár would be reused in upcoming decades in numerous news journals and documentary films, but without any explicit connection to the Jewish genocide. A reversal in attitude toward Jews was not brought about by the Communist coup of 1948 but by the political developments in Israel, where the January 1949 parliamentary elections signified its move away from pro-Soviet politics and a new inclination towards the West. This resulted in negative, even malevolent, propaganda against Zionism and cosmopolitanism, and also during the process of “de-Jewification” (together with post-war “de-Germanization” and “de-Magyarization”⁶) (Zemko 2006, 32). Communist ideals preaching equality among men were left at the level of grandiose planning. Both politicians and entrepreneurs of Jewish descent became the victims of fabricated political trials in the 1950s.⁷ Not only the Jewish community but the whole of society inclined

⁵ The International Military Tribunal defined crimes against humanity as “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation... or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds.” (The Nuremberg Trials).

⁶ Czechoslovak citizens of German and Hungarian nationality were deprived of Czechoslovak citizenship by Decree 33/1945, which led to their forced removal from the country. This and other decrees are known as the Beneš decrees – after President Eduard Beneš.

⁷ For example, the goldsmith Izidor Frostig was executed in October 1952 for alleged financial criminality, with his court trial recorded in the propagandistic document *Triedny nepriateľ* (*Class Enemy*, dir. Vlado Kubenko, 1952).

towards a “conspiracy of silence” – the Holocaust was not talked about and it became a taboo subject.

The Holocaust is a trauma of Slovak history as it is of every other European country; it was not only the tragedy of the victims but also the tragedy of all their contemporaries and participants. The trauma of the Holocaust in Slovakia, as in any other communist country, is also exacerbated by the fact that for ideological and political reasons this issue was circumvented, distorted and hushed up for more than forty years (Kamenec 2009, 61). Visual testimony was considered to be stronger and more authentic than pathetic, docile commentary (voice over). From a great tragedy, only sporadically dispersed references, symbols and metaphors remained. The filmmakers deemed footage from concentration camps, mass graves or the “Arbeit macht frei” inscription as sufficiently eloquent, and did not feel the need to talk more deeply about the events. The commentaries of the voice over tended to generalise the massacres, the annihilation of nations and of both Slovak and foreign citizens, and to docilely glorify certain groups – Communists, partisans, anti-fascist fighters and the underground resistance. The Jewish genocide was re-classified as an annihilation of the enemies of fascism.

During the 1960s, the situation changed due to the influence of political liberalization. New court trials of war criminals, former Nazi commanders and concentration camp employees were held throughout the world. The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–1965) were attended by Alfréd Wetzler as a witness. In April 1944, Wetzler fled from Auschwitz with Rudolf Vrba. Together, they wrote *The Auschwitz Protocol*, a testimony about the death camp. Vrba, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1958, wrote the book *I Cannot Forgive* (1963) with the Irish journalist, Alan Bestic. In 1964 (Obzor), the book *Čo Dante nevidel (What Dante Did Not See)* was published, in which Wetzler (under the pseudonym Jozef Lánik) described in detail their escape. In the 1960s, several monographs were also published that opened a new discussion on

the topic of the Slovak National Uprising. Historians and filmmakers felt freer, as did a large part of society.

In the ambitious one-hour anti-war film *65,000,000* (dir. Miroslav Hornák, 1961) which stood somewhere between experiment, editing collage, documentary and fiction, the theatrically pathetic scene with the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves in Verdi's opera Nabucco turns into a montage of authentic footage from concentration camps with corpses, cremation ovens and piles of women's hair. The fictional micro-story about the Jewish woman with the brooch thus directly refers to the "final solution of the Jewish question". The documentary film *Príbely z Roháčov* (*Stories from Roháče*, dir. Karol Skřípský, 1965) deals with the sense of guilt towards fellow Jewish citizens for the very first time some 20 years after the end of the war. Two feature films from 1965 serve as a direct accusation of anti-Jewish repressions and the transports during the Slovak State: *Námestie svätej Alžbety* (*St. Elizabeth Square*, dir. Vladimír Bahna, 1965) is a tragic love-story between a Jewish girl and a Slovak boy. The Oscar-winning *Obchod na korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*, dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965) tells the tragic tale of the Aryanizer of a Jewish shop and the shop's rightful owner, an old Jewish woman.

The overturning of the Prague Spring's democratizing ideals following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 resulted in a return to the pro-Soviet proven strategy of dodging and distorting historical facts. In the 1980s, Western scientific discourse on the Holocaust expanded to include the term *Shoah*, which also appears in the several-hours-long documentary film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985). At that time, two films by Miroslav Cimerman were made with the same setting and with the same theme. The first film is a newsreel *Kinožurnál* (*Cinema Newsreel 19/1985*) with the subtitle *Osvienčimské memento* (*Auschwitz Memento*), which was created for the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the largest concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau (27.1.1945).

The second film is the documentary “*Es ist Dunkel in meiner Erinnerung...*” – “*Je temno v mojej pamäti...*” (“*It’s Dark in My Memory...*”, 1986), which wasn’t released for distribution until 1988. The narrator’s voice fades out to give space for the memories of survivors who talk about the atrocities they had lived through. One of these, retrieved from oblivion for the first time in years, features Alfréd Wetzler. Neither his heroic escape from Auschwitz nor the deportations from Slovakia are, however, mentioned in the film, while the original screenplay contains more than what was found in the film. In spite of that, several never-before-mentioned topics are discussed in the film: the killing of women with phenol heart injections, sterilization experiments and secret abortions. The presence of women’s testimonies is not new for the topic of war, but radically different.⁸ The female perspective only seconded the male testimony and dominated only in gender-specific areas: on the occasion of International Women’s Day, in medical films that focused on women’s health, pregnancy and child upbringing, reports from textile factories etc. Female characters in feature films – in the case of war victims – were usually innocent, passive victims, such as in the films *St. Elizabeth Square* and *The Shop on Main Street*. The opposite case was represented by the fallen women, collaborators or mistresses of Nazi commanders, who profited from confiscated Jewish property in the films *Polnočná omša* (*The midnight Mass*, dir. Jíří Krejčík, 1962), *Obchod na korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*, dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965), *Naši pred bránami* (*In front of the gate*, dir. Ludovít Filan, 1970), *Veľká noc a veľký deň* (*Great night and*

⁸ It is interesting to observe the differences between the film explication, the script and the finished film. The director’s idea was more spectacular, he asked for colour material, which he did not receive, he planned to use samples from foreign films (*Night and Fog*, *Ordinary Fascism*, *Shoah*...). The director was aware of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the obtained testimonies, but for political or other reasons they did not make it to the movie. See Slovak Film Institute, National Film Archive, Studio of Short Films.

great day, dir. Štefan Uher, 1974). In both cases, however, victims and collaborators usually end tragically or are punished.

Even though it was not possible at that stage to talk about a turn towards micro-history, invisible characters and minorities, a shift is evident in the film *It's Dark in My Memory...* In 1987, a samizdat document was created, in which 24 publicly known artists and intellectuals (the writers Dominik Tatarka, Hana Ponická and Milan Rúfus, the painter Vincent Hložník, the Catholic dissidents Ján Čarnogurský, František Mikloško) expressed their attitudes towards the Holocaust, expressed regret for the victims and stated the need for a dignified memorial (Vyhlásenie k deportáciám židov zo Slovenska).⁹ This was the first expression of remorse, of an act of apology, but also of defiance against a Communist regime that destroyed synagogues and left Jewish cemeteries squalid.¹⁰

2 Revision of History After 1989

The fall of the Communist regime brought with it new challenges for historians and filmmakers as well. Films suddenly ceased to be ideological tools. A new history of Slovakia – as well as new literature and textbooks – was needed, that would bring the truth about the Slovak national uprising, domestic and foreign resistance, collaboration, labour camps, transports, Aryanization, post-war pogroms etc.

The wild years of privatization, mafias, nationalism of the 90s were marked by a struggle for a democratic and pro-European character for Slovakia, but also by the breakdown of Slovak filmmaking and the dissolution of the only Slovak film studio, Koliba. Film production rapidly decreased; Slovak Television became the main producer of films, mostly documentaries. The director Dušan Hudec focused on retracing the stories of Slovak Jews. In a two-part TV documentary

⁹ Full text and signatories (in Slovak): Vyhlásenie k deportáciám židov zo Slovenska (October 1987).

¹⁰ See more: “Jewish history still being made.” *The Slovak Spectator* (9 Jul 2020).

Poslavia nádeje (*Messengers of Hope*, 1999), 18 Slovak Jews who survived Auschwitz presented their testimonies on camera; the film *Svedok* (*The Witness*, 2001) follows the fate of a young Jewish boy who escaped a massacre and, as the sole witness, was able to convict the offenders of the murder; and *Miluj bližneho svojho...* (*Love Thy Neighbor*, 2004)¹¹ maps a tragic incident in Topoľčany, where, before the war, a large Jewish community used to live. The film reconstructs the development of a tragedy – from the peaceful cohabitation of the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, through the radicalization of Slovaks due to anti-Jewish propaganda and antisemitism, the stealing of Jewish property and the transports during March 1942, to a pogrom that took place in September 1945 in which more than 40 Jews were injured. The film *Celý svet je úzky most* (*The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge*, 2010) portrays the Košice rabbi Yossi Steiner who, as a child, had to hide from being deported along with his parents.

Probably the most problematic were the films that dealt with the controversial wartime criminal Jozef Tiso who, as the head of the autonomous government, signed the first deportations of Jews from southern Slovakia in November 1938 and then, as president, additional transports between 1942 and 1945. Tiso and the wartime Slovak state had been among the taboo topics of the previous period when this part of the past was reduced to only the history of the anti-fascist resistance (Kamenec 2009, 43). In the 1990s, the cult of Tiso rose from the ashes due to exiled historians and increasingly strong nationalist voices calling Tiso's 1947 execution a martyrdom (Hruboň 2017).

The first film about Tiso was the television documentary *Pokus o portrét* (*An Attempt at a Portrait*, dir. Ľubomír Mlynárik, 1991), which chose to look at his person as objectively as possible, without prejudice and emotion, and not only in black and white. In addition

¹¹ Several films by Dušan Hudec had a problem with television censorship. The public Slovak Television (STV) refused to broadcast *Love Thy Neighbor*. See more: *The Slovak Spectator*, 2004.

to the rich archival material that captured the political rise of Tiso, the main dramatic line consists of two different opinions, represented by Tiso's lawyer JUDr. Ernest Žabkay and the plaintiff, JUDr. Anton Rašla. The feature-length documentary *Tisove tiene (Tiso's Shadows)*, dir. Dušan Trančík, (1998) also focused on the principle of the conflict between several opposing points of view. Trančík followed a method of alternating statements between lawyers, representatives of the church, the ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Vatican, Anton Neuwirth, an officer of the American military intelligence service (CIC) who arrested the in hiding Tiso, and fanatical nationalists who still worshiped his cult. However, the provocative topic did not find support in Slovakia, so the film was created thanks to the financial support of Czech Television.

3 Female Viewpoint, Female Experience in Documentary Film

The victims of criminal acts and wars are most frequently women and children – while men are represented as noble fighters with celebrated heroic deaths, the bravery and heroism of women remain invisible. While we find enough female characters in feature films (Lewis 2017)¹² because every story stands and falls on relationships and different forms of love, in documentary films, it is only rarely that women and children are cast in the roles of witnesses, as personal observers or involved individuals. It is interesting to observe where this position changes, where female narrators/witnesses/protagonists and the female voice come to the fore.

Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich recorded absent female voices and war memories in her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*. She compares memory to “*light-gathering power*” – the ability of a lens to fix the captured image. According to her, women's memories of

¹² See more: Lewis, Ingrid. 2017. *Women in European Holocaust Films: Perpetrators, Victims and Resisters*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

the war are the most “*light-gathering*” in terms of strength of feelings, in terms of pain.

I would even say that “women’s war” is more terrible than “men’s”. Men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings. And another thing: men are prepared from childhood for the fact that they may have to shoot. Women are not taught that... They are not prepared to do that work... And they remember other things, and remember differently. They are capable of seeing what is closed to men. I repeat once more: their war has small, has color, a detailed world of existence. (Alexievich 2018, xxiii)

One of the first female portraits is the mid-length film *Cesta Magdalény Robinsonovej* (*The Journey of Magdalena Robinsonova*, 2008). The director, Marek Šulík, didn’t have a chance to meet the Slovak photographer personally because she died in 2006, but he works with recorded interviews interlaced with archive photographic and film materials, along with newly filmed scenes. His form of presenting Robinsonová’s interviews is also interesting; they are shown on a TV screen travelling through different places inside the former Auschwitz concentration camp, where she was interned. The TV-set was chosen deliberately as an important, but also problematic media battlefield in which populists, extremists and defenders of the wartime Slovak State are given the space to talk. Šulík pulls us into the story through a slow ride along a corridor with a centrally placed TV screen in which a film (a life story) is shown as a time-lapse with short pauses, and different picture and sound fragments flash through the grainy image. From time to time, the almost haptically fleshed out accounts by Robinsonová are interrupted by TV or “*systemic*” (technical or social) shortcomings.

On March 25, 1942, the first transport to Auschwitz was sent from Poprad, a city in northeastern Slovakia. In it were a thousand single young women, of whom only a few survived. The television documentary *Prvý transport* (*The First Transport*, dir. Milan Homolka, 2017) combines the talking heads of historians and survivors, explaining the interconnections and recalling past events, along with various materials (radio recordings, documentation, photographic and film material) that explain the development of domestic politics at that time. The first victim of this transport was a woman suffering from severe diabetes who did not survive the inhumane conditions of the long journey. The women's memories of the departure from home to the unknown, allegedly travelling for work, the inhuman and demeaning conditions in the camp, and the fear they felt during every execution, are extremely suggestive. The film is framed by a reconstruction of the past events: at the beginning, high school girls get onto a period cattle train car and try to experience what their peers lived through in the times. At the end of the film, the girls share their unpleasant feelings.

The fates of extraordinary women from the Slovak Jewish community were investigated by director Anna Grusková. Her debut film *Rabínka* (*The Woman Rabbi*, 2012) is a documentary portrait of Gisi Fleischmann, the brain behind the illegal Bratislava Working Group that operated under the Jewish Centre and focused on rescuing Jews from deportation. The film adaptation of her story was preceded by long-term research that also resulted in a radio broadcast trilogy and a theatre play that first premiered in Italy. The film reconstruction of Gisi Fleischmann's life is told through several storylines: archive recordings, expert commentaries, personal recollections, the theatre adaptation of the play *La Rabbina* by a Bolognese theatre and authorial commentary. The rich archive material consists of film shots and photographs of wartime Bratislava, family photographs, letters, telegrams, passports, stamps, maps, graphs, caricatures, drawings, radio recordings and items from foreign archives. Grusková creates a visually and

factually rich portrait of the woman whose organisational and diplomatic skills placed her at the forefront of the Jewish resistance. After her arrest, she was taken to Auschwitz with the note, “R.U.” – Rückkehr unerwünscht (Return Undesirable).

The second documentary film *Návrat do horiaceho domu* (*Return to a Burning House*, 2014) is a journey in the steps of Chaviva Reicková, a Slovak patriot, Zionist and soldier. She became a victim of Nazi retaliations after the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising (SNP). In a short period of time, Reicková underwent dynamic personal development: she moved from Banská Bystrica to Bratislava where she organised the migration of Slovak Jews to Palestine. Then she herself moved to Palestine, where she helped launch a kibbutz. She underwent military, paratrooper and intelligence training and, after the launch of SNP, she came back to Slovakia. While *The Woman Rabbi* mapped out a politically and topographically compact area, *Return* is conceived more broadly and divergently – due to both Reicková’s foreign activities and the international material available. The first two scenes reveal the two central locations: the Banská Bystrica Region and the Sharon Plain. These scenes show also the two different approaches towards the relationship with “*places of memory*” – the Slovak side is represented by a newly-built miniature Chaviva Reicková garden near the monumental building of the SNP Memorial (the Slovak National Uprising), while the Israeli side is represented by the large, forested campus of the educational centre Givat Haviva. Grusková crosses the boundaries of her research towards broader historical and political contexts – in her film, the grandiose celebrations of the 70th anniversary of SNP in 2014 are shown alongside displays of extremism. A paradox concerning memory is the fact that in the region of the most powerful anti-Nazi resistance and the greatest Nazi retaliations, an ultranationalist extremist in 2013 won county elections. The title of Anna Grusková’s latest film *Žena novej doby* (*Woman of the New Age*, 2022) is based on an extensive publication from 1938 edited by Alžbeta Gwerková Göllnerová and Jarmila

Zikmundová.¹³ The film is about the fate of one of them, the literary historian, translator and teacher Alžbeta Gwerková, who was tortured and shot by the Gestapo (respectively Hlinka Guard)¹⁴ in the winter of 1944. Grusková used self-commentary, quotes from a book dedicated to the education of the modern woman, historical interpretation and dance scenes.

Public opinion looks at women scientists as an unhealthy phenomenon, claiming that a woman chooses this field of activity only out of necessity, because she cannot make a living otherwise, or she is driven to pursue it by a morbid ambition. Public opinion does not want to allow this, that a woman can devote herself to science out of an inner need, that she can have abilities and a scientific character. (...) Every woman must remember that she does not speak, act, or work only for herself, but for all women. (Göllnerová 1939, 144 – 147)

4 Porajmos – Unknown Romani Holocaust

For a long time, the Romani genocide stood outside of scientific interest, filling the “*white spaces*” of history after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 seemed not to concern the Romani people (Janas 2010). The titles of the first more complex pieces of research testify to this exclusion: *Unknown Holocaust* (Frištenská, Lázničková, and Sulitka 1995), *Unacknowledged Holocaust* (Kumanová and Mann 2007), *Forgotten Camps* (Janas 2008). Like the Jews, the fate of the Romani was the systematic liquidation, while their persecution goes back deeply into the past. Their

¹³ The book was published in two editions: in 1938 with the subtitle *Book for the Education of a Democratic Woman* and with an introductory quote by T. G. Masaryk; in the spring of 1939, under political pressure from the clerico-fascist Slovak Republic, the editors had to change the subtitle to *Book for the National Education of Women*. Nonetheless, both editions were confiscated.

¹⁴ Slovak nationalist militant organization (1938 – 1945).

representation is built on myths and stereotypes that the Roma are savages, cannibals, antisocial, dirty and lazy. According to the American scientist Ian Hancock, the myth was passed down that the Romani people were willing to be enslaved – that slavery was natural for them. According to Hancock, it is striking that even after the war the Romani people received no help, that no-one was called to testify on their behalf during the Nuremberg Trials or any other war crimes trial, that they were never compensated, for a long time they did not have any memorial to the victims, and for a long time they were classed as “*other victims*” (Hancock 2001).

Official Slovak politics seems to have avoided this topic for a long time and thus covered up the debt to its own citizens. Since 2005, thanks to the initiative of the civil association In Minorita, we have been commemorating the Roma Holocaust Remembrance Day in Slovakia. On August 2, 1944, over 4,000 Roma were murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Since 2005, commemorative plaques and monuments began to increase at the places of deportations, mass executions and labour camps (Dubnica nad Váhom, Lutilla, Nemecká, Zvolen, Slatina, etc.).¹⁵ However, not much has changed from an existential point of view. In Slovakia, two-thirds of the Romani population still live in segregated slums, in poverty, and in poor hygienic conditions without water and sewage. Their discrimination continues even today.

Repeated bans on nomadism – both during the wartime Slovak state and under communism – deprived the Roma, who were skilled craftsmen, of the possibility of a living. Elena Lacková, the first Slovak Roma writer, education worker and a graduate of the Department of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague (1970), recalls how during the war Roma were forced to settle in villages and small towns and how they were soon forcibly evicted from

¹⁵ See website: <http://www.romaholocaust.sk/sk/pripominanie/159-obcianske-zdruzenie-inminorita>. In 2015, the European Parliament declared August 2 as the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma.

there to the hills at least two kilometres away, where they constructed temporary ghettos. They lived in those ghettos or settlements long after the war, because the post-war reconstruction of the country did not involve the Roma (Lacková 1997).

The wartime anti-Romani decrees first made it impossible for Roma to move about, and forbade them from entering cities or using public transport – whoever was caught, had their hair roughly cut or was beaten. The Romani men were taken to work units, or camps, where they worked on the most difficult construction sites throughout Slovakia. More than 5,000 Roma passed through the camps. Today, almost no one knows that the Romani men, in primitive and slave-like conditions, built railways, bridges, tunnels, roads, regulated water flows and started the rough construction of the Orava Dam. Director Paľo Korec recorded testimonies about the construction of the Prešov – Strážske railway line in eastern Slovakia in the medium-length TV documentary *To ta trať* (*That's the Track*, 2002). He contrasts the present with celebratory archival propaganda shots from the construction of the railway, near which witnesses still live today. They still remember the inhumane conditions in the work camp in Hanušovce during the construction of the long railway viaduct. They remember: “... *how they treated people... We were not human (for them), but animals.*” and “*Torture was the most important thing there, the beating, that was the worst, and the hunger.*” This new track became the pride of the Clerico-fascist regime, and was also visited by President Jozef Tiso. Of course, the celebration was held without the participation of the Roma.

Ian Hancock sees the difference between the Roma and other nations by suggesting that the Roma lack any means to consolidate and defend their identity, they have no political or military power, they do not have their own territory; their history, religion and language were unknown to others. Dark skin, their way of life and also the fact that the West associated them with the threat of Islam contributed to the creation of a negative image (Hancock 2001, 141). Who does not have his own history does not exist. The

feature-length cinematic essay *Diera v hlave* (*Hole in the Head*, 2016) is based on the metaphor of a leaky memory. Director Robert Kirchhoff followed the history of the Romani genocide across several European countries, resigned to archival materials, uncovering the past through a narrative in which current events and situations alternate with memories of killing, concentration camps and pain. (Those events include violent police interventions against nomads, a demonstration, a meeting of family and friends after many years, etc.)

Each character tells a different story, and the stories intertwine like a braid. They are menacingly and dangerously similar, gradually becoming one story. Because there were Roma concentration camps in every country, the local police cooperated in the liquidation of the Roma, the killers used almost identical methods... Or not? Isn't it the case that gradually, after these many years, a kind of collective Roma memory about the Holocaust was created, that the stories wander in the memories and other memories are always added to them? The Roma themselves question the reliability of memory, because who would remember all that... After all, it doesn't matter how it happened, because, unfortunately, it just happened. (Ciel 2017, 34)

This pan-European wandering painfully affects Slovakia as well; here too the Roma were interned in labour and detention camps and suffered mass-murder. Due to the incompleteness of the archival materials, it is almost impossible to find the exact number of people affected. According to estimates, approximately 3–4 thousand people passed through 14 coercive labour facilities (Varinský 2004, 18).

The documentary film *Ako som sa stala partizánkou* (*How I Became A Partisan*, 2021) mixes memories in a fairy tale form through which the director Vera Lacková reveals the tragic fate of her family. The Roma people were not only war victims – forced to

live in segregation, forbidden to join the army, imprisoned in the Dubnica nad Váhom concentration camp – they were also active participants in the Slovak National Uprising. Lacková’s film talks for the first time about their participation, a topic that was never talked about before. Lacková visits archives, living survivors and neighbours, and composes a portrait of her great-grandfather Ján Lacko, whose mother, wife and four children were shot in a forest by Nazis. The film is not only about past resistance, but also about contemporary struggles – the director fights for making known other Romani partisans and acknowledges the crimes against humanity done to the Roma. She also deals with another “*storyline*” – the female genealogy from her oldest relative, *phuri daj* in the Roma language, through her biological and adoptive mother, to her own pregnancy. In interviews and discussions with her peers and representatives of institutions, she encounters evasive reactions, prejudice and indifference towards extremism. Anew, she builds archive material that illustrates the wartime cataclysm, while she also reveals a current family tragedy: the story of a father beaten and robbed by his white friends, *gadjo*. The director lost her father when she was eight years old. This deep personal scar and the constant presence of the author in the scenes reveal the racism deeply rooted in our society.

One of the locations the director passes through is the village of Lety in the Czech Republic. A large piggery stood on the site where during the war there was a concentration camp for Roma. Three special transports were sent from Lety to Auschwitz and the gypsy camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the first in December 1942, the second and third in March and June 1943 (Fraser 1998, 275). In the 1990s, all initiatives to build a Romani monument failed. Shortly after the completion of the film, however, the piggery was demolished and a Roma and Sinti Holocaust Memorial was opened in May 2024. The film ends as it began: as an almost fairy-tale-like story told to the director’s newly born daughter Daria. Romani family stories have always been carried from generation to

generation through fairy tales. In a fairy tale, everyone has a name, an identity. Thanks to the director's research, new names, fixed in memory, have been added to their family grave, commemorating the fates of women and other minorities who have lived in oblivion for such a long time.¹⁶

5 Conclusions

In her work about the specific role that documentary film has played and plays in Holocaust representation, Golan (2023) wrote:

Using its universal language, documentary film has served as an intermediary between the viewer and the survivor, as well as between the historical truth as captured by the eye of the lens, even before the smoke had evaporated from the furnaces, and the deniers.

The fates of the “others”, Jewish women and Roma people, remained untold for a long time. A number of significant documentary films (*The Woman Rabbi*, *Return to a Burning House*, *Hole in the Head*, *How I Became a Partisan*) have been made only in recent years with a new approach on reflecting on trauma and the Holocaust.

We have tried to present several examples of Slovak documentary films that work with memory in various ways and deepen our knowledge of our past. This is only a small, rather atypical part of Slovak audiovisual production. Even their heroes and heroines are exceptions rather than typical and stereotyped representations of men and women. However, we will also find other examples. The touching story of Sir Nicholas Winton, who in 1939 saved 669

¹⁶ In the recent documentary film *O baripeň (Pride, 2023)* Lacková focused on the story of the above-mentioned Romani writer Elena Lacková (1921 – 2003) and her great-granddaughter, the successful young actress and singer Alžbeta Ferencová (1991).

Jewish children and transported them from Czechoslovakia to Great Britain, was made into two Czech-Slovak co-productions directed by Matej Mináč: documentary *Nicholas G. Winton – Sila ľudskosti* (*The Power of Good: Nicholas Winton*, 2002) and a feature film *Nickyho rodina* (*Nicky's Family*, 2011).¹⁷ The feature films *Nedodržaný sľub* (*Broken Promise*, dir. Jíří Chlumský, 2009) and *Správa* (*The Auschwitz Report*, dir. Peter Bebjak, 2020) also tried to attract expanded audience interest, but despite their genre potential and strong stories based on real events (the true story of a Jewish boy Martin Friedmann, the escape of Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba from Auschwitz), they did not become blockbusters. Both films received positive reviews and acclaim at international festivals.¹⁸

Despite the fact that Holocaust films are inherently traumatic for the viewer, they constitute a significant and interesting part of audiovisual production in recent years, through which more and more “others” find a place where their voices can be heard. Although even today it sometimes seems that the collective memory does not work and society is prone to forget faster than to correct its failures, new scientific research or artistic activities prove that we must always revisit the past. Such a place of memory is the area of the former labour camp in Sereď, today the Holocaust Museum, opened in 2016 and renovated in 2021, whose original barracks remind one of the repression and the 16 transports to several death camps that took place there.

¹⁷ Among Slovak films, they have received the greatest international acclaim. The Nicholas Winton character appeared for the first time in the feature film *Všetci moji blízcí* (*All My Loved Ones*, dir. Matej Mináč, 1999).

¹⁸ In 2021, *The Auschwitz Report* was the second-best-attended Slovak film with 39,063 viewers.

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Lau tiskoch (Don't forget!)
Jewish memory in the Hungarian
cultural public sphere (1958-1967)

Tímea Jablonczay

Abstract

My paper presents claims concerning the developments in the discourse of Holocaust memory in the Hungarian socialist period in the '60s. My research assumes that, although the official politics of memory in Hungary did not allow for open social processing of the trauma, it can be concluded that from the late 1950s and 1960s onwards there were clear signs of a breaking of silence, of a remembering of the victims, of reflection on the presence of the haunting past. It is my argument that the trials of the 1960s - the Eichmann trial or the Auschwitz trials as global events - may have influenced the Hungarian cultural sphere, just as the political impact of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war may have had a decisive influence on the shaping of Jewish memory. The present study is about the encouraged form of Jewish communal memory – the *Claims Conference* grant for cultural reconstruction, exhibition, and book publishing (from 1958) -, on the other hand, about the forms of memory revived in the literary public between 1960 and 1967, and finally about a person - Erzsi Szenes - through whom we can illustrate the particularities and discontinuities of Jewish memory in the 1960s.

Keywords: Jewish memory, Eichmann trial, preservative forgetting, official memory politics, Holocaust narratives, the 1960s.

Lau tiskoch (Non dimenticare!)

La memoria ebraica nella sfera pubblica culturale ungherese (1958-1967)

Il mio lavoro presenta alcuni aspetti del discorso della memoria dell'Olocausto, emersi durante gli anni Sessanta nell'Ungheria socialista. La ricerca si basa sul presupposto che, sebbene la politica ufficiale della memoria in Ungheria non permettesse un'aperta elaborazione sociale del trauma, a partire dalla fine degli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta ci furono

chiari segni di rottura del silenzio, apertura al ricordo delle vittime e alla riflessione sulla presenza del passato tortuoso. Sostengo che i grandi processi degli anni Sessanta - il processo Eichmann o i processi di Auschwitz come eventi globali - hanno influenzato la sfera culturale ungherese, in modo simile l'impatto politico della guerra arabo-israeliana del 1967 ha esercitato un'influenza decisiva sulla formazione della memoria ebraica. Questo studio tratta delle forme di memoria ebraica, come la ricostruzione culturale della Claims Conference (dal 1958), che ha permesso di realizzare una mostra ("Dalla servitù alla libertà", 1960) e diverse attività editoriali (ricerche storiche, traduzioni, memorie in ungherese). Allo stesso tempo, per quanto riguarda le forme di memoria riattivate nel pubblico letterario tra il 1960 e il 1967, il lavoro indaga l'impatto diretto del processo Eichmann e infine, attraverso la storia di Erzsi Szenes, caratterizza le specificità e le discontinuità della memoria ebraica negli anni Sessanta.

Parole chiave: memoria ebraica, processo Eichmann, oblio preservativo, politica della memoria ufficiale, narrazioni dell'Olocausto, Anni '60.

1 Introduction¹

¹ This paper is a written version of the lecture entitled "Official Amnesia and the Imperative of Remembering. Memory discourse(s) of the Holocaust in the Hungarian cultural sphere (1958/60-1967)" presented at the conference of *Memories of the Shoah. Narrative Forms and Cultural Discourse in East-Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe* (Padua, 11-13, 05, 2023). The research findings of the paper have been published in Hungarian in an expanded form (discussing the intersection of anti-fascist and Jewish memory) entitled "Lau tiskoch (Ne felejtst!) és Soha többé fasizmust! Zsidó és antifasiszta holokausztemlékezet a hatvanas évek kulturális nyilvánosságában" [„Lau tiskoch (Remember!) and Never again fascism! Jewish and antifascist Holocaust remembrance in the cultural public sphere of the 1960s”] (Regio 32, no 3, 2024).

In Hungary, out of a Jewish population of 762,000, more than half a million - Randolph L Braham (2000, 251-253) estimates it at 564,500, and László Karsai (2001, 15) puts it around 550 to 569,000 - were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Returnees from the camps and survivors of the Budapest ghetto, deeply traumatized and deprived, were forced to rebuild their lives in a society that had recently collaborated with the occupying forces and was complicit in a horrifying event to which it was subsequently unable to respond adequately. Among the survivors, many decided to emigrate to the West or Palestine (Israel), and the Jewish community, with the support of Western organizations, sought to assist the remaining victims in rebuilding their lives and reintegrating into society (Csorba 1990, 61). Right after the atrocities, between 1945 and 1948, several written accounts of recent traumatic experiences of deportation and persecution were published by intellectuals and non-literate survivors of the concentration camps, labour camps, and ghettos (Kisantal 2020). More survivors – such as *Béla Zsolt*, *Tereza Rudnóy*, *Miklós Nyiszli*, *Ernő Szép* - have considered it their moral duty to share the traumatic experiences they had undergone. Not only would they tell their own painful stories, but they also sought to memorialize the innocent victims. In this first period, it was thus possible to say that Jewish memory was represented by the Jewish survivors, particularly those who had survived the Holocaust in concentration camps, factories, as labour workers, or in the ghetto of Budapest. However, these memorial works could not become part of the social memory when they were published or in the following decades, just as in other countries, including Hungary, the impermeable silence, or indifference surrounding the mass murder (Assmann 2025, 23). However, after the communist takeover, between 1948 and 1989, under Soviet rule, the ruling communist party was instrumental in creating and controlling the official memory of the World War II and the Nazi genocide.

Tony Judt (2005, 823) argues that the memory of the Jewish mass murder plays a marginal role in post-communist Eastern Europe. Still, Judt (1996, 41-42) also makes the case that the national memory politics of Cold War Europe was characterized by an international practice of collective silencing of the genocide, which made the Germans responsible for all crimes. In so doing, he claims not only that East and West followed the same forgetting practices in confronting the Holocaust, but also that this narrative of the past based on a national strategy of forgetting allowed the responsibility of collaborator states to be silenced at the state (and societal) level. For Aleida Assmann (2016, 71-74) the pre-1968 period is usually seen as a period of communicative silencing, of latency, concerning the events of the Holocaust. Still, the early 1960s should also be seen as the beginning of a confrontation with the crimes, manifested in prosecutions, reparation negotiations, and the cultural sphere as the beginning of a “subliminal memory”. Until recently, it was a widespread conviction that the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary was characterized by amnesia from 1949 until the fall of communism, a taboo that only began to be slightly dismantled in the mid-1970s and that the topic entered the social discourse mainly in the 1980s (Fritz 2012, Gyáni 2016, Szirák 2005, Heller 1996). Over the last decade, there has been a growing awareness in Hungarian historical sociology and cultural studies as well of the need to re-evaluate earlier claims regarding the socialist era that relied on *deep silence* about the Holocaust and Jewish identity (Bohus, Hallama, and Stach 2022, Esbenhade 2019, Esbeshade 2022, Jablonczay 2019, Jablonczay 2022, Kékesi, Zombory 2022, Szécsényi 2017, Varga, 2019, Véri 2018, Véri 2022, Zombory, Lénárt, and Szász 2013). This renewed - local, national, and transnational - research on the memory of the Holocaust no longer underpins the concept of *deep silence*. It explores how and in which ways the Holocaust was articulated in the socialist states of Eastern Europe through antifascist ideological discourse, regardless of Western discourses, while at the same time revealing the findings

on the politicized representations of the Holocaust in the multidirectional relations between antifascism and Holocaust memory. Some studies (Kékesi, Zombory 2022, Esbenshade 2019, Esbenshade 2022, Bohus 2022) also suggest that antifascism was not only a monolithic propagandistic instrument of state socialist regimes, but also had multiple meanings, it could be understood not only as a top-down ideological tool with a direct allegiance to Moscow but also, in the context of the new discourse of antifascism, as a bottom-up identity pattern, a representational praxis, dedicated to the enforcement of human rights struggles.

Conceding the multiple ways in which antifascist discourse can be approached, the issue of communist control remains a relevant factor for the interpretation of discourses, since it is an undoubted fact that it was the institutional conditions of communist political ideology in Hungary, as in one of the countries of the Soviet bloc, that directed the practice of cultural representation - from education to the arts - even after the Stalinist (in Hungary, so-called Rákosi) regime. In the communist master narrative, as Tony Judt (2005, 823) also states, the Second World War was interpreted as an anti-fascist war in which national and class categories (workers) were applied, but ethnic and religious labels were avoided.

It remains to be argued that, as in other countries, the public commemoration of the Jewish past has been absent from the policy, certainly not in the sense that the memory politics of the Holocaust developed by the subsequent globalization of Holocaust memory. Although the official memory policy in Hungary did not allow for the open social processing of trauma, it is to be found that from the late 1950s and the 1960s onwards, there were obvious signs of silence being broken, of victims being remembered, and of the presence of a haunting past. My research aims to identify the discursive and political prerequisites for the emergence of Jewish memory and to point out that in the discursive space opened up, it was not only antifascist discourse that provided the avenues for narrative, but also to highlight that

specifically the contours of the Jewish memory tradition seem to be present in the cultural sphere of the 1960s, in synchrony with, but in a much more clandestine way than, international phenomena in terms of political control.

In my paper, I try to show the traces of Holocaust memory in a particular and forgotten discourse exploring the way how survivors, their descendants (or sometimes non-Jewish Hungarians) try to tell a story of the haunting past into the present. What we encounter appears to be the forgetting process of a fragmented memory regime, that from the 1970s onwards, developments related to Jewish memory articulated in the 1960s, in Aleida Assmann's terms (2008, 98) were immersed in the realm of archive's "preservative forgetting". I hypothesize that the trials of the 1960s - the Eichmann trial or the Auschwitz trials as global events - may have also left their mark on the Hungarian cultural public, like the political impact of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war may have had a decisive influence on the development of the forming Jewish memory, but only by preventing its presence. This paper draws on a larger body of research to present some of its findings, firstly on the supported form of Jewish communal memory, secondly on the forms of memory that were revived in the literary public between 1960 and 1967, and finally on a person - Erzsi Szenes - through whom we can illustrate the specificities and discontinuities of Jewish memory in the 1960s (Jablonzay 2019, Jablonczay 2022, Jablonczay 2023).

2 Jewish communal memory during the 60s

The organization that maintained the institutional and communal life of Hungarian Jewry was always (even after the war) tightly entwined with the state power system, for reasons of diaspora policy and out of self-defence (Csorba 1990, Kovács 2003). After the war, the promise of the socialist order - equality of citizenship and political rights, the reduction of anti-Semitism after the shocks

of persecution and deportation - could guarantee the living conditions of Jews, and the new order's offer understandably did not conflict with their interests (Csorba 1990). Under the Stalinist dictatorship of the 1950s (Rákosi-era), however, the Jewish community faced non-recognition of Jewish identity and Zionism; the trials against Zionists were held in 1953, arresting Jewish leaders (Győri-Szabó 2009, 212-227). The Jewish community followed a policy of obedience and obligatory loyalty in the hope that its living conditions would be secured and that there would be no possibility of anti-Semitism in society (Kovács 2003, 135-140). After the 1956 revolution, the erosion of Jewish advocacy and forms of dependence on communist power were still prevalent. The Jewish policy of the post-Stalinist period in Hungary was shaped by the fact that Jewish issues were not allowed to enter the political arena, giving no room for anti-Semitism, and Jewish identity was tied to the denomination. Moreover, it was also part of the pact that the Jewish community would not be allowed to have any identification with Israeli identity and could not support Zionism (Kovács 2003, 140-142).

For Hungarian Jewry, it was pivotal to establish contacts (financial and intellectual support) with transnational Jewish organizations, especially the *World Jewish Congress* or the *American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee*. After the war, these organizations were of great help in the administration of justice, the recovery of confiscated property, and the rebuilding of the denominational community life in Hungary. Between 1945 and 1949, the *World Jewish Congress* played a political role in the reconstruction of the Jewish community, in the trials of the people, and the administration of legal justice. In 1953 the organization withdrew from the country because of the oppressive actions of the communist dictatorship (Frojimovics 2005). The party-state authorities tightly controlled the activities of the organizations. For András Kovács (2019, 49-50), while following Soviet political policy, the authorities often used the authorization or prohibition

of their activities to demonstrate the Jewish community's dependence on power. According to a document found in the archive of Ilona Benoschofsky (historian, archivist, leader of Jewish Museum, Budapest 1963-1992), the official relationship with the *World Jewish Congress* was resumed between 1957 and 1960. This connection would play a major role in the subsequent years in the development of efforts to document and commemorate the Holocaust and revitalize the cultural life of the Jewish community. Although the Hungarian Jewish community received 36,000 dollars for cultural purposes from the Claims Conference, the Hungarian community did not receive any large-scale compensation. (Dawidowicz 1960, 114). Ilona Benoschofsky's document explains why the community did not receive any restitution money, even though the financial support for Holocaust survivors would have been \$62,000. The reparation amount was omitted because the communist government, which followed Soviet policy, had to block contact with the organization because of its alleged anti-Soviet, anti-imperialist views (Benoschofsky's (Ilona) Documents and bequest, Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive, XIX-278, 7, 1-10).

Although reparations were not granted, owing to the support of the *World Jewish Congress* and the funds allocated for cultural reconstruction by the *Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany (CJMCAG)*, there were significant cultural efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s to document the tragedy of the Jews and to initiate commemorations within the Jewish community. The work funded by the *Claims Conference* primarily comprised historical documentation, exhibitions, translations, and the publication and presentation of Hungarian source materials and memorial works (Dawidowicz 1960, 118-120). I would particularly like to point out two major initiatives that have been able to be implemented as a part of this support program: the collection of historical documentary volumes and an exhibition on the genocide.

The historical documentary about the history of the Holocaust in Hungary: between 1958 and 1967, three volumes entitled *Indictment against Nazism* (1958-1960-1967) and a collection of documents on the history of labour service (1962), “*Standing Unarmed in the Minefields*”, were published. Both publications were edited by historians Elek Karsai and Ilona Benoschofsky and contain the results of the documentary research they initiated. It is a widely shared view that before Randolph Braham’s *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (1981, translated in 1988), there was no Hungarian Holocaust history research. Indeed, it would be difficult to compare the earlier developments with Braham’s large-scale undertaking, produced over decades, and the Hungarian Holocaust historiography that began in the 1990s. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that historical accounts and interpretations of the Hungarians’ participation in the war and the Holocaust were already being drawn up by leading historians in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the introductory chapter of *Indictment against Nazism*, the series of publications aimed to publish a work without editorial/historical commentary that “authentically documents how the German Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators destroyed the Hungarian Jewry”, without personal recollections (Karsai, Benoschofsky 1958). In addition, as part of the collection work, from 1960 onwards, survivors were asked to publish their diaries and memories so that they could be preserved as memoirs and made available for future historical works. The two-volume collection “*Standing Unarmed in the Minefields*” - *A collection of documents on the history of labour service* documented the inhumanity of the institutionalized persecution of Jews in labour service. The two volumes comprise state and institutional sources - official letters, ministerial decrees, bulletins of the Hungarian Jewish Diary, announcements, military reports, sentences of the People’s Court - as well as an introductory historical study by Elek Karsai and the recollections of several men and women who returned home from labour service (from the DEGOB minutes, from typed

manuscripts with the exact location of the data recorder). The ideological level of the historical narrative, and its location in the political field, reflects communist narrative expectations only in that the study begins with the events in 1919 and ends with the liberation of the Soviets on 4 April 1945.

According to Paul Hanebrink referring to these documentary volumes published in the late 1950s and early 1960s,

These collaborations are remarkable, even more so considering the absolute silence around the topic that prevailed in other countries around the Soviet bloc. However, the work of Hungarian historians of the Holocaust was noticed and discussed only within very tiny Budapest-based intellectual circles. Writing in 1976, the writer György Száraz concluded in a seminal essay on anti-Semitism that the events of 1944 had become “part of Hungarian history. (Hanebrink 2013, 267)

In May 1960, the leadership of the *National Representation of Hungarian Israelites* (MIOK) inaugurated the renovated premises of the Jewish Religious and Historical Collection, in the Dohány Street Jewish Museum in Budapest. An exhibition on the Nazi past opened at the same time as the opening of the Jewish Museum’s reconstruction in 1960 (*Új Élet*, 1 Jun 1990: 4). The 1960 exhibition, entitled *From Slavery to Freedom [Szolgaságból Szabadságba]* is also crucial because, although it has taken the antifascist label as its subtitle, it is the first exhibition in 1960 to place the documents of historical research specifically at the service of Jewish memory. The same historian, Ilona Benoschofsky (who became director of the Jewish Museum in 1963), who contributed to the previously mentioned document collections, arranged the exhibition. The catalogue for the 1960 exhibition, which is a source material as a historical document, has been preserved with the opening text in the national library and the author’s archive.

Ilona Benoschofsky (1960, 3) begins the opening text of the exhibition with the following words,

In the first class of the Jewish Girls' High School in Budapest, the teacher remembered the anniversary of the liberation of the Pest ghetto in January 1959. However, it turned out that none of the students in the class had known anything about the ghetto in Pest. They didn't even know that it existed, nor what it was. So, for fifteen to sixteen-year-old Jewish girls, most of whom had already lived in the ghetto in 1944-45, or possibly had lived in the ghetto, the Pest ghetto was a completely unknown concept. And as much as it is gratifying that our young people are no longer familiar with the humiliation and pain of the ghetto of Pest a decade and a half ago, it is just as sad that they know nothing about what they should never have forgotten. (Benoschofsky, 1960, 3)

Reflections on the threatened and traumatized identity within the Jewish community indicate that following the war, the deliberate forgetting and deflection of trauma played a major role in the family and collective identity. While welcoming the fact that for the new generation, persecution is not a lived experience, it stresses the need to guard against forgetting the past, and that social, communal, and family forgetting should not be accepted, as the Jewish commemorative community defines the need to remember and to be reminded by the idea of "Don't forget". A community that fought to enforce the prohibition of forgetting was also conceivable in socio-political terms in the communist-antifascist order, as this exhibition has also emphasized. This is also the reason for the inscription above the entrance to the exhibition, in Hebrew, *Lau tiskoch!* (*Don't forget!*) and on the main wall the antifascist "*Never Again Fascism!*" According to Ilona Benoschofsky (1960), the

meaning of the two phrases reflects the “ideological content” on which the strong message of the exhibition is anchored.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition provides a detailed description of the content of the panels: the first panel covers the period from the *numerus clausus* to the period of labour service, the second the period from the German occupation to the ghetto in Pest, the third the trials after liberation, “crime cannot remain unpunished” and the memorials of the martyrs. Photographs accompanied by commentaries and objects - prisoner uniforms, yellow stars, camp documents, artworks, literary works - were displayed on the tables. Tibor Barabás’ “Force March”, a sculpture was also part of the exhibition. The display, although certainly part of a community, local commemoration, was presumably less visited nationally, attracted a significant number of visitors, and the guest book indicates that many people arrived from abroad to be remembered.

The subject of this exhibition was closely linked to the volume of *Indictment* (Karsai, Benoschofsky 1958), considered a complementary part of the documentary collection, and it seems reasonable to say that the exhibition and the volumes were realized in conjunction with one another. The presupposition of the possibility of Jewish communal remembrance was tied to the transformative intention of confronting the fascist past that seemed to be articulated in the communist order. The Jewish community undoubtedly wanted to influence the content, form, and procedures of the negotiating position, the ways of speaking, and the statements about confronting the past. The identification with antifascism could also be part of a transnational agenda, and it was precisely the vulnerability of Jewry to power that was underlined. A striking example of this can be found in the coverage of the opening of the exhibition of Paris, in the *New Life* [Új Élet], in the Jewish press. Indeed, the material for the exhibition, which could be changed in detail but was intended to be essentially permanent, was sent to the *International Committee of the Memorial to*

the Unknown Jewish Martyrs, which opened in Paris on 15 October 1961, for an exhibition on “the Jewish ghettos of the Fascist era”. Jews from Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and many other Eastern European countries came to the antifascist exhibition, the author of the communication writes, to demonstrate how the living conditions of Hungarian Jews in communist Hungary were so prosperous after the liberation.²

It is hardly inaccurate to suggest that this display at the Jewish Museum in 1960 was the first Holocaust memorial exhibition after 1949 to put the documents of historical research at the service of Jewish memory, while at the same time attempting to accommodate official anti-fascist discourse.³ Although the exhibition remained, with some modifications, a permanent exhibit at the museum until the 1980s, no trace of it remains in Hungarian cultural memory. The location of the exhibition, dedicated to the persecution and genocide of the Jews, also has significance, since in Hungary, before the Holocaust Memorial Centre was opened as a memorial site and museum in 2004, the Museum and Archives, which was part of the Synagogue and the Cemetery Garden, was a symbolic and real site of memory of Jewish culture and the bloody events of the 20th century.

In addition to the exhibition and historical documentary publications, several memoirs and narratives were prepared for publication, such as *The Ghetto Rebellion* [memoirs of Leon Weliczker, Noémi Szac-Wajnkranc, Dorka Goldkorn], Endre Sós’ book entitled *Tanuvalomás* (1962) [*Testimony*], Arthur Geyer’s *The Bibliography of the Persecution of Jews by Fascism in Hungary, 1945-1958* (1958) [A magyarországi fasizmus zsidóüldözésének bibliográfiája,

² Although recent research (Kékesi, Zombory, 2022, Véri, 2022) has not referred to it, it is presumably from this collection that the material for the so-called anti-fascist exhibition at the Hungarian pavilion in Auschwitz in the 1960s was drawn.

³ Dániel Véri summarises the Holocaust-related exhibitions held between 1945 and 1949 in Hungary (Véri, 2023).

1945-1958] funded by *Claims Conference*. These publications always announced, and even proudly proclaimed, that the work of commemoration could be accomplished with the assistance of this organization. To add to the truth, these books certainly had an impact only within the Jewish community. There is no doubt, however, that an initiative has been launched to promote communal remembrance rather than forgetting, the first steps have been taken within the denominational public sphere and with the permission of the state to implement communal mourning and to incorporate the Holocaust into cultural memory.

Along with all these Jewish community efforts, memorial works became more prevalent in the public cultural sphere at the beginning late 50s and especially during the 60s. A dedicated study should address how and for what motives the works published at this time relate to and intersect with antifascist discourse. Here, we can only remark that Jewish memory in this period managed to occur in a complex intersection of relations, within which multiple ways of narrating the violent past existed. On the one hand, the works of memory surrounding the Holocaust, which narrate the suffering and murder of Hungarian Jewry, focus on the uniqueness of Hungarian Jewry and feature prominently. Recalling the traumatic events and the specificity of their memory can also be interpreted as challenging antifascist policy, which, as is well known, proclaimed the universal struggle for human rights and, as a political ideology, sought to emphasize communist heroism and sacrifice in the face of fascism in the recollection of the past. The challenge indicates the presence of Jewish memory, which in many cases presumably sought to associate itself with the main line of this ideology for Jewish political considerations.

3 Haunting past in the present: the emergence of Jewish memory in the public sphere during the 60s

Today, we are witnessing a widespread intensification in recent decades of phenomena that constitute a lasting presence in the present of the consequences of historical and structural traumas, of the traces of past violence. The ghosts of the past act through the trauma, their presence in the present could become indeed very real, especially in the sense that Freud referred to the phenomenon with his notion of the ghostly, as well as melancholia and the return of the repressed. (Baer, Sznajder 2017, 20-22). The spectral presentness of the past, active in the present, is not characteristic only of today's memory culture, but also of the sixties as a period in which the ghosts of the past return, intensified by social trauma. Acts of symbolic scope, such as the trials of the sixties, owing to the confrontation with the ghosts of the past, will be a constant issue in literature, art, and debates - who did to what during the war, what happened to those who were deported, what was experienced by the survivors? Along with the ghosts came the representation and interrogation of those responsible, not only the specific perpetrators but also the implicit subjects who indirectly contributed to the atrocities.

Research on the history of memory emphasizes that the path from post-war invisibility surrounding Auschwitz to the present-day culture of memory is not linear, but has been shaped by a series of ruptures, with some significant symbolic turns in the reactivation of Holocaust memory. The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 has proved to be such a turning point in Western discourse, and its symbolic scope and cultural impact have been the subject of international research. International research into the political, historical, and symbolic impact of the trial, which gained a new impetus from the late 1990s onwards, has made it clear that the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann and the discourse surrounding the trial marked a threshold moment in Holocaust memory, one of the important consequences of which was that it initiated a period of knowledge about the Holocaust as a historical event, which could henceforth be understood in isolation from the

events of the world war (Assmann 2016, 80-81). In the historical arc of the development of Holocaust memory, the trials in Jerusalem and Frankfurt can thus be seen as the capstone of the first phase; it took twenty years after the cataclysm for the memories of the Second World War to begin to surface and become a public issue and for the process of confronting the past to begin. Of these turns, particularly prominent was the Eichmann trial, which focused on the testimonies of survivors. On the one hand, Eichmann's death sentence could be interpreted as a symbolic condemnation of Nazism, and on the other, Holocaust survivors were allowed to speak in public for the first time, going beyond their usual role as forensic witnesses to become witnesses to history (Traverzo 2004, 232).

As it is well known this trial - as Annette Wieviorka, Tom Segev, Enzo Traverso, David Cesarani, Shoshana Felman, and others argue, marked a threshold moment in the memory of the Holocaust. Annette Wieviorka ([1998], 2006) in her seminal work, *The Era of Witness* has highlighted the privileged role of the trial in the transformation of the position of the victim, the former victim has become a witness, the bearer of history, testifying to the continued presence of the past. Shoshana Felman (2002) who developed her studies concerning the symbolic dimension of the trial based on the deconstructive psychoanalytic approach that was fundamental in the years around the millennium, emphasizes that the drama enacted in front of the audience allowed for a conceptual revolution regarding the status of the victim. The victim has been given a speaking position in the public sphere through a legal act, and the previously voiceless have been empowered with the possibility of voice, becoming the author of history and able to tell their own story (Felman 2002, 124-125). By providing a space for the survivors' voices, the trial has both given survivors semantic authority and, through their testimonies, created a collective history. Those who testify mourn, and remember, and their authoritative status extends to those who did

not survive the Holocaust, speaking on behalf of the victims (Hirsch, Spitzer 2010, 392).

The trial opened a space for survivors to present their testimonies. David Cesarani (2004, 342-344) speaks of “the seismic effect of the trial on public consciousness” following the trial, which was crucially influenced by Hanna Arendt’s coverage of the trial (depicting Eichmann as “the personification of the banality of evil”). According to Cesarani (2004, 321), the trial, as a global media event, was a wake-up call for countries that “bears the marks of Eichmann’s attention”, reminding them of the legacy of the Nazi past. Survivors were then given the space to present their testimonies, which could then become part of the communal memory as public texts (later video recordings), and the theme of the Nazi past was also reflected in literary and cultural (media) texts, films, historical and political statements.

Most historical research on the memory of the Holocaust, especially in the West, refers in some way to the developments that were reported as a reaction to the Eichmann trial. David Roskies and Naomi Diamant (2012, 98-124) in their periodization of American Holocaust memory discourse, undoubtedly invoke the Eichmann trials as a starting point for the period 1960-85 labelled “provisional memory”, pointing out that several testimonies and fiction were published at that time, prominently Hochcuth’s *the Deputy* (1963) and Jean-Francois Steiner’s *Treblinka* (1966). Italian research on the history of memory (Gordon 2012, 4, 41-68) also underline the 1960s in terms of the articulation of new knowledge and a new field, and to borrow Samuel Moyn’s phrase, emphasizing that this was a period of *regime memory* in which the Eichmann trial was a turning point, triggering the emergence of various war narratives and the writing of parental complicity in war crimes, and the six-day Arab-Israeli war in 1967 in the West positively influenced the development of the order of memory. Among the post-socialist countries, research on the history of memory in Poland defines the period of the 1960s as a period of

silence. Michael C. Steinlauf characterized the period between 1948 and 1968 as “repressed memory” in which Jewish memory was not visible owing to the Marxist, communist perspective, and the “epiphenomenon of class struggle and an interplay of the economic forces” determined history rather than ethnic conflicts and hostilities (Kapralski 2017, 172-175).

The symbolic impact of the Jerusalem (and Frankfurt) trials, the meaning of witnessing, the punishment of perpetrators, and the presence of cultural works dealing with the trials are not only scarcely reflected in official Hungarian historiography or literary history, but also less remembered in Hungarian cultural memory (Zombory, Lénárt, and Szász 2013, 245-256). In recent years, the study by Máté Zombory, András Lénárt, and Anna Lujza Szász of Zoltán Fábri’s film *After-Season* has been particularly relevant to our topic. The analyzed “Holocaust film”, which was adapted from the novel by György Rónay, indeed strongly relates to the cultural impact of the Eichmann trial in Hungary. Although the film is presented as a single phenomenon of the period, it is pointed out that the representation of the symbolic connection of the trial focused on the question of the responsibility of the average Hungarian citizen, namely how people might have remained silent in the face of the catastrophe.

Presuming the discourse surrounding the Holocaust, the encounter with published translations, memoirs, and fictional writings indicated that it is worthwhile to pursue broader research on the language and context of the topic in the cultural sphere. An examination of the issues of *Life and Literature* [*Élet és Irodalom* - the literary and public weekly, as the journal of the Hungarian Writers’ Union, which was directly affiliated to the Ministry of Agitation and Propaganda] between 1958 and 1968 reveals that contrary to the previous summary findings, literature on the processing of the violent past, Jewish identity, confrontation, memory, and recollection received considerable publicity in literary public life between 1960 and 1967. It can hardly be claimed that no reflections

or books on the memory of the Holocaust were published before 1960, since from the late 1950s onwards, more and more books on the subject were published. What is striking, however, is that the period between 1960 and 1967 saw a greater presence and intensification of remembrance works and publicist articles of a provocative and controversial nature in the literary field. It can be assumed that there was a noticeable shift between 1960 and 1963 in the field of memory, which had been scattered and fragmented in the 1950s, and that this theme received intense attention until 1967. How does antifascist discourse intersect with the discourse of Holocaust memory, or how is the multidirectional space of memory (Vietnam - Hiroshima - the memory of the colonial past, decolonization, and memory of the Holocaust) deployed in this field be the subject of further inquiry, I merely draw attention to some of the salient motifs related to Jewish memory of the Holocaust.

Many articles in the literary magazine concern the memorial works, translations, foreign books, Hungarian memoirs, novels, and films published in these years, all related to the memory of the Holocaust. In the literature of memory, certain writings are recounted within the framework of anti-fascism, and others are specifically Jewish works of memory. Among others, the *diaries of David Rubinowicz and Anna Frank*, the books of *Norbert Fryd, Bruno Apitz, Anna Seghers, Ludvik Ashkenazi, Schwartz-Bart, Burian, Poltorak, Curzio Malaparte, Stanislaw Wygodzki* or *Edith Bruck*, the Hungarian memorial literature, the fiction or memoirs of *Imre Keszzi, András Mezey, Gáborné Vidor, András Tabák, Lajos Szilvássy, György Rónay, Ottó Major, Olivér Rác, Boris Palotai*, many of whom have explicitly dealt with the memory of Auschwitz and the difficulties of coming to terms with the past, often in ways that exceed the general anti-fascist narrative.

András Mezei [(1930-2008), a writer, poet, editor, and recipient of several prestigious literary awards]) in the 24 June 1960 issue of *Life and Literature* published a poem immediately after Eichmann's capture titled *Memento. An audio drama from 1944. The scene of a*

concentration camp. „*In memoriam of Herr Adolf Eichmann*”. By placing the poem in the literary magazine, he opened a discourse around Eichmann, actively influencing the formation of this memory. This lyrical work evokes the concentration camp environment, depicting the horrors of Auschwitz in the manner of ancient tragedies, in a quantitative style. The symbolic representation of the trial itself can be read in Zseni Várnai's poem *Listen to the Testimony of the Witness*, which appeared in the Jewish press, *Új Élet* [*New Life*] in 1961. The lyrical language of the trial emphasizes the role of the witness, the testimony, the perpetrator, and the judge. Although both András Mezei and Zseni Várnai were prominent writers and poets during the Kádár era, their poems have disappeared from our cultural memory without a trace. András Mezei's poem was also published in the Memento series of poems, in the volume entitled *Congested Time* [*Torlódó idő*, 1961]. In this collection of poems, the author, who experienced terror and persecution as a child in the Budapest ghetto, gives a memorial to the trauma, exclusion, and suffering of his father. In the first poem of the series, the boy recalls the tragic circumstances of his father's death, notably his father's hanging in Auschwitz; there are poems in which the shots fired into the Danube are the focus.

Edith Bruck's memoir *Chi ti ama così* (1959) [*Who Loves You Like This / Ki téged így szeret*] which later became a seminal work in the global canon of Holocaust memory, was first published in Hungarian in 1964.

In a 1965 article in a literary magazine (*Kritika*), the reviewer, Gábor Tolnai says,

Others who experienced the inhumanity of fascism - like the material contained in the middle forty pages and a quarter of Edith Bruck's work - have written books of many hundreds of pages. But these forty and a few pages, with their antecedents and all that follows, leave the reader in no less awe than the best of the longest camp novels. What causes

this shock is not only the subject matter but the artistic treatment of the subject itself, the courageous omission, and the equally courageous emphasis (...). The artistic conceptualization of the material alone does not explain the extraordinary impact that Edith Bruck's work has on the reader. (Tolnai, 1965, 47)

The reference to ghosts, to the unmourned victims, also appears in the title of a memoir that appeared in the Hungarian cultural public in 1960, Katalin Vidor's Auschwitz memoir, *The Grave is Running High* was published. The title, a survivor's phrase, "*the grave is running high*", can be perceived as a symbol of the past haunting the present. The memoir is a testimony of the ordeal in Auschwitz, dedicated by the survivor to the children and mothers of Auschwitz. In this memoir of Auschwitz, the survivor, who recollected and interpreted her experiences, met Soviet liberators, the context may have been charged politically, but a communist hue or reference to soviet resistance would not appear in the rest of the narrative. Framing the narrative in such a way that the witness recounts the events of the past 14 years later, thus embedding the process of remembering in a self-reflexive way in her narrative. An intriguing aspect of the reception of the book is that it was awarded in 1961 by the Ministry of Culture. After this official award, the memoir was translated into German (GDR). However, it became negligible from the 1970s, when the criticism had acknowledged that Katalin Vidor's memoir is a shocking document after all suggesting that the written form of this memory was inappropriate in the literary sense. Thus, this testimony, like many others, went into oblivion for almost 50 years in the Hungarian cultural memory and Holocaust remembrance (Jablonczay 2023a, 10-13).

András Mezei's novel *The Miracle Worker*, published in 1966, is based on historical fact, yet as a novel, reality is rewritten through surrealistic means in the telling of the story, and there are

numerous biblical allusions to the re-staged elements of reality. The protagonist is Joske, a Jewish boy who uses stories and dreams to escape the realities of 1944 - ghetto, persecution, being shot into the Danube, and deportation. The protagonist-narrator miraculously recreates the reality: the people dragged to their deaths on the banks of the Danube rise to the sky, mocked and punished by the Arrow Cross and the deportation commanders. He also shows passive bystanders, who watch the deportation on the streets of Budapest dispassionately. Another remarkable short story of his, which recalls his father's removal to labour service, is also directly linked to Eichmann, under the title "On the margins of the Eichmann trial". The short story was published in a youth magazine, Boys' Yearbook 1963, addressed to adolescent (boy) readers.

In the fictional narrative, the figure of the bystander also appears, dispassionately witnessing the deportation and the people marching in the streets. The non-Jewish author, Judit Beczássy's short novel entitled *1944* inspiring empathetic reading was published in 1960, in "*Women's Word*". An anthology of Hungarian women writers, alongside, *In Memory of My Mother*, Magda Székely's mourning poem of her mother, a victim of the genocide.

Along with books and films, the victory over fascism is discussed, the fact that in the Federal Republic of Germany, the murderers were not prosecuted, but the reference point is not Buchenwald (the anti-fascist memorial) but Auschwitz, where the direct memory of those murdered is emphasized. A few years after Eichmann's trial, in 1965-66, the social issue of the trials provoked even greater debate. The impact of the Nazi past on the present becomes manifest, comparing the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt with the Eichmann trials, emphasizing that the trials never ended legally as most of the guilty had evaded the law and that in reality, the trials could never end. This topic is emblematically represented in Peter Weiss's drama *Auschwitz (The Trial)*, based on testimonies given in the courtroom of the Frankfurt Trial (1963-1965). The

Hungarian premiere of the drama, and the writer's advocacy and participation were discussed in several articles during this period. A closer analysis of the literary journal reveals that in the first half of 1967, Jewish memory was still present in the field to a significant extent, while in the second half of 1967, the theme was completely eradicated. The commemorative texts, fictional or documentary treatments that had previously been in the foreground no longer appear, the subject is once again literature in the narrower sense, and analyses of classical and modern Hungarian, Soviet, or international literature return. The relegation of the subject of remembering the Nazi past to the background since June 1967 has coincided strikingly with the Arab-Israeli war of 5-10 June 1967, which resulted in a triumphant victory for Israel, Soviet pressure forced Hungary to break diplomatic relations with Israel (Kovács 2019, 167). From the following year onwards, the theme of the violent past reappeared in the paper, but in much smaller numbers than between 1960 and 1967, and the discursive space in which the injunctive articulation of the past had emerged faded away.

4 Eichmann trial witness from Israel in the Hungarian literary public: Erzsi Szenes

Global events that played an important role in shaping the order of Jewish memory, such as the Eichmann trial and the cautious opening of relations with Israel, as well as the Soviet reaction to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (the radical interruption of diplomatic relations), are illustrated in the narrative of a hitherto entirely forgotten writer, the Holocaust survivor Erzsi Szenes.

Erzsi Szenes (1902-1981) was a writer, poet, and journalist, a respected figure in the Hungarian literary scene of Czechoslovakia (Slovenská) and Hungary; kept her Zionist affiliations, suffered Nazi torture, was deported to Auschwitz, and emigrated to Israel in 1949 (Jabloneczay 2023b). After the war, her name remained primarily known in the literary histories of the Hungarian minority

in the Czech/Slovak Republic (her poems and narratives were appreciated), her figure and her works sank after 1945, together with the pre-war so-called women's literary tradition, mainly through her emigration to Israel, and were, so to speak, erased from the literary public consciousness. In Jerusalem she worked as a journalist, writer, and performer in Hungarian-Jewish circles, dedicating her entire career to the memory of the Holocaust. In 1956, she published her memoirs *Van hazám (I Have a Homeland)*, and in 1966 she published her diary *A lélek ellenáll (The Soul Resists)* (1939-41), which deals with a subject of great historical importance.

A pivotal point is that as a Hungarian witness, she testified at the Eichmann trial, and her testimony is referred to in books by Friedrich Karl Kaul (1965, 214) and Gideon Hausner (1984, 212). She could justify Eichmann's personal decisions to deport Hungarian Jews, for indeed, she was on the train that was "considered by the prosecution as decisive evidence". It was the Kistarcsa transport, which after the great deportations, that is, after the Hungarian government had ordered that no more transports could be sent, Eichmann ordered to be deported to Auschwitz, twice, the second time successfully (Benoschofsky 1975, 69-70).⁴ Erzszi Szenes thus spoke at the trial as a survivor of the transport deported from the Kistarcsa internment camp ordered back, and deported again, whose testimony can be considered direct evidence against Eichmann (*Testimony of Erzszi Elisheva Szenes*). In June 1964, Szenes travelled from Israel to Europe, testified at the trial in Frankfurt, and then arrived in Budapest. At that time, she was interviewed in the Hungarian press, which for the first time presented her as a witness at the trial(s), whose identity was now inseparable from her role in the trial(s): the victim had become a

⁴ The story of the deportation train at Kistarcsa is a well-known example, often cited in historical studies - a powerful piece of evidence for Eichmann's implication in the mass murders. See Gerlach, Aly, 2002:344.

speaking witness, who could tell her story in her name, in public, legitimized by a legal act, and inform the public.

Her subsequent visit to Hungary played a major role in illuminating the historical context of remembrance in the 1960s. Although Hungarian-Israeli foreign affairs documents reveal that relations with Israel were not at all supported by the Hungarian Foreign Ministry in 1965, Erzsébet Szenes managed to achieve the publication of her Holocaust diary in Hungary and to participate in the official event surrounding the publication of her book.⁵ In 1966, the Hungarian *Popular Literature* Publishing House (one of the leading state publishing houses of the time) published his Holocaust diary, *The Soul Resists*, the manuscript of which is preserved in the archives of Yad Vashem (Testimony of Elisheva Erzsebet (Singer) Szenes, in Yad Vashem) This enabled her to visit Hungary in person and participate in raising public awareness of the processes of remembering the Holocaust. From Israel, she was invited (by leading literary figures) to return to Hungary, and from Israel, she came to Budapest (she stayed for six months), at a time when there was little chance of either Holocaust remembrance or an intensive presence of Israeli contacts.

Rather than a detailed analysis of *The Soul Resists*, I focus here on a few relevant aspects of the book's reception at the time, namely

⁵ According to the Israeli-Hungarian Foreign Ministry documents, in the mid-1960s the Hungarian side did not seek to increase cultural relations, refusing to allow the publication of Israeli books in Hungary. The Foreign Office only received information about the Hungarian publication of Erzsébet Szenes' book from the Israeli-Hungarian press, the New East. The complexity of the system of political relations is shown by the fact that, although the Foreign Office could not authorize it, the Ministry of Culture allowed Erzsébet Szenes to appear in Hungary. In 1964, when she visited Budapest for a few weeks, she met with the respected writers of the time (Lajos Kassák, Gyula Illyés, Ferenc Juhász, etc.), who helped her to make a diplomatic detour in 1966 to attend the book fair in person (archival sources and articles in Új Kelet inform about the events. (Hungarian - Israeli cultural relations, Hungarian National Archives, XIX-J-1-j-1965 j-61- Izrael - IV 66-70)

the content that Hungarian readers encountered in the 1960s. The book is composed of a diary (1939-1942) and collected poems (1938-42), accompanied by a preface written in Jerusalem in 1964. In the preface, the author explains the reasons for the choice of the title, what resistance of the soul means, details the circumstances of the writing of the original manuscript, its hiding, and discovery, and describes the most important stages of her biography. Thus, the average Hungarian reader could be confronted with what she was only telling the audience of (Hungarian and Israeli) Jewish public.

As Erzszi Szenes recounts in the preface,

On the third day of the German occupation of Budapest, 21 March 1944, I was taken prisoner by the SS in the Dárday Pension on the banks of the Danube. First, they took me to the Zrínyi Street prison, then to Kistarcsa. From there - as it turned out after the war - I was deported, together with hundreds of my fellow prisoners, on Eichmann's orders, straight to Auschwitz, from where I was sent a few weeks later to Fallersleben, a military prison. At the end of March 1945, I was transported to Salzwedel with five hundred of my fellow prisoners. The Americans released me on 14 April. (Szenes, 1966, 7-9)

She records the tragic circumstances of the deaths of her parents and brother. Describing her previous literary involvement and her works, she identifies herself as a member of a multicultural society: she was a member of the “Slovak Masaryk Academy, the Budapest Writers’ Union, and IMIT (Hungarian Israelite Literary Society)” and points out that the Holocaust, the persecution, had transformed everything. After the war, writing about his Holocaust experiences for a Slovak anti-fascist newspaper in Bratislava, and emigrated to Israel in December 1949. The diary is opened with a poem of mourning. ‘I Have Not Mourned You’ (1965) confronts

the unspeakable trauma of the Holocaust, the compulsion to remember and mourn, to tell and to bear witness. Her diary, written in the Slovak ghetto, is both documentary and semi-literary. Beyond the daily events, the role of literature as resistance, and the role of writers, becomes fundamental. In the diary, several allegorical stories are narrated, indicating the content of the secondary meaning of collective identity. Her stories allude to the sense of an excluded, wounded, traumatized identity within the Hungarian community in Slovakia, highlighting the role of the Jewish community in maintaining Hungarian culture within the Hungarian community in Slovakia, while also accentuating the extreme vulnerability, fragility, and destructibility of the Jewish diaspora - in advance of the Holocaust.

From these years (from 1964 to 1967) numerous documentations of his six-month presence in Hungary are to be discovered, consisting of interviews, lectures, semi-official events around her diary, and the integration of her works and her person - as an Israeli Hungarian writer - into the literary canon. In interviews with her, and in reviews of her work published around this time, several concerns are part of the evolving memory of the Holocaust. Drawing attention, among other aspects, to the similarities of the diary and its context to Anne Frank's legacy, the diary is explicitly described as a testimonial, and the content of her testimony at the Eichmann trial is shared with the Hungarian audience. The moral and historical imperative to struggle against forgetting is also underscored in the discourse around Erzsi Szenes. Of other accounts, however, there are, to be sure, those that avoid all references to the Israeli context and present her merely as a writer living abroad. In this sense, it is not astonishing that Jewish authorities were both state and denominationally represented at the launch of Erzsi Szenes' book, as only the Israeli-Hungarian press reported.

After the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, the official Hungarian policy was to condemn the so-called "Zionist aggression", so that

solidarity with Israel, the defence of Jewish national identity, and “Zionist activity” were considered anti-state agitation (Győri-Szabó 2009, 325-329). The reception of Erzsi Senes was immediately interrupted, as was her integration into the canon, and efforts were made to erase all traces of her official documents. Not only was the memory of Erzsi Szenes forgotten, but also the Jewish memory of the 1960s has been subsequently attempted to be submerged. The political control of the Kádár regime re-emphasized socialist principles from above and tried to obscure the threads that emphasized Jewish identity and the uniqueness of the Holocaust story. In line with the principle of anti-fascist homogenization, the forms of the nascent Jewish memorial tradition were merged and references to particularities were removed. Even though this memory of the genocide had already acquired a visible form in Jewish communal discourse by the end of the 1950s and gained legitimacy in the Hungarian cultural public sphere because of the symbolic effects of the trials of the 1960s, the erasure process had been so effective that until now these developments have remained invisible to Hungarian memory history.

5 Conclusions

In my paper, I have argued that although the official memory policy in Hungary did not allow for an open social processing of trauma, from the late 1950s and 1960s onwards there were obvious signs of a breaking of silence, of remembering the victims and of the representation of the violent past. I sought to illustrate how the traces of Holocaust memory in the 1960s led to a specific and forgotten discourse in which survivors, their descendants, or non-Jewish Hungarians attempted to narrate the phenomenon of the past that haunts the present. This discourse of Holocaust memory in representing the traumatization of the genocide and Jewish identity, consciously drew on certain elements of the antifascist discourse, or, in some cases, despite it, emphasized the narrativity

of its memory in particular historicity. Firstly, concerning the shaping of Jewish communal memory, then interpreting it as a reaction to the Eichmann trial, I presented examples from the Hungarian literary public, and finally, through the figure of Erzszi Szenes, we could see the presence of a distinctly Jewish, Israeli memory regime and its subsequent marginalization.

In closing, it is certainly worth noting that the political discourse responded after 1967, not only to Israeli relations but also to the attempt to reclaim the more powerful presence of the Jewish commemorative tradition. The memory that had been strongly associated with the uniqueness of Jewish memory, with the emphasis on Jewish victimhood in the later (Western canon) discourse of Holocaust memory, was receding. As Anna Földes (1977, 25), one of the respected literary scholars of the time, pointed out in her 1977 study of the literature of persecution, the developments of the sixties were not forgotten, but the seventies marked a new beginning. She argues that the dawning of a new era marks a departure from the antecedents of the sixties, and that, from her viewpoint, the narrative of suffering cannot be ethnically privileged, but that the subject requires a more general form, one that responds to socialist expectations and literary needs at the same time. In this respect, it is intriguing to consider why Imre Kertész was so unpopular in Hungary in the 1970s and may open up new perspectives regarding its interpretation. The proposed question from this perspective may open up a new perspective in interpreting why Imre Kertész was so unpopular in Hungary in the 1970s, and why Magda Szabó's oeuvre needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the questions raised by the Holocaust memory articulated in conjunction with the responses of the communist authorities, which in some periods becomes more powerful, in others recedes to become part of a preservative forgetting.

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*Adolf Rudnicki's task of commemorating
the martyrdom of Polish Jewry*

Giovanna Tomassucci

Abstract

The Polish Jewish writer Adolf Rudnicki is one of the most remarkable writers dealing with the narrative of the Holocaust, but despite his long, lifelong discourse on the condition of Polish Jews, a discourse that Zygmunt Bauman called "a stubborn and obsessive manifestation of Jewish identity", his work has not received the recognition it deserves in Western countries. The article aims to identify the specific aspects of his bearing witness not only to the martyrdom of Polish Jewry during the Second World War but also to the Jews' role in Polish society between assimilation and anti-Semitism and to their condition as survivors in the People's Republic of Poland.

Keywords: Adolf Rudnicki (1909-1990); Holocaust Literature; Polish-Jewish culture.

1. A “blatantly and demonstratively Jewish writer” on the Holocaust, but not only

Adolf Rudnicki is a great Polish-Jewish writer who did not receive the recognition he deserved in Western countries, although he was one of the most important writers to deal with the narrative of the Holocaust, and even managed to publish several collections of short stories about the Holocaust during the Stalinist era. Zygmunt Bauman, an admirer of his work, defined him as "a blatantly and demonstratively Jewish writer" and praised him along with Julian

Strykowski: "Their language, originally a shelter, has become the temple of a nationwide cult. Their books are sold out the day they are published. Readers love them, and critics lavish praise on them." (Bauman 1996, 589). In the 1970s Rudnicki was even highly regarded that on the 30th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, an Israeli Polish-language magazine suggested that he should be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature¹. Today, however, his work is read by very few people, not only in Israel, United States and various European countries², but even in Poland. I would like to contribute to recalling some fundamental aspects of his work, which are still of considerable interest, both for their capacity to document and inform, and for their great literary value.

Born in 1909 as Aron Hirschhorn (or Hirschhorn) in Żabno, a small shtetl near Tarnów, Rudnicki came from a Yiddish-speaking family and strict Hasidic observance: his father was a *gabbai* (Hebrew: גבאי), also known as *shamash* (שמש), a warden who assists in the running of synagogue services, close to the *Tsaddik* Shalom Unger (cfr. Unger 1961; 2010)³. At the end of the 20s, after completing

¹ Henryk Dankowicz, *Monument Zagłady*, "Nowiny-Kurier", 27.04.1973, cited by Löw 1995, 55.

²The lack of knowledge of his work abroad, including essays on Shoah literature written by non-Polish scholars, is certainly related to the fact that in some countries only a few of his many works have been translated. It happens that some scholars, as Rosenfeld (1988, 208) and Young (1990, 219), cite only one of his texts, *Ascent to Heaven* (Rudnicki 1951), without any in-depth analysis. The interest shown by Shenfeld (1991, 1996), Polonsky (2004), Ezrahi DeKoven (2008), Golembiowski (2012), Kassow and Roskies (2020) is an exception. Even in Israel his work is not well known, apart from *The golden Windows* (cf. Löw 1995, 51). There are also very few critical texts by Polish scholars translated into Western languages: Wróbel 1998; Adamczyk-Garbowska 2003; Prokop Janiec 2010; Kowalska-Nadolna 2021; Żurek 2023.

³ Anat Plocker (2011) claims that the Hirschhorns were instead close to the *Tsaddik* of Dzików, Eliahu Horowitz (1879–1943), unfortunately without citing a source. The protagonist of the Rudnicki Holocaust story *Dying Daniel* is the son of a *Tsaddik*, and his surname is Dzikowski (which means "coming from Dzików").

his military service and moving to Warsaw, he broke off contact with his family, carefully erasing all traces of his past, and soon became a respected Polish writer. However, this Jewish intellectual of many personalities (see Molisak 2006) differed from other Polish-Jewish writers of the interwar period in his public acknowledgement of his heritage, his knowledge of Yiddish and his unwillingness to shy away from Jewish themes.

In fact, from the very beginning, all his stories contain at least a hint of Jewishness. In *The Death of the Operator*, a short story (1930), *Rats* (1932) and the novel *Unloved* (1937)⁴, he presented a reality in which one could read "between the lines" the fate of young Jews. Some of them are immigrants, fleeing authoritarian fathers and the traditions of a distant province to the big cities, where they are not very welcome. In *Summer*, published in 1938 (Rudnicki 1956, 274-373)⁵, set in Kazimierz Dolny and in the Hasidic centre of Ger [Góra Kalwaria] near Warsaw, the narrator, acting as a distant but not indifferent observer, reflects bitterly on the illusions of the polonised Jewish intelligentsia and its inability to form a common front against rampant anti-Semitism, with the Hasidic communities that continue to live traditionally in the background. As already mentioned, the latter is an environment well known to Rudnicki: this contrast between the different sectors of Polish Jewry will also appear in the stories set in the Second World War, with various characters from or descendants of Hasidic families.

Rudnicki spent the first two years of the war in Soviet-occupied Lviv and eventually moved to Warsaw in 1941. He worked as an agent for the Writers' and Artists' Aid Cell of the Jewish National Committee (Żydowski Komitet Narodowy [ŻKN]) and for Żegota, the Polish resistance group that helped the Jews and was

⁴ The last two of these could be read in Italian with the titles *I topi*, *Non amata* (Rudnicki 1967, 5-149).

⁵ *Summer* could be read in German with the title *Sommer 1938* (Rudnicki 2021).

founded in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942. This allowed him to witness or hear several stories of ghetto fugitives. As Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes: "[Rudnicki was] "one of the few surviving Jewish writers to have remained in Poland after the war, set himself the task of commemorating the death throes of Polish Jewry out of the conviction that no one else could do it." (DeKoven Ezrahi 2008, 161). He will do this by avoiding talking about himself (and it is still uncertain whether and how much time he spent in the ghetto)⁶ in the name of a choral narrative. His first post-war story, *Easter*, dedicated the ghetto uprising and based on notes written on the spur of the moment in April 1943, appeared in the first issue of "Kuznica", the cultural magazine of the Polish Workers' Party, to which Rudnicki had belonged since 1944. He exhorts people to bear witness to the Jewish uprising: in the story *Easter*, a young Jewish woman whom the narrator meets urges: "Someone should [...] write about [the insurgents'] lives and this inhuman but so beautiful end" (Rudnicki 1955, 444).

Since the first post-war period, the official Marxist historical narrative has been that the extermination of the Jews should not be emphasized in comparison with the massacres of the rest of the population, even in the extermination camps⁷. This approach was even more pronounced all the more in countries where the *Endlösung* had taken place. In Poland, a clear sign of this was that the victims of Auschwitz and the other camps were counted

⁶ In a broadcast for the Polish Radio (1997), Piotr Kuncewicz stated: "Rudnicki survived the occupation of Poland, he saw the ghetto, he was in it, he even briefly describes how he volunteered for a few days and felt a sense of solidarity. Nevertheless, he could not bear the burden and left the ghetto. Instead, he was an observer of all events" (Kuncewicz 1997). Unfortunately, it is not possible to confirm whether the writer stayed in the Warsaw Ghetto, and if so, for how long.

⁷ About the narrative of the Holocaust in Postwar Western Europe, see the important book by E. Traverso (2004). As regards Poland, a recent picture is provided by Y. Weizman 2022 and the conference *Le Polonais et la Shoah*, especially the chapter 9. (Janicka 2019, 145-162), and 13 (Leder 2019, 205-238).

according to their citizenship, and that there was no public remembrance of the existence of ghettos in Polish cities. In the very years that Rudnicki published his stories, the area of the Warsaw ghetto in Muranów was being rebuilt without the slightest desire to leave traces of the recent tragic Jewish history.

The fact that Rudnicki, as a Jewish survivor and a communist writer, proposed the task of bearing witness to vicissitudes and deaths of Jews who had perished or fled was not a trivial matter not only in Poland. Obviously, he was not the only writer (my references are exclusively literary) of the post-war period to describe the reality of the ghettos: it is necessary to mention Kazimierz Brandys' novel *Samson* (Brandys 1948), Bohdan Czeszko's *Generation* (Czeszko 1951) and Władysław Kowalski's short story *Mosiek, the communist's son* (Kowalski 1951). In these more or less dogmatic texts, the heroes, Jews or Gentiles, were exclusively communists, and the so-called Polish *szmalcownicy* (people who blackmail the Jews) or searchers for Jewish gold were nothing more than representatives of the reaction. The ideological poem *On the Red Biography of Warsaw* (Włodek 1953), written for the tenth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, even presents the Jewish struggle as an emanation of the great patriotic war of the Soviet Union.

During the war, in Soviet-controlled Lviv, Rudnicki also wrote an ideological Jewish story, *The Horse*, set in interwar Poland. His hero was an old Hasid who had been converted to communism after the death of his son, a party member (Rudnicki 1949, 7-27). However, this kind of dogmatic character is not particularly present in his post-war production dedicated to the extermination of the Polish Jewry. In his stories he describes not only escapes and blackmails, arrests and summary executions, but also betrayals, the Kafkaesque atmosphere of suspicion and the great ease with which

death is given (a characteristic example is the story *Dying Daniel* set during the Warsaw uprising).

It has been noted that the Nazis are barely present in Rudnicki's narration of the Holocaust, but it should be added that the role of Poles and Ukrainians is also relegated to the margins, although the danger of being denounced by blackmailers and anti-Semites is always present. Rudnicki tells us of Jewish poets, architects, lawyers and, in some cases, proletarians, who fled: in general, they are all assimilated Jews, even if they are of Orthodox descent. In his post-war stories he often moves and often leads the narrative on two temporal planes: the past before and during the war, evoked by an extradiegetic narrator, and the post-war period, so that we can well identify their social origins and cultural heritage. As prisoners and fugitives from the Ghetto, they will live their drama in absolute solitude, without a family, a milieu, often forced to remove memories in order to live among others. This sociological focus on the assimilated *intelligentsia*, which attempted to erase their fathers' ties to Orthodox Judaism, has not been much emphasized by scholars (with the exception of Bauman 1991, 589 -591; Bauman 1996; Błoński 1993, 471; Błoński 1994, 82-84). On the contrary some of them, such as Artur Sandauer, have accused Rudnicki of paying too much attention to the intellectual classes (Sandauer 2005). This has not prevented him from stating elsewhere: "For the first time, a Jewish writer addresses the Polish public, emphasises his own ethnic and cultural belonging, and even makes it his own artistic programme" (Sandauer 1959, 11). Rudnicki's programme was underlined by the fact that, at a time when the terms *Holocaust* and *Shoah* had not yet been applied to Jewish extermination, he felt the need to resort to a specific term: *Epoka pieców* (The Age of Ovens), which brutally recalled the reality of crematoria. This definition became the title of Rudnicki's planned trilogy, the first volume of which, *Shakespeare*, was published in 1948, at the end of a period of relative political liberalisation, and for some

time was widely used in Poland and France⁸. In full Stalinism, after the tightening of censorship in 1949, Rudnicki managed to speak between the lines of anti-Semitism and to publish texts on the Holocaust at a time when the only official definition was "the era of racism," considered the prerogative of German Nazis and definitively over. After the war, as he himself recalls:

there were many communists of Jewish origin in the ruling team [...] Most of them came to communism through literature, at least through books. They retained a weakness for literature, which turned out to be a strength. [...]. In the team of the early 1950s there were many who could not forget that I was the one who described how their mothers died... (Rudnicki 1986, 294)

The Polish-Jewish writer was able to publish (albeit in a self-censored version) the second volume, *Escape from Yasnaya Polyana*, later merged in the second edition of *The Living Sea and the Dead Sea* (1952, 1955)⁹. The stories form a kind of saga, as some characters appear in more than one, in a novelistic continuity, creating a fresco of an epoch (the pseudonyms of some of them hide real people, such as Doctor Braun, the literary alter ego of Adolf Abraham Berman (1906-1978), a Zionist and one of the founders of Żegota, emigrated to Israel in 1950, and brother of Jakub Berman, the second most powerful politician in Poland since 1948. In this year the writer also dedicated to the subject of the

⁸ In France, many of Rudnicki's works have been published by Gallimard, in particular the dedicated stories from the cycles on the Holocaust, as *Shakespeare*, *The Living Sea and the Dead Sea*, *The golden windows* and *Escape from Yasnaya Polyana*.

⁹ The expression "dead sea" is not only a metonymy for Israel, as it might seem at first sight, but also a metaphor for annihilation. Thus, in *The Crystal Stream*: "He saw that he had lost her forever. It was the end. A dead sea surrounded him" (Rudnicki 1955: 435; the Italian translation of this passage can be found in Rudnicki 1995, 375).

Holocaust *The beautiful art of writing* (Rudnicki 1948a) and *A paper found under the wall of executions* (Rudnicki 1948b).

In the wake of de-Stalinisation, Rudnicki also contributed to a collection of historical and literary testimonies about Auschwitz, *Wieczna pamięć* [Eternal Memory], which was also published in English and French under the titles *Lest We Forget* and *Souviens-toi* (Rudnicki 1955 and 1956). In 1955 he managed to publish one of his masterpieces, *The Golden Windows* (although his manuscript was greeted by the publisher with the comment: "Again about the Jews, again about the ghetto, again about the suffering?" [Rudnicki 1986, 185]).

Marian Pankowski, a Polish émigré writer and a former political prisoner of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, wrote in "Kultura", the magazine of Polish emigrants in Paris, that the Polish-Jewish writer was "the only one who did not bow to the dictates of the party" and noted with irony that in Poland "they accuse [him] of being obsessed with a single subject [...] - as if the world had not moved on" (Pankowski 1955, 53, 56). Rudnicki on the other hand doubted that the world had moved on and considered it necessary to recount not only the Nazi persecutions in Warsaw, Lodz, Lviv, but also anti-Semitism, the identity conflicts of assimilated Jews (*The golden Windows*), the no-win situation of women (*Ascent to Heaven*) and the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto.

In 1953 the literary critic Helena Zaworska, a supporter of the Rudnicki's work, asked: "It is puzzling that the writer, the only and most faithful chronicler of the shocking experiences of the Jewish nation, has not yet shown in his cycle the most beautiful and heroic moment: the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising!" (Zaworska-Trznadłowa 1953, 185). When, a few years later, Rudnicki returns to this subject in *The golden Windows* (in the second edition of *The Living Sea and the Dead Sea*, 1955), he avoids the rhetoric of the Stalinist epic vulgate about Jewish ghettos, according to which the bourgeoisie,

merchants and Zionists were the natural allies of the Nazis. We can cite the case of Bernard Mark, director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw from 1949 to 1966, the first to edit the material found in the Ringelblum archive, who wrote so on the Warsaw Judenrat: "The Judenrat, police-lumpen-bourgeois directorate, sucked up the last of the blood" (Mark 1954, 42).

His work neither seeks to demonize collaborationism nor to pass it over in silence. Rudnicki's great later achievement was also the telling of the parable of Chaim Rumkowski, the "king" of the Lodz ghetto in *The Merchant of Lodz* (1963)¹⁰. As in the stories of Tadeusz Borowski (a political prisoner in Auschwitz), Rudnicki does not feature many Nazi characters: although Ukrainian, Latvian or Lithuanian collaborators, to whom the story *The ring* is dedicated, are brought to the fore, even in a sarcastic way (Rudnicki 1955, 357-359). He remembers "ukrainian facists arm in arm with of the Polish Blue Police", the Poles who come out of Easter Mass and remain indifferent to the burning ghetto and the Jews jumping from the buildings the (*Easter; Escape from Yasnaya Polyana*, Rudnicki 1955, 437-445; 518), the sexual blackmailing fleeing Jewish women (*The golden windows* [Rudnicki 1955, 95-140])¹¹, and the post-war pogroms, with references that may seem vague today, but were perfectly understandable to Polish readers of that time¹². A clear example is the *Crystal Stream* (1946), which Milan Kundera defined "the most beautiful story about love written in XXth century" (Bratkowski 2015). This is how the narrator comments on the

¹⁰ This long story was translated into Italian under the title *Il commerciante di Lodz* and published in Rudnicki 1967, 209-259.

¹¹ Other references to Polish collaboration with the Nazis from the long story *The golden windows* are included in the Italian edition under the title *Il passaggio* (Rudnicki 1995, 81-141).

¹² Tomasz Żukowski is of a different opinion, inserting some of Rudnicki's stories about the Holocaust into *the mainstream* of the discourse on Polish martyrology during the Nazi occupation (Żukowski 2021, passim).

condition of the Jews who survived in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War:

Those for whom the world should blush, who returned after dying a hundred times a day for six years, fell on the threshold of their homes from a bullet that was no longer German. In the streets lurked creatures who called themselves the Army. and who exterminated them in their tried and tested way. In large and small towns, they went to sleep, uncertain of tomorrow, as they had been under the Germans. These killings dissolved the last vestiges of fear that lurked in any man contemplating such a difficult thing as abandoning his country. But they had no choice, their deaths had long since ceased to move anyone, so they began to flee *en masse*. (Rudnicki 1955, 429)¹³

Rudnicki's peculiarity is also that in the stories of the two Warsaw uprisings, the Jewish in 1943 and the Polish in 1944, no one is a hero. In *Dying Daniel*, set in August 1944, there is chaos, senseless misunderstandings: the story of the protagonist, accused of being a Gestapo collaborator in the *Hotel Polski* affair, borders on the absurd. There is never a battle an epic moment, but an odyssey of flight and suspicion. Even in the stories of the early 1950s, Rudnicki does not present brave, beautiful and heroic Communists, nor repulsive enemies of the people: his protagonists are intellectuals, architects, doctors, writers, poets, who "die a hundred times a day", but are capable of betraying to save themselves. The Jew Józef Klon, the only proletarian and completely positive character in *The golden Windows* is a simple and honest man, who dies with his Polish girlfriend, shortly after escaping from the ruins of the ghetto, having been betrayed by the

¹³ This and other translations into English are my own, unless otherwise stated. This fragment from *The crystal stream* is also included in the Italian version under the title *La limpida corrente* (Rudnicki 1995, 367-368).

Jewish poet Karmański, who fascinated him and whose life he had saved several times (Rudnicki 1955)¹⁴.

As before the war, Rudnicki is interested in perceptions distorted by incriminations that become obsessions. As in the story *The Living Sea and the Dead Sea*, the most realistic socialist, which presents the contrast between the survivor Emanuel Krakowski, who believes in socialism and wants to stay in Poland, and another older survivor, Regina Borkowska, who wants to escape to Israel. Despite the author's dogmatic intentions, Regina is a tragic Jewish Niobe. In Rudnicki's work there are several allusions to Polish *blackmailers* and to the eternal Jewish problem of 'looking good' [*dobry wygląd*], that is to say *aryan*, to camouflage oneself among the slaves: dying one's hair, learning prayers, pretending not to be hungry or afraid: this obligation is even more relevant to Jewish identity problems and self-hatred.

Rudnicki suggests looking further back, to the interwar period, and points to the inability of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia to respond to Polish anti-Semitism. One very interesting story is *The Great Stefan Konecki*, set in Nazi-occupied Lvov. Konecki, an assimilated Jewish writer, character a clef of the Polish-Jewish writer Ostap Ortwin, is accused by the narrator of wanting to be more Polish than the Poles and of not telling the Poles about his own and the Jewish people's suffering (which is exactly what Rudnicki tried to do in post-war socialist Poland). The Polish-Jewish writer also senses the distrust of culture and literature that was shared by many, not only in Poland: in his opinion literature had completely failed because "writers and poets like William Shakespeare did not prepare readers for life in the age of Ovens" (Rudnicki 1948, 220). These were years in which literature was expected to have a

¹⁴ The part of *Golden windows* concerning Marek Karmański is translated into Italian as *La vita eterna di Marek Karmański* (Rudnicki 1995, 142-237).

testimonial value, should be simple and without trappings, for fear that of being inauthentic and mystifying: as Jerzy Jedlicki noted in 1978, "Literariness became synonymous with pretentious insincerity" (Jedlicki 1978, 351)¹⁵.

As before the war, he was also capable of irony, especially towards intellectuals (*Self-Portrait with Two Kilograms of Gold*), in order to depict the mechanisms of self-illusion in the ghetto even with a certain amount of black humour: he notes that "Jews had faith in Germany" (Rudnicki 1948, 164), shows as workers in the Warsaw Ghetto factory *Szopy* sang the well-known Yiddish song *Tumbalalajka* (*Tumbale*) to keep up the pace of work (Rudnicki 1955, 101)¹⁶. His intention is to keep his narrative in a participatory dimension, but always rational and not very emotional (he is always ready to analyse, compare, suggest analogies), so different from the direct brutality of other Holocaust narrators¹⁷, is perhaps the basis of his later fall from grace, a subject to which I will return soon.

2. An author to be rediscovered

As I have already mentioned, despite the various translations and reprints in the main Western languages, especially in France, (in Italy the last reprint dates from 1995 [Rudnicki 1995]), the Polish-Jewish writer is today a little-remembered and in some cases even ignored author. I tried to show that there are several good reasons to re-read and republish him. He has shown a deep knowledge of the various sectors of the Polish Jewish community (the Orthodox

¹⁵ It is possible to read this interesting essay in Italian translation (Jedlicki 1986, 344-371).

¹⁶ This fragment from *Golden windows* is also included in the Italian version under the title *La distruzione del ghetto di Varsavia* (Rudnicki 1995, 89).

¹⁷ Cf. Mieczysław Dąbrowski's comparison between Rudnicki's and younger Henryk Grynberg's writing: „Rudnicki [...] narrates, not expresses, the experience of the Holocaust, and it seems that this reality can only be expressed - as in Grynberg's play - dramatically, brutally, uncompromisingly” (Dąbrowski: 2006, 24).

world, the intelligentsia and the urban proletariat), which is reflected in his pre-war (*Summer, Soldiers*) and post-war works. He was able to reflect on the failure of assimilation and the responsibility of Jewish intellectuals, perhaps also thanks to his knowledge of the debate in the Yiddish *milieu* before and after the war. It should be remembered that precisely from this point of view Rudnicki's work inspired Zygmunt Bauman's essay *Assimilation into exile: The Jew as a Polish writer* (1996), in which the Polish sociologist made important observations to Rudnicki (Bauman 1991–1992, 589-591).

The author of the cycle *The Age of Ovens* must also be appreciated for his courage in addressing the crucial and painful issue of the Jewish collaboration in the ghettos, in a very different way from the dogmatic and Stalinist perspective. It should also be added that his long story *The Merchant of Lodz* (Rudnicki 1963) was probably one of the main sources for Primo Levi's reflections on Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski in *The drowned and the saved* (Levi 2017a) and *Moments of Reprieve* (Levi 2017b; cf. Mengoni 2011): although Levi did not mention Rudnicki, he could have read his story in the Italian version (Rudnicki 1967, 209-259).

Rudnicki was the only Polish Jewish writer to be in constant, if often conflictual, dialogue with the Jewish culture and to largely avoid the post-war dogmatic view of the extermination of the Jews. Even under full Stalinism, he continued to publish testimonies and narratives about the Holocaust and to reflect on Polish and Jewish collaboration in occupied Poland. He was "the most faithful chronicler to the shocking experiences of the Jewish people" (Zaworska Trzmalowa 1953, 185), who "wanted to portray mental transformations, complexes and fears, sometimes leading to madness or resignation, a kind of degeneration of the consciousness of an entire nation condemned to the Holocaust" (Molisak 2006, 74).

Despite the esteem in which his work is held by many eminent Polish scholars, the author of *Escape from Yasnaya Polyana* does not currently occupy a central position in the Polish literary system. His unjust marginalisation is also due to the fact that Rudnicki was a longtime party member, remained silent during the Polish anti-Semitic campaign of 1967-68 and had no sympathy for the Polish dissident movement. Moreover, unlike him (he died before censorship was abolished), the younger generation of writers who began to publish their works on the Holocaust and Polish Jewry in the 1980s had the opportunity to be more explicit about the subject. On the contrary, since the 1960s his work has become increasingly allusive, hermetic and difficult to understand, especially in its references to the mystical and Hasidic tradition. Thus, even after the communist era, his work was in a peripheral position, and this situation hasn't changed in recent decades.

It should be added that Rudnicki is very little known outside Poland. With the exception of France, where almost all of his works have been published, none of his numerous books on the Shoah has been translated abroad in recent decades¹⁸. Moreover, in the Orthodox diaspora, like other Jewish writers who write only in Polish, he is considered a talented renegade who has betrayed his roots and his *mameloshen*, the Yiddish language.

But these are not the only reasons for Rudnicki's current lack of fame in Poland and abroad. As I have already pointed out, he did not explicitly depict brutal acts of extermination; his narrative often focused more on the feelings, emotions, even negative ones, of the fleeing Jews than on Nazi atrocities. He also preferred to be the

¹⁸ In the USA, immediately after the war, his stories about the Shoah were translated into Yiddish (Rudnicki 1947, 2nd ed. 1962), and four years later into English (Rudnicki 1951): the author has not been republished since. Analogously it happened in Italy (Rudnicki 1967; Rudnicki 1995 [the first edition was published in 1961]) and in Germany (Rudnicki 1959, 1960, 1964).

chronicler of the fate of other Jews rather than his own (he rarely wrote in the first person and never told his own story during the war). I believe that at a time when the world was discovering writers such as Primo Levi and Eli Wiesel, his reflections could be seen as somewhat less authentic, and this may have contributed to his oblivion. In the 1980s and 1990s these aspects also led some Polish scholars to proclaim that Rudnicki was the "eulogist of those who die well" (Sandauer 2005, 90)¹⁹ or to write about the "dandyism" of his prose (Błoński 1993: 97). Such an unjust judgement must be reconsidered today, when it is now possible to see that he was one of the few to reflect on the link between the failure of Jewish assimilation in Poland and the behaviour of Jewish victims during the Second World War (cf. Tomassucci 2025).

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¹⁹ Artur Sandauer echoed Tadeusz Borowski's harsh judgement of Rudnicki in the late forties: "Adolf thinks that the best cure for fascism is to show the beauty of those dying as a result of it (through this he obscures the very mechanism of fascism)" (Borowski 2007, XI; cf. Wal, 2002, 122).

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Remembering (in) the absence of memorials

Mischa Twitchin

Abstract

The title of this article evokes the present of remembering the Shoah in the Estonian context, through the example of a recent play by the Estonian-Russian theatre maker, Julia Aug, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?* Aug's testimonial dramaturgy allows for a dialogue between different generations for whom the question of their Jewish identity in Estonia (including the author's own) is not subsumed in a "national" understanding of the past. As much as the living, the dead also speak in the present of the play, where the entanglements of pre- and post-Soviet memory culture, as between official and unofficial histories, are movingly explored. Aug's play brings to light multidirectional questions of remembrance, not only in terms of "nationalities" but of gender, exposing a marginal-central configuration of voices in established accounts of memorialising Estonian independence.

Résumé

Se souvenir de/en l'absence de monuments commémoratifs

Le titre de cet article évoque le présent de la remémoration de la Shoah dans le contexte estonien, à travers l'exemple d'une pièce récente de la metteuse en scène estonienne-russe, Julia Aug, intitulée *Maman, notre chat est-il juif aussi ?* La dramaturgie de témoignage de Julia Aug permet un dialogue entre différentes générations, pour lesquelles la question de l'identité juive en Estonie (y compris celle de l'autrice) n'est pas subordonnée à une compréhension «nationale» du passé. Tout comme les vivants, les morts parlent dans le présent de la pièce, et les enchevêtrements de la mémoire pré- et post-soviétique, ainsi que les histoires officielles et non officielles, sont explorés de manière émouvante. La pièce met en lumière les questions multidirectionnelles du souvenir non seulement en ce qui concerne la «nationalité» mais aussi le genre, présentant ainsi une configuration marginale-centrale de voix dans le récit officiel de l'indépendance estonienne.

People dealt this fate to people.
(Zofia Nalkowska 2000 [1946], xx)

Hasn't the time yet come for an open, honest, calm conversation, without emotions and insults, about everything that happened during the war in Estonia, with Estonia and Estonians? Wouldn't this help the older generation to find peace of mind, and the young to get a correct understanding of historical events? Maybe then it won't happen again.
(Julia Aug 2018, n.p.)

The only solution is to acknowledge other people's memories and to negotiate a common past in which the sufferings of the other side and one's own share of the guilt have their proper place. In other words, it is necessary to blast asunder the all too narrow horizon of one's own collective memory.
(Assmann 2006, 21)

Between an engagement with questions of translation and acknowledgement of my debt to others, a host of circumstances – both personal and theoretical – condition my reading here of a play by the contemporary Russian-Estonian theatre maker, Julia Aug, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?*¹ This reading aims to offer some refraction of the play's concerns, as they address the context of remembering the Holocaust in Estonia. First produced in 2018, the play has not yet been published and so my references are to the script (translated from the Russian by Seth King), a copy of which was kindly made available to me by Märt

¹ Aug was born in Leningrad but was brought up in Narva, when Estonia was a Soviet Republic. Her grandparents had been citizens of the independent, interwar Estonian Republic and so Aug would be entitled to an Estonian passport. (The complexities of this situation are explored in another of her plays, *My Estonian Grandmother*, which I have also discussed elsewhere [Twitchin, 2025].) As she notes in the play itself, following her public criticism of Putin's invasion of Crimea in 2014, Aug became persona non grata in Russia and can no longer work there.

Meos, producer of the Estonian theatre project, Vaba Lava (Open Space), where I have been fortunate to see performances of it. While Aug writes in Russian, her work is translated into Estonian for performance at Vaba Lava – an independent venue that hosts visiting companies, as well as commissioning new work – where Aug is also one of the artistic directors (Pesti and Reidolv, 2018).

The constellation of interests that orients my reading reflects on things that, whilst not necessarily untranslatable, perhaps remain untranslated or unsaid – whether that be between languages (in this case, Russian and Estonian; or either of these and English); between past and present; events and testimony; or biography and history. Indeed, between what is already said and what might still be said, a reading of Aug’s play should engage with the very questions of testimonial justice that it is itself engaged with. In respect to the history of the Holocaust in Estonia, this concerns (as proposed by my title) “remembering (in) the absence of memorials” – where “memorials” may suggest the already said and “remembering” what remains to be said; and where both of these touch on forms of “absence”.

In a sense, the first absence here is, of course, the play itself. As I will only really cite the last scene, there is a danger of misrepresenting its testimonial concerns as a whole. It is in another scene, for instance, that perhaps the most infamous historical question of a “memorial” to the Holocaust in Estonia is cited – referencing the designation, in Nazi documents from 1942 (including on maps used at the Wannsee Conference), of the country as “Judenfrei” (also Weiss-Wendt 2009, 135). This fact is recalled in Scene 5 by a Russian acquaintance of Aug’s, who invokes the “liberation” of Estonia from the Nazis as reproof to views about the country’s “occupation” (indeed, its annexation)

by the Soviet Union. Aug registers her sense of shock at hearing this and then expresses to her commitment to learning more about the “national” history, as attested to by this very play. Who is remembered and by whom in this haunting term – which insists in German (long after the historical specificity of its first use) – remain complex and troubling questions.

It should be noted, however, that even after the murder of those Jewish citizens who had remained after the Soviet evacuation in 1941, Estonia was not in fact “empty of Jews”. Just as with the General Government in Nazi-occupied Polish territories, the term “Judenfrei” refers to an ideological definition of public space – as if officially describing (or proposing) a realisation of political decisions, passing from increasing segregation through to genocide.

Up until 1944, for instance, thousands of Jews – especially people deported from Nazi-occupied Czech lands – were still being worked to death in slave labour camps across Estonia, mostly related to the production of shale oil (Weiss-Wendt 2017a). Even annulling the title of citizenship does not, of course, remove humanitarian responsibility (both ethical and legal) for others. As Aug reminds us, this was the state-sponsored murder of millions, simply for being Jewish.

As indicated, then, by what is at stake in the use of “Judenfrei”, the personal testimony in Aug’s play to questions of Jewish identity and of being identified as Jewish in Estonia is bound up with complex narratives of national sovereignty. Both the post-war Soviet period and the post-Soviet present speak of and to an Estonian history in which the question of “memorials” is engaged in the contested signification of civic space. Distinct from hegemonic historical memory, Aug’s play offers the recognition of what minority memories reveal, retroactively, about both the interwar past and the

consequences of foreign occupation in Estonia. This is explored in the many testimonial voices that call for a hearing beyond the official scope of a government-mandated Historical Commission (2001), where the play's work of remembering is grounded in the implications of historical documents for testimonial justice in the present. The Estonian Jewish community numbered around 4,000 people in the late 1930s, of whom some were murdered by the NKVD in 1941 (and whose names were erased by the Nazis investigating Soviet crimes [Weiss-Wendt 2009, 134-35]), others were evacuated with the retreating Soviets, and – as Aug's play reports – 963 were murdered during the Nazi occupation (Weiss-Wendt 2009, 131). As across the Soviet bloc, the decades-long official Soviet memory culture repressed not only the specificity of Judeocide under the Nazis, but also the relative cultural flourishing and autonomy of the Jewish community in the interwar Estonian Republic.

As Marek Tamm writes of the post-1990 “transition”: “The whole period in question was characterised by the idea of restoration, at both the political and the cultural level: the ideal was to re-establish pre-war Estonian society, including laws, pre-war ownership rights, and also monuments and interpretation of history.” (Tamm 2008, 505) Restoration of the 1920 Constitution offered a fundamental assertion of legal continuity of Estonian sovereignty against any claim by Russia that the changes of 1991 might provide a baseline for the two countries' new international relations. The significance of this (including the right of self-determination in entering into a set of alliances with both the EU and NATO) is manifest given the current Russian war against these same rights in Ukraine, with a grotesque rhetoric about a renewed war against fascism. As Piret Peiker notes, “The memberships in WTO, NATO, and EU were for many Estonians pursued not (only) as aims in

themselves, but as an escape route from the economic and political sphere of influence of Russia, continuously perceived to have colonial ambitions” (2020 [2018], 121). (These same lessons have also been adopted by another of Russia’s direct neighbours, Finland, which renounced its long-standing policy of neutrality in consequence of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.) The wish to rediscover the past promise of a future that was repressed by both Nazi and Soviet occupations entails complex reconsideration of nationalist paradigms.

In posing the question, “what do Estonians remember of their past?”, Tamm does not suppose that there exists a “past” simply to be remembered, but addresses the sense that this is a past constructed in and by the work of remembering – citing, for instance, Homi Bhabha in recognising that “the nation is, indeed, ‘a narrative strategy’” (Bhabha 1990, 292; Tamm 2008, 511). In respect of marking civic space with memorials – established by and for whom? – Tamm’s own question, nonetheless, seems to presuppose who are the Estonians, such that they might, indeed, share a past of their own. Clearly, restoration of the interwar Republic, as the condition of and for the present post-Soviet national narrative of independence, has a distinct resonance for Estonian Jews. Any thought of sovereignty ought, then, to deal with the trauma of the Holocaust in a way that recognises counter-hegemonic remembrance. With respect to “remembering (in) the absence of memorials”, it could seem that there are, paradoxically, continuities between Soviet and nationalist historical narratives.

In 1989, on the very cusp of the transition away from the Soviet memorial regime, the head of the Jewish Community in Tallinn, Evgenia Gurin-Loov gave a speech commemorating the Holocaust that movingly addressed this entangled context:

We are talking here of memory, but what specifically do we know? We do not have complete lists [of victims]; we do not know of all the sites where our people were murdered. We do not have memorials... Now is the time for us to give the victims their dues; their memory should be sacred to us. We do not have to, and can no longer, pass in silence this genocide that was perpetrated against the Jews... We came here today in order to remind the titular population, the Estonians, that Jewish tragedy also concerns them. Indeed, this was a tragedy also for the people who lived side by side in friendly relationship with Jews, this was a tragedy that took place on Estonian soil... Jewish blood was spilled on Estonian soil. Those tortured and murdered rest in Estonian soil. And we hope that next year, as we gather here again, some representative of the titular population will join us in our sorrow... (Gurin-Loov, quoted in Weiss-Wendt 2017b, 273)

Gurin-Loov subsequently produced her own memorial to the victims through her research on the Holocaust in Estonia, which was published in her 1994 book, *Suur Häving: Eesti juutide katastroof 1941/ The Holocaust of the Estonian Jews, 1941*. This work is a principal source of reference for Aug's play, in which some of those named in the archival documents that Gurin-Loov reproduced are given voice in the present of its performance.

While the cultural presence of Jews in Estonia seems to have been relatively unproblematic in the interwar Republic (unlike many other East European countries), similarly the memorial absence of Jews seems to have been relatively unproblematic (or unproblematised) in both the Soviet and post-Soviet Republics. As the narrative of independence is infused with the sense of the interwar Republic as the source of constitutional legitimacy today, the remembrance enacted by the sound of Yiddish in Aug's play evokes a deep cultural fault line.

It is important to remember that the cultural autonomy of national minorities – German, Swedish, Russian, and Jewish – was guaranteed in the constitution of the interwar Estonian republic. Indeed, Aug’s play cites an article in the London-based *Jewish Chronicle* from 1936 in which Estonia was recognised “as the one country in Eastern Europe where... Jews are allowed to lead a free and secure life, given the opportunity to live in accordance with their national and cultural principles” (Scene 10; *Jewish Chronicle*, 1936, 22). How this particular legacy of the past might be recognised in the post-Soviet present, then, is one of the key issues in understanding the very question of the play’s title (as it appears in the final scene), *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?*

This immediately invites reflection on the potential meanings generated within cultural memory between translation and affect, as between symbolic form and feeling. Heard at the play’s end, the title’s emotionally freighted question of identification is, evidently, addressed by a child to her mother – evoking the author’s own Jewish heritage, as she writes herself into the play as both a mother (in this scene) and a daughter (in the play’s opening scene). The child’s question encapsulates a scenario of innocence asking after a knowledge that concerns the very relations in and of which it is being asked, where the familial appears as distinct from the societal. After all, for whom is the identity of a person (or of a cat) in question – and why in terms of threat, rather than cultural and civic solidarity?

The “dialogue” in this scene, with its questions and answers, is prefaced by a comment from the person of “the author” (whose stage presence anchors the whole play) reflecting on the performance that is now about to end. This anticipates, of course, the beginning of the audience’s own reflections on both the experience of the performance and of the questions concerning

the Holocaust in Estonia that it raises – especially with respect to the translatability of historical memory and its affects. Besides the dread term “Judenfrei” the play offers other citations from the archive in German, contrasting with their translation into Russian (and then Estonian and English) as part of official history. In counterpoint to this, but now as a matter of familial memory, the sound of Yiddish (with the lullaby *Rozinkes mit mandlen*) is inscribed in the play as part of unofficial history.

In both cases, something is remembered that is distinguished from what passes “silently” into translation. This creates a sense of both cultural-historical belonging and displacement, as that characterises attempts to forge a coherent narrative of the nation state throughout Eastern Europe. Importantly, this double braiding disturbs the “universal” assumptions of both Russian and Western European “victory” narratives regarding WWII. The play’s testimonies recognise a present past that is key to understanding the “childish” question of the play’s title, interweaving these official and unofficial histories. Preceding the indirect, quoted speech of child and parent, this last scene begins with an ostensibly direct “authorial” speech, setting up a shift from appeal to the transgenerational recognition of Jewish heritage in Estonia back into the vital reality of its inter-generational meaning.

*

Scene 17: While working on this play, having looked at documents and listened to reminiscences, I had the feeling that each photograph, each recollection and each document, has a direct bearing on me. It is me standing on the edge of the ditch, knowing that I'm going to be shot, it's my child that is torn out of my arms, it is my neighbours who wrote a denunciation of me

so that they could get my apartment... All this literally made my skin hurt. It seemed to me that even my clothes hurt...

- "Mama, is our cat also a Jew?"
- "No, my darling, our cat is a Siamese."
- "What about the dog?"
- "The dog isn't a Jew, he's a poodle."
- "And papa?"
- "Papa isn't a Jew, Papa is an Estonian."
- "So, who is a Jew?"
- "I am. You, if you want."
- "Does papa love us?"
- "He loves us, my darling. He loves us very much."

*

As indicated by the format of the script here, the child's questions are reported by the performers – no one "acts" the parts of child or parent (at least, not in the author's own production that I saw at Vaba Lava). As figured in the relation between them, the question concerns love, as then between the mother-and-daughter's identities as both Jewish and Estonian, where these are also refractions of another dual heritage as Russian and Estonian. The question of the cat's identity addresses that of minority communities in relation to the "national" or "titular" community as figured in the father's relation to both. Echoing Gurin- Loov's 1989 speech, Jewish- Estonian and Russian- Estonian cultural history conjoin the minoritarian and the national in solidary questions of and for the work of remembering, even as the ambiguities of this are highlighted by "childish" reference to the cat. Ostensibly without cultural history or identity, the pets nevertheless belong to the family. In this context, one might also reflect on a description of childhood by Danilo Kiš as "the time of life when we have the strongest

common denominator regardless of race, surroundings, or historical period, when we come closest to the hypothetical biography of all people at all times. Later the common denominator begins to fade, differences make themselves felt, and the specific gains ground over the general.” (1995 [1986], 233)

The family pets are without “nationality” but – like the child – have it ascribed to them. However, as David Smith notes, “to point to divergent collective memories is not to essentialise nationality or to posit the existence of two internally homogenous groups with no points of contact between them” (2008, 420). The work of translation – between Russian and Estonian, and between either or both and English – simultaneously elides and exposes, precisely, such “points of contact” as a matter of historical entanglement. With Aug’s play, it also traces the fact that, as Anton Weiss-Wendt notes, “most, if not all” Holocaust survivors in Estonia “had moved to Estonia after the Second World War from other parts of the Soviet Union” (2008, 486), to where many of the pre-war Jewish citizens had escaped with the retreating Russians in 1941. With the Russians’ return in 1944, the post-war legacy of the “nationalities question” in the census of the multi-ethnic Soviet Union had particular resonance for Soviet Jews, whether those returning to Estonia after Stalin’s death; or, more generally, those seeking to escape from the pressures of institutionalised anti-Semitism in Russia; or as part of the major Russian immigration from the 1950s on, in the context of a policy of Russification in Soviet Estonia.

This concern of and for remembering amongst Estonian Jews is distinct from the “national” familial-cultural memory of the Stalinist deportations of Estonians (especially in 1941 and 1949), which have been the focus of national memorials since the restoration of sovereignty. (The restoration of memorials from – and to – the interwar republic had already begun during the last

years of Soviet rule, under the auspices of the Estonian Heritage Society and was itself part of the movement towards what became the restoration of independence [Smith 2008, 419].) These questions of social context within the play are those of the performance itself – presented as an enquiry by the author, who (as we have seen) writes herself into the text being performed. While the final scene begins with an authorial interpolation, grounding the historical-biographical work in the present of its address, the opening scene ends with her addressing the audience about the composition of the very play that we are watching: “When I began to collect materials for this play, I went to all the Jewish people of my acquaintance and ones I didn't know so well, who had been born in the USSR, with the question: ‘Tell me, how did you find out that you were a Jew?’”

The title question of identification (“is our cat *also* a Jew?”) counterpoints this generational research with that of family relations, evoking the common suggestion of a child asking, “who loves me the most?” It registers the emerging awareness of a world in which these possibilities – identified here with her maternal and paternal heritages – are held by some in society to be mutually exclusive rather than inclusive. Fundamentally, the play offers testimony to the question not only of anti-Semitism but of citizenship – of the legacy of the Holocaust for the restored Estonian Republic remembering not simply (in) the absence of memorials, but also remembering (in) the presence of constitutional rights and responsibilities. On the one hand, the Holocaust in Estonia is given specific testimony in relation to the post-war anti-Semitism experienced within the Russian speaking community particularly (including Aug’s maternal family, returning from exile in Belarus after Stalin’s death); while, on the other hand, it echoes a broader European memory politics concerning denial of the facts and implications of common

meaning that are evidenced in their very translatability (despite any claims to national particularity or, indeed, exception).

The vulnerabilities of enduring questions of “nationality” – entwining those of racism with those of citizenship (as exemplified by the Nuremberg Laws, enacting a political imaginary that made possible the terror of “Judenfrei”) – are refracted through allusion here to the innocence of the family pets. After all, being-in-language concerns not only those who can speak for themselves (where the political-social context admits it), but those who are spoken for. This is all the more resonant for remembering (in) the absence of memorials, as it concerns the civic space of and for a national narrative of independence founded in the pre-war constitution and its recognition of cultural minorities.

Here the assemblage of what might be thought of as both official and unofficial histories in Aug’s play offers a distinct dramaturgy of time, giving voice to individual stories that are narrated rather than being enacted or dramatised. Indeed, most (but not all) of the interactions between the four performers on stage (at least, in the author’s own production) explore the conditions of the performance itself, with the re-rehearsal of their present citation of and from the documented past. Through what one might call a dramaturgy of testimony, where the personal is presented on a par with the archival, the play gives “information” about Jews in Estonia (with respect to the Holocaust) which is offered verbatim, always in the name of an identified “informant” – including, crucially, the dead. Individual voices are heard from the documents that are cited, where the dead speak of and for themselves in the testimonial present.

Aug’s play explores knowledge *about* people (in the past) as if *from* these people (in the present); not as a fictionalised re-creation but

as a documentary theatricalisation. Just as the performers speak not only to each other but to the audience, the play allows the dead to speak to the living. These voices are not only those of Jewish victims of the violence, but of friends and neighbours who protested it, as well as of Estonian perpetrators (all drawn from Gurin- Loov's research). Fracturing "the" past (as projected in the abstractions of historical narrative) by the implicit question as to whom that past "belongs" – as, indeed, a question of belonging ("Mum, is our cat also a Jew?") – Aug's play explores the conditions of and for understanding (hearing) such voices in contrast to a national (or hegemonic) narrative.

We might also contextualise this in relation to Michael Rothberg's reflections on the manifold sense of "implication": "Socially constituted ignorance and denial are essential components of implication; as such, they are also potential starting points for those who want to transform implication and refigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 200). It is the potential of such solidarity – where, as Rothberg comments, "the ultimate point... is not to dwell on or in implication but to transfigure it: to acknowledge and map implication in order to reopen political strategies beyond the defensive purity of self-contained identities" (201) – that performances such as Aug's at Vaba Lava invoke. Her play addresses the potential solidarity of Estonian citizens through the (multiple) translations of cultural heritage that remember not only the potential of a shared past but of a shareable future. Since the first performance, however, the context of expanded EU citizenship has been confronted by the renewed imperialist ambitions of Putin's Russia, with its continual attempts not only to propagate disinformation regarding the present but to rewrite the past – both forms of today's "hybrid warfare".

It is in this changing context of the past in the present (as, indeed, “the absence of memorials”) that we may read the play’s authorial persona asking (in Scene 14): “Hasn’t the time yet come for an open, honest, calm conversation, without emotions and insults, about everything that happened during the war in Estonia, with Estonia and Estonians? Wouldn’t this help the older generation to find peace of mind, and the young to gain a proper understanding of historical events? Maybe then it won’t happen again.” The echo of the European shibboleth “never again” is tempered here, recast from the didactic imperative to a more ambivalent conditional mood. Given that the mantra of “never again” offers an official political memorial to the post-war period – now challenged by a post-Soviet Russia – it is important to remember that this symbolic negation attests to what has already been enacted historically. Indeed, perhaps, it should be written “(n)ever again” in recognition of any number of genocidal actions that undermine the claims of a European exceptionalist construction of “world history” (typically occluding the legacies of colonialism). Diffracting the appeal of and to the interwar Estonian republic in terms, precisely, of the “multi-ethnic” polity that preceded Soviet hegemony, Aug’s play contributes to exploring the different implications of “national history” in the case of Estonia.

The Vaba Lava production, then, addresses the civic space of memory politics in practice – in its “multi-directional” refraction, in which theatre rehearses questions of testimonial justice regarding the memorial. As Donatella di Cesare observes: “Testimony cannot be taken for an objective proof which imposes its truth all by itself, without any need for the other. The witness’s word makes the truth, articulates it by wrenching it from silence and entrusting it to those who listen. The other plays a decisive role. For this reason, testimony cannot be stashed in the archives

and, if it is to remain testimony, it cannot stop bearing witness. From this stems both its fragility and its strength...” (2023, 7).

Theatre instantiates this “other” as the audience attending Aug’s re-presentation of voices from both the historical archive (drawn from the research of Gurin-Loov), as well as from her own enquiries amongst her contemporaries concerning individuals’ histories of anti-Semitism. Set in the very theatre in which we are watching it, her play also contrasts the “fragility and strength” of witnessing with the often problematic forms of unofficial “history” that circulate through the internet. The play models a civic space (in the absence of official memorial culture) that is distinct from the politics, say, of an online chatforum. Crucially, the reality that is folded into the play’s deixis – in the present context of its performance – concerns historical facts rather than conspiracy theories.

Entrusting stories to the hearing of others – becoming thereby testimony – is at the heart of the play’s dramaturgical practice (“remembering (in) the absence of memorials”). In speaking of named individuals, the “I” of speech (whether implicit or explicit) is refracted between the performers, as also between the living and the dead. The question of who is called a Jew *by* whom, alongside that of who calls themselves a Jew and *for* whom, has a profound undertow, after all, concerning what it might mean to address the memory of the Holocaust in Estonia, as in any European country.

If Holocaust memory has been marginal – or marginalised – in Estonian historiography, in both the Soviet era and in post-Soviet narratives (such that Anton Weiss-Wendt ironically wondered in 2017 whether the subject had already been “exhausted” without ever having been developed [2017b]), then we might ask – with Aug’s play, as it challenges that history through its theatre of

testimony – what is the “right of return of the dead” in Estonia? In their claim to speak with the living concerning, precisely, questions of injustice (in the absence of memorials), remembering concerns the present not simply “the past”. Cited in the play’s very title here, this possibility of shared hearing – as of remembering – is also instantiated in its translatability, as the work of both implication and the practice of cultural-political solidarity.

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Contested Ground:
Public Commemorations of the Shoah in Lviv¹
Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair

Abstract

The narratives of World War II, and especially accusations of nationalism and anti-Semitism, are widely used in Russian propaganda to legitimize the military aggression against Ukraine. This article takes a closer look at Lviv, a city with a traditionally strong national identity. While historical events related to the implementation of the Shoah in the city are well researched, less attention has been paid to public perception of them. Besides giving an overview of the local memory actors, the main focus of this article lies on public commemorations, which are considered to be media of the transmission and articulation of historical knowledge. The article first examines the content of speeches, and the manner in which ceremonies are staged. It then questions the views society holds toward the Jewish past and how the Jewish identity is conveyed through these rituals. The study is based on in-situ empirical research conducted between August 2015 and January 2023.

Keywords: Ukraine; Shoah; memory; public commemorations

Спірна територія: публічні вшанування пам'яті жертв Голокосту у Львові

Екатерина Шапіро-Обермаєр

Наративи другої світової війни, а особливо звинувачення у націоналізмі, ксенофобії та антисемітизмі широко

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використовуються російською пропагандою для легітимізації військової агресії проти України. У цій статті авторка докладно оглядає Львів як місто з традиційно потужною національною ідентичністю. Хоча історичні події, пов'язані з Голокостом у місті, достатньо вивчені, однак громадському сприйняттю цих подій приділялося менше уваги. Окрім огляду локальних акторів пам'яті основна увага цієї розвідки сфокусована на публічних комемораціях, які розглядаються як медіатрансляції історичних знань. У статті передусім аналізуються зміст промов, а також перебіги публічних урочистостей. Авторка порушує проблему суспільних поглядів на минуле єврейського народу і як єврейська ідентичність транслюється у вимірі таких комеморативних практик. Робота ґрунтується на емпіричних дослідженнях, проведених у період з серпня 2015 року до січня 2023 року.

Ключові слова: Україна; Голокост; пам'ять; публічні комеморації.

Dear Jewish community! Dear residents of Lviv! Today, on this grief-stricken day, I am addressing you on behalf of the head of the regional state administration and on my own behalf with condolences and with a bitter awareness of this tragedy of planetary scale. A tragedy that happened here, right next to us, on our lands. [...] Not even a hundred years have passed since these barbaric exterminations [took place], the extermination of 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews. And this is actually a quarter of the world's losses, the world's victims of the Holocaust. Fifty years ago, Ivan Dziuba firmly asserted that the Holocaust is our common tragedy, [...] the tragedy of the Ukrainian and the Jewish peoples. Today, we must follow [...] the principles of our Metropolitan Andrei, who personally saved many Jewish lives here in Lviv. He wrote that the extent of the highest love is to save a brother's

life. And today, we have a duty to prevent such losses and such victims. We must make every effort to educate the next generation on the principles of human dignity and tolerance. Glory to the heroes, and to those who are risking their own lives today to save their neighbours. Thank you!²

This speech was given by Khrystyna Berehovska, Director of the Department of Culture, Nationalities and Religions of the Lviv Regional State Administration [Lvivska Oblasna Derzhavna Administratsiia], during the commemorations of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, 2017 (event filmed by the author). Delivered by a representative of local government, not only could her contribution to events be seen as an official statement and a sign of solidarity between Ukrainians and Jews, it was also a response to Russian propaganda accusing Ukrainians of being anti-Semitic. Furthermore, it is possible to identify several motifs in the speech that are essential to contemporary public reception of the Shoah in Ukraine, especially in the west of the country. While the Ukrainians' collaboration with the Germans remained hidden, Berehovska mentioned the contribution Ukrainians made to saving Jews, emphasizing the special role played by the metropolitan of the Greek Catholic Church, Andrei Sheptytskyi. Concluding her speech by acknowledging the Ukrainian soldiers who were involved in the current military actions in the east of the country, she foregrounded the idea of unity between the past and the present, with the understanding that the Russo-Ukrainian war that has been ongoing since 2014 is a continuation of World War II.

This article examines the perception of the Shoah in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv through the lens of public commemorations. These collective events are considered as a form of social

² All translations to English are the author's own.

interaction and communication that cannot be reduced solely to the function of mourning. On the one hand, they are a medium through which governments convey normative historical views to their citizens. On the other, they enable various groups in the population to express their political and social demands by appealing to historical justice. According to Peter Burke (2010, 108), public commemorations can be understood as an “agreed interpretation of the past linked to shared views of the present.” Furthermore, these collective practices do not solely refer to a historical event to be remembered but are placed in an ongoing dialogue with the previous iterations of the ceremony (Olick 2005, 338). In any case, commemorations do not just serve as an anchor for the present: they are also a guide for the future.

While monuments and museums remain more or less static and could therefore be analyzed through their genesis, appearance, and impacts, the study of commemorations demands a special methodology. First of all, their annual proceedings are by no means fixed and vary from year to year. Even though these collective practices follow an established canon or adhere to a certain (not always written) script, occurring in public spaces and involving various actors—organizers, participants, but also random passers-by—they are characterized by their open-ended nature. At the same time, simple cause-and-effect mechanisms (such as bad weather or overlapping commitments) can influence final outcomes and should not lead to heavy political overinterpretations. Most of the empirical data collected for this article was gathered in situ through participant observation, a method that enabled the events’ distinctive atmosphere and emotional dimensions to be captured. Analysis is focused on both the content of speeches and the performative elements within these ceremonies. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of the Jewish community, some of whom are involved with, or take part in, commemorative events. Between

August 2015 and April 2017, field research was carried out in collaboration with the historian Alexandra Wachter within the framework of the project “Lwiw. Kriegsmuseum.”

The article looks in greater detail at two kinds of events: an annual event and a standalone occasion (Burawoy 1998, 136–37). This methodological approach allows the distinction between typical and accidental elements within these assemblies. The one-off event analyzed below is the inauguration of the memorial site “Spaces of Synagogues” which took place on September 4, 2016. The author did not attend this ceremony. Instead, publicly available video documentation was used for analysis (Lviv4you 2016a and Lviv4you 2016b). The observance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which has been commemorated in Ukraine every January 27 since 2012, serves as an example of a cyclical event. The article examines the ceremonies on this date in 2017 and 2023 (Commemorations of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2017, 2023); both events were attended and filmed by the author.

Historical Background and Knowledge

With the ghetto located within walking distance from the city center and the Lemberg-Janowska concentration camp on the periphery, Lviv was one of the most significant sites for the mass murder of Jews during World War II. While the course of the Shoah in and around the city has been thoroughly investigated (e.g. in Amar 2015; Himka 2011, 2021, Mick 2010, 2011, 2015, Pohl 1996, 2002; Struve 2015), its (under)repression during the Soviet period (Amar 2014) still influences both Jewish and non-Jewish city dwellers’ perception of events. The local population’s involvement in the mass killings of Jews, particularly those who were members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA),

makes public discourse about these crimes particularly difficult (Himka 213, 639–40).

During our research, we conducted interviews with leading representatives of Jewish organizations in Lviv, including Ada Dianova (March 16, 2016), Mykhailo Pleskov (November 16, 2019), and Iosif Shtatsman (May 3, 2016). All these prominent figures in the Jewish community stated that it was only in the 1990s that they learned what had happened in the city during the war, mainly through their work in their respective institutions. In an interview with the author on March 16, 2016, Olha Fadeeva, a librarian at the All-Ukrainian Jewish Charitable Foundation Hessed Arieḥ, explained:

When the club was founded and the library opened, we got the opportunity to read [about] all these [events]. I [began to] read the literature about the catastrophe with [a sense of] horror. Because at home, we didn't talk about it. As you can understand, [it was] the Soviet era. Thank God, no one in our [family] perished, nowhere, neither in the ghetto nor in [ravines like] Babyn Yar. [...] Since we didn't have such conversations in our family, I only found out about it thanks to my work here, that was in 1998. Otherwise, I am a simple Soviet child who attended a Soviet school. [There were] only very general references to the war, and that was it. There was nothing about the Jewish exterminations.

Fadeeva described her reaction to these revelations in the following words: “It was more than a shock. It was a dumbfounded horror” (Fadeeva 2016).

At the time of our interview with him, on May 3, 2016, Iosif Shtatsman was interim Director of “B'nai B'rith 'Leopolis'” and Chairman of the “Holocaust Center.” He was also a professional historian and worked for the State Archive of Lviv Oblast

[Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Lvivskoi Oblasti (DALO)] before retiring. When he was asked when he had learned about what happened to Jews in the city during the war, Shtatsman responded:

Details—very late. So, I had a very general knowledge, mainly from literature. I knew this already in the late '70s—early '80s. But the details [I learned] only when it became possible to get access to the documents, in the early '90s. [...] People didn't talk about it. It was difficult for them. Well, separate mosaic pieces were there, but the entire picture wasn't coming together. The entire picture emerged only in the '90s when articles were published, when [representatives of the] Soros Foundation started working here, when the first conferences took place, when the monument to the victims of the ghetto was erected. Only then did the entire picture emerge.

He also explained the situation regarding archive documents that described crimes against Jewish people:

All these documents were labelled as “secret.” They were not handed out at all. [...] If someone got a permission, [...] you were supposed to talk in your research about the criminals [...] but not about the victims. The term “victim” became an empty linguistic formula.

The quotations above illustrate that during the Soviet period the experience of the Shoah was not discussed within the Jewish families of Lviv, a state that can be described as a break in communicative memory (Assmann 2018). One of the reasons for this silence lies with the underrepresentation of the mass killing of Jews during World War II within the Soviet war narrative (David-Fox et al. 2014). Embedded in Marxist critiques of capitalism (Gitelman 1993, 117) and suppressed by the politics of state anti-

Semitism, the Shoah remained unwritten in the official history. However, the general tendency in the Soviet Union was not to deny the Jewish genocide, but rather to obscure it (Gitelman 1993, 118). Moreover, as elucidated in the realm of Soviet memory culture, the pain of Jewish victims was transferred from innocent suffering to dedicated sacrifice (Voronina 2018, 16). Consequently, many Soviet Jews adopted the narrative of a great victory instead of the one about the perishing—we will observe this fusion in one of the examples discussed below. For the half a million Jews who survived the Shoah by enrolling in the Red Army, their experiences did not, in fact, differ significantly from those of other Soviet military men (Epstein and Khanin 2013, 146–7).

The situation in Lviv was still specific. After almost the entire Jewish community was annihilated in the Shoah (Amar 2015, 88–142), most of the few survivors had to leave the city for Poland as former Polish citizens in a forced population exchange between the USSR and Poland by the end of 1946 (Amar 2005, 93). Jews who settled in Lviv in the aftermath of the war came mainly from the eastern parts of the Soviet Union and had little to no family or cultural ties to the local pre-war Jewish community (Amar 2015, 165; Amar 2015, 143–44). Even if these people were aware of what had happened to the Jewish population in the Soviet territories occupied by the Germans, they did not possess the memory of local experiences and could not transmit it to their children and grandchildren. The continued transfer of historical knowledge was also interrupted by a further break within community life in the early 1960s. The synagogue, which was re-established after the war, served not only as a religious, but possibly as an even stronger cultural and social center (Amar 2005, 91). Its compulsory closure in 1962, due to an anti-religious campaign that also targeted other religions (Amar 2015, 281) allegedly led to the disruption of vital communication channels.

Foundation of Jewish Organizations and Other Commemorative Actors

Public Jewish associations didn't open in Lviv for another twenty years. The first organization to emerge was the Society for Jewish Culture named after Sholem Aleichem. It was founded in 1988 by journalist Boris Dorfman (1923–2022) and writer Aleksandr Lizen (1911–2000). Both men did not originally come from western Ukraine and they had survived the Shoah by joining the Red Army. One of the first actions taken by their organization was to install memorial plaques at locations where synagogues were destroyed by Germans during the war, among them the “Golden Royz” synagogue, which I will return to later. The society's most prominent project was the erection in 1992 of a monument to the victims of the Lemberg ghetto, with planning commencing as early as 1988, three years before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first religious community was registered in 1992, four years after the foundation of the first cultural society. Two further religious communities—the Jewish Religious-Orthodox Community “Turei Zahav” [Golden Rose] and the Jewish Religious Community of Progressive Judaism “Teiva”—were only established in 2009. It could therefore be assumed that in post-Soviet Lviv, the Jewish population's cultural identity was stronger than their sense of religious belonging.

In the 1990s, other Jewish organizations appeared in Lviv thanks to support from abroad. The International Memorial Fund “Janowska Camp” was created by a former prisoner, Alexander Schwarz (1924–2014), in 1993. In the same year, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the camp's liquidation, and in collaboration with the local branch of the “Memorial” organization, the fund's “Janowska Camp” initiated the first international conference on the camp's history. The inauguration of the memorial stone took place during this big event. Despite later efforts by various actors

to redesign the area, no representative memorial complex matching the scale of the crimes committed here had been erected so far. Thus, the stone, conceived as a temporary symbol, remains the only object commemorating the existence of the camp and its victims. The fund's "Janowska Camp" became the precursor to the local cultural organization B'nai B'rith "Leopolis", which was founded in May 1996. In 2001, the fund was renamed the Holocaust International Center, named after Alexander Schwarz.

The All-Ukrainian Jewish Charitable Foundation Hesed-Arieh, financed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the youth organization Hillel Lviv were founded in 1998. As a vital cultural center and an organization with a social profile, Hesed-Arieh is currently one of the most active commemorative actors in the region. As of 2018, its Director, Ada Dianova, moved to the progressive Jewish community "Teiva" which has also become increasingly active in the field of memory work.

While for years only Jewish organizations carried out memory work regarding the Shoah, since the mid-2000s academic institutions also have become active in this field, with the first being the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe (2004) and later, the "Territory of Terror" Memorial Museum (2014–16). The city council [Lvivska Oblasna Rada] can also be considered a significant commemorative actor. Even if the city does not initiate its own commemorative projects dedicated to Jewish history and culture, it often supports similar initiatives. The rise of academic and municipal structures involved in the study and popularization of the history of the Shoah in Lviv sits alongside Ukraine's efforts to integrate itself into the European Union. Being a part of Europe means recognizing the Holocaust as central to its foundation.

Holocaust Remembrance Day: An Occasion of International Significance and the Local Canon

The apex of the mass killing of Jewish civilians in the Soviet Union during World War II is the massacre of the Babyn Yar—the murder of more than 33,000 Jews on September 29 and 30, 1941, in a ravine near Kyiv. Since Ukraine’s declaration of independence in 1991, commemorations of these events have occurred annually in late September (Prymachenko 2017, 209), mainly in Kyiv but also in another cities. However in 2011, on the seventieth anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy, January 27 was introduced to the state memorial calendar as Holocaust Remembrance Day (Supreme Council of Ukraine 2011) rather than one of the dates in late September. The date for this memorial was established in 2005 by the United Nations (n.d.) on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp by the troops of the First Ukrainian Front of the Red Army in 1945. Since then, it has been commemorated internationally by many member countries. In Ukraine, designating January 27 as a date to remember the victims of the Shoah has several dimensions. On the one hand, it helps to unite distinct experiences from different parts of the country and enables them to be understood as components of a larger phenomenon. On the other, referring to an event that occurred outside of the Soviet Union makes it possible to connect national history to the history of Europe. Furthermore, by commemorating the date, which is of significance to countries such as the USA and Germany, among others, Ukraine aligns itself with the international memorial canon established in Europe and North America. This is particularly remarkable given that the decision was made during Viktor Yanukovich’s presidency, a period characterized by approximation to Russia in the field of historical policy.

Victims of the Shoah have been publicly remembered in Lviv on January 27 since 2013. As a recurring event, commemorations in

2017 followed an established pattern that, according to my observations in 2023, essentially remained the same, even after the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In both 2017 and 2023, people first met at the monument to the victims of the Lemberg ghetto, and later at the stone memorializing the victims of the Lemberg-Janowska camp. At both sites, first, a rabbi led a prayer, then speeches were made and finally, memorial offerings were laid down. In 2017, the first assembly (at the monument to the victims of the Lemberg ghetto) was attended by approximately one hundred people, while the assembly at the memorial stone consisted of a narrow circle of approximately twenty people, most of whom belonged to the organizations involved. In 2023, slightly fewer people took part in these commemorative events but the proportion stayed the same. On both occasions, representatives of the municipality were invited solely as guest speakers and were not involved as initiators or organizers. They only participated during the assembly at the monument to the victims of the ghetto, marking this event as the more important of the two.

In 2017 and 2023, most of the participants, especially those who assembled at the stone, were native Russian speakers from the middle or older generations. Nevertheless, (with very few exceptions) they delivered their speeches in Ukrainian. According to Yury Radchenko (2023, 5) this shift began in 2014 with the Russo-Ukrainian war. As a political gesture, the choice of language could be interpreted as an expression of unity between Jews and Ukrainians and was therefore a counterargument to Russian accusations that Ukrainians were “fascists.” The comparison with commemorations carried out by the local Polish associations is insightful as these assemblies are usually only conducted in Polish. For instance, during the ceremony to remember the murdered Polish academics, which happened on July 4, 2016, most of the participants also represented the middle or older generations, but no speeches were delivered in Ukrainian and only Polish was

spoken. This example illustrates the incongruity of the fact that the representatives of the Jewish community speak Ukrainian in public. It also indicates that the position of the Russian language is more problematic than its Polish counterpart.

Nevertheless, some distinctions between the events in 2017 and 2023 could be made. One of those differences signifies a strengthening of new commemorative actors. While in 2017 the assemblies were initiated and implemented by the local Jewish organizations “Hesed-Arieh” and “B’nai B’rith ‘Leopolis’” in 2023, “Teiva” and the “Territory of Terror” Museum co-organized the event. The museum, which is located on the street opposite the monument to the victims of the ghetto, has taken an increasingly active role in designing commemorative events. In 2023, before the gatherings, it offered a guided tour of its permanent exhibition. In 2024, a lecture called “Memories and Documents: The History of the Rosenthal Family” occurred there following the events. Allegedly, for this reason, even the established order of the locations being visited was changed and people first met at the site of the former camp and later at the monument. Olha Honchar, the museum’s director, attended the gatherings at the monument in 2023 and 2024.

In 2023, further minor but significant shifts occurred. Since their inauguration, gatherings at both sites have regularly included a service, most often ecumenical. However, in 2017, aside from the prayer, the commemorative events took on a distinctly secular character. (Fig. 1). Wreaths and flowers were mostly laid down, though candles were also present. In 2023, as a grassroots initiative, people also brought stones to the memorial to the victims of the ghetto, among other offerings, a rite borrowed from the Jewish religious canon. While this practice does not necessarily serve as proof of a rise in religious observance among the Jewish community of Lviv, it suggests the increasing importance of public expressions of religious identity. Furthermore, in both years a

minute's silence took place. While in 2017 it was marked by the sound of a metronome, in 2024, this sound was missing. This acoustic element, typical of the Soviet tradition, is still widely used in Russia, especially during Victory Day celebrations. Its meaning is not, however, inseparably linked to the Great Patriotic War. For example, on Independence Day 2019, during the minute's silence in honor of soldiers who had died in the current war, President Volodymyr Zelensky used the sound of a metronome. The absence of this tone might indicate that the Soviet memory tradition is losing its significance but also that the emotional impact has shifted from heroic pathos to a pathos of mourning.

In both 2017 and 2023, the process of laying memorial offerings was accompanied by music from a film soundtrack, but a change was made here as well. Even though the musical background to a commemorative event should not be overinterpreted, its semantic framework is still present. In 2017, a score from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* played on loudspeakers at both sites. This well-known film represents a Hollywood interpretation of the Shoah: rich in details it features a charismatic hero and a happy ending where most of the characters with whom the audience sympathizes survive. In Ukraine, as well as in other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, the significance of this fact-based fiction in shaping the perception of historical events cannot be underestimated (Epstein and Khanin 2013, 149). Composed by John Williams in a minor key, the film music is also frequently used internationally during events to remember victims of the Shoah. It not only aims to evoke a strong sense of sadness or melancholy in listeners but also places respective commemoratives within a North American/Western European context. During the memorial ceremonies in Lviv in 2023, the *Schindler's List* theme was replaced by Myroslav Skoryk's soundtrack to the film *Vysokyj pereval*. Released in 1982, the movie depicts the anti-Soviet resistance of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Skoryk's

“Melody” is highly symbolic as an unofficial Ukrainian national anthem and is regularly played during commemorations of the Holodomor and the Revolution of Dignity, events central to the construction of Ukrainian national identity. After the full-scale invasion it also became popular outside of Ukraine, as it is often played during various charity concerts aimed to support the country in the current war. The use of this emblematic music during the commemorations of the Shoah frames the mass murder of Jews during World War II as a part of a genuinely Ukrainian history. At the same time, it presents the Shoah through a nationalistic lens and thereby appropriates Jewish suffering.

All these alterations to the course of the events indicate shifts in public perception of the Shoah in the region: the appearance of memory actors outside the Jewish community; the valorization of Judaism through the inclusion of religious rites; the increased abandonment of the Soviet memorial canon; and—probably the most challenging one—the integration of Holocaust remembrance into the tradition of Ukrainian national victimization.

From Soviet Heroism to the Individualization of the Victims

During the two commemorations held on January 27, 2017, most of the speakers limited their contributions to brief and generalized statements that corresponded with their position within the Jewish community or politics. However, there were several presentations which conveyed that people with different, yet contradictory, approaches were present among those gathered. In particular, the less formal assembly at the memorial stone, where political representatives were absent and anyone who wanted could make a public statement, afforded more space for individual improvisation. The two following speeches illustrate the most radically different positions. Both of them were given by older men

who were receiving support from “Hesed-Arieh”: Viktor Korniiichuk and Yury Storozhenskyi.

Korniiichuk read a poem in Russian which he wrote. As space does not allow me to quote it in full, I will limit myself to several of the most characteristic strophes:

Remember, Comrade, to whom you are indebted,
For the fact that you now walk in the sun.
Those millions of lads who perished,
Who put down their lives for us.
[...]
When you pass by this stone, bow down low.
And whisper: thank you, lads, that life carries on!

It is remarkable that throughout the poem Korniiichuk spoke solely about males and heroes and not about civilians or victims, and never was the word “Jew” mentioned. At the same time, words such as “Red Army” or “soldiers,” to which the poem obviously refers were not used explicitly either. This double silencing is not easy to interpret. On the one hand, the topic of Soviet military heroism was already unpopular in Western Ukraine in 2017 and commemorations of the Shoah gave the speaker an opportunity to perform familiar and internalized forms of public grief without being blamed for being pro-Russian. On the other hand, within the context of remembering victims of the Shoah, the poem intended to express the speaker’s sorrow and empathy with the deceased, but its rhetoric reveals a gap between the crimes committed in the camp and their representation in the spoken language. In any case, the poem reproduces the concept of a sacrificial death for the sake of future generations that is inherent to the concept of social realism found in literature (Clark 1981). It also indicates how strongly the reception of the Shoah in Lviv is still intertwined with the Soviet tradition, even within the Jewish community.

Korniichuk's attitude is even more striking, as he claims to have been a child prisoner of Majdanek (Korniichuk 2017). Even if this assertion might be true, I could not find any evidence.

Storozhenskyi's contribution conveyed the opposite message. In his speech, he related the story of the prominent lawyer Maurycy Allerhand who was killed in the Lemberg-Janowska camp. Storozhenskyi was aware of Allerhand's fate due to the book written by his grandson Leszek. Using the terminology of Jan Assmann (2018), his knowledge was not transmitted to him by living people and came not from a communicative, but from a cultural source that lies outside the Soviet narrative. When the speaker referred to Allerhand by name and pointed out that "behind the numbers were real people," it was the first time at both gatherings that day that a certain victim was mentioned as an individual. This emphasis on the personal dimension of the greater historical narrative follows the international trend toward the individualization of Shoah victims and marks a shift in the local memory culture from the Soviet canon to the "North American/Western European." During the assembly it emerged as a private statement, indicating a process of transformation carried out from the bottom. The coexistence of both positions within one community illustrates its heterogeneity and therefore, its potential for further change.

Opening Ceremony of the "Spaces of Synagogues": An Occasion of Local Significance and the International Canon

The memorial site "Spaces of Synagogues" was erected on the site where the "Golden Royz" synagogue used to stand. The creation of this memorial site marked an important effort in public recognition of the Shoah in Lviv and cannot be underestimated. Even if in the early 1990s the Society for Jewish Culture managed to install a memorial plaque with basic information in Ukrainian,

English, and Yiddish on this spot, for years, the place itself looked like a wasteland in the heart of the city. The project was initiated and realized by the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe in cooperation with the municipality and the German Society for International Collaboration [Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GiZ)]. An international design competition was launched in 2010, which was won by a German landscape architect Franz Reschke (Fig. 2).

The memorial site was inaugurated on September 4, 2016. More than 200 people participated in this ceremony, making it the biggest assembly discussed in this article. The event expressed a new direction in the public's processing of the Shoah. In addition to speeches by organizers and political representatives, there was more focus on the victims and the witnesses who survived the Shoah in the city. Leszek Allerhand and Aharon Weiss attended the event in person. Janina Hescheles and Krystyna Chriger were unable to join the assembly and had their letters read out instead. After the speeches, the rabbi led prayers, then a white cloth was removed to reveal the sculptural element of the complex and the participants laid down stones on it. In contrast to the commemorations on January 27, wreaths of flowers were absent.

This act of laying stones to honor the deceased as a religious rite was included due to the site's former sacred function. In the given situation, it was not indispensable, since it was performed during a secular event and not at a cemetery or a place of burial. Obviously, through its integration the victims' Jewish identity was stressed, just as the Soviet-era silence about the Shoah ended. It did, however, reduce the identity of those who perished solely to their dedication to Judaism and indirectly implied that only Orthodox Jews were the victims of mass extermination by the Nazis. Furthermore, through the overemphasis on religious identity, Jews were presented via their otherness to Ukraine. On the visual level, this distinction between the two groups was emphasized by the

appearance of the city's mayor, Andriy Sadovyi, who wore a traditional embroidered shirt *vysyvanka*. This garment is customary in the region, but it is not mandatory. Indeed, Sadovyi wears it frequently but does not have it on at every public event. Yet, his clothing did not only point out the differences between the two groups, it also expressed Ukrainian solidarity with Jewish loss.

When the site was inaugurated, all the invited witnesses to the historical events no longer lived in Lviv. But it was not only their addresses that marked them as foreigners. Only Aharon Weiss spoke Ukrainian to the audience. Hescheles, Chriger, and Allerhand used Polish to describe the events in their testimonies and their appeals were translated. Expressed through language, their Polish identity revealed that the city, as well as most of the Jews who were killed here during the Shoah, were not Ukrainian, Russian, or Soviet but Polish. Their presence also made clear that the contemporary Jewish community differed a lot from its pre-war incarnation and created a kind of juxtaposition.

Even though the project originated in collaboration with the local Jewish organizations, only two of their members participated in the event. Ada Dianova, the director of “Hesed-Arieh,” moderated the ceremony and Boris Dorfman, one of the founders of the Sholem Aleichem Society, was the eighteenth and final speaker. Being the last speaker distinguished Dorfman from the other representatives of his generation; he was perceived as being a less significant witness, or not even a witness at all, and merely a leading member of the oldest local Jewish organization. He was the only person to address the crowd in Yiddish as, according to him, this was the language of those who lived here before. He read two poems: the first poem was “Testament” [Zapovit], by Taras Shevchenko, translated into Yiddish—a piece emblematic of Ukrainian culture and primarily national in its content; the second was written by Aleksandr Lizen, a co-founder of the Sholem Aleichem Society, which Dorfman read in Yiddish and in Russian. Through these two

poems, Dorfman expressed two contradictory messages. He insisted that Jews are not just a religious minority, but an integral part of Ukrainian society, while the use of the Russian language indicated how the local Jewish community belonged to the Russian culture.

The Difficult Past, Spoken and Unspoken

Following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, two perceptions of twentieth-century Ukrainian history could be observed in various parts of the country. On the one hand, many share the idea that the current war is a continuation of World War II (Hellbeck, Pastushenko, and Tytarenko 2017, 65–6). On the other, the Nazi and Soviet regimes are often considered as equal in their nature (Kasianov 2023, 11). As Ukrainians are currently at war for their independence against Russia, these concepts often merge. Both notions were expressed to the audience during the gatherings described in this article. The Ukrainian involvement in the mass killings of Jews, however, remained unacknowledged.

The equality and joint culpability of both totalitarian regimes were emphasized during all the events discussed here and were expressed by very different actors, Jewish as well as non-Jewish. Here, I will quote only two examples. At the opening ceremony of “Space of Synagogues,” Oleh Vyshnyakov, the consul for the state of Israel in Lviv, drew a parallel between the Nazi policy of annihilation and the suppression of Soviet Jews in the post-war period:

Unfortunately, during the Soviet era many people have forgotten their history. But they are returning to it. [...] Unfortunately, the history of the Jewish people has many sad and tragic aspects. This is the Holocaust, the ghettos, the concentration camps; these are the torments under the Soviet rule.

In his comparison of both powers, journalist Marko Simkin relied less on fact and blended inaccurate historical representations with flowery metaphors and Jewish stereotypes. During the assembly at the memorial for the victims of the ghetto on January 27, 2017, he stated:

800 years ago, following the invitation of King Danylo, Jewish people came to Galicia. They came from Hungary and Germany. They developed the economy, taught people here, treated them as doctors. This community existed for hundreds of years and reached its peak in the 19th century. Who could have imagined that on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire, two such monsters would arise—one under the bloody flag, under Satan’s pentagram, and the other under the swastika—and unleash together the Holocaust against the Jews. The Holocaust against the Jews began with the Holocaust against the Ukrainians and the Russians in Soviet territories as the Soviets took power. Jewish intelligence was annihilated, Jewish scientists were annihilated. And Hitler was just a student of these crazy ideas.

According to Simkin, the Soviet regime was an even greater evil and was just as—if not more—involved in the implementation of the Shoah. This perspective is characteristic of the nationalistic, Ukrainian-centric historical master narrative and its inclusion in the commemorations of victims of the Shoah is particularly striking. On the one hand, it shows the Jewish community’s desire to position itself as part of Ukrainian society; on the other, it demonstrates the influence this dominant national discourse has on the perception of the Shoah.

However, bearing the idea of unity between the current war and World War II, the commemorations of the Shoah were used by those assembled not only to confirm the equality, but also to refute

it. In this case, the focus lies on the role of Ukrainians whom Russian media presents solely as nationalists in the past as well as in the present. The mere fact that memorial ceremonies honoring Jewish victims could take place in Lviv's public spaces should serve as proof that "fascists" did not prevail in Ukraine. Speakers who did not belong to the Jewish community emphasized their solidarity with the Jewish people and in doing so, countered the Russian propaganda. During all the commemorations discussed in this article, it was stated by several orators that some Ukrainians saved Jews during World War II. Andrei Sheptytskyi was mentioned repeatedly, as shown in the quotation at the beginning of the article, while Ukrainians' involvement in the Shoah was not addressed in a single speech.

It is useful to take a closer look at how the Holocaust was used—before and after the full-scale invasion—as a reference point to describe current events and to see that an essential shift occurred post-2022. In 2017, reference to the Holocaust was rare and I could trace it only once during the event on January 27. It was made by the head of the Jewish religious orthodox community "Turei Zahav," Meilakh Sheikhet, a controversial figure in the Jewish community, during the gathering at the monument to victims of the ghetto. He compared the year 1939 and the current urban policy of Lviv and summarized his speech with the phrase "Today, the Holocaust goes on in Lviv." This statement was promptly contradicted by subsequent speakers. An immediate reaction came from Myroslav Marynovych, a human rights activist and former Soviet dissident, who spoke right after Meilakh. Marynovych stated:

It is difficult for me to speak. I am irritated by the phrase we just heard, that the Holocaust continues in Lviv. I believe this is a different interpretation of the Holocaust. [...] I cannot accept this statement. I protest against it internally.

Later, at the memorial stone, Siva Fainerman, the rabbi from the progressive community also opposed Sheikhet:

What does he who said these [words] know about fascism? What has he seen, being born after the war? What does he know about the Holocaust, he who has never heard of it? And does he know with what joy the mass media there, in the East, among our neighbours, will pick up on this presentation. On behalf of my community, I disavow these words!

Fainerman wanted to prevent this provocative equation of the past, when Ukrainians actively collaborated with the National Socialists, with the present from being assumed as a shared belief within the Jewish community.

By contrast, in 2023, the idea of equating the Shoah with the Russo-Ukrainian war was not just present, it dominated the commemorations on January 27. However, this comparison emphasized different aspects. For example, Yury Storozhenskyi, who spoke again, said:

And I would also like to touch on another topic and compare today's war to the genocide of the Jewish people. Jews were herded into a pile by armed men into a pit. [...] And they shot at them with machine guns. This was genocide. It was the destruction of people.

What our "brothers" Russians are doing now is driving tanks and long-range artillery to some village and shooting at the settlement. They destroy houses, kill people. That is the same genocide.

In his statement, Storozhenskyi not only equated contemporary Russians with Germans of the wartime period but also linked present-day Ukrainians to Jews of the past. This idea borders on the relativization of the Holocaust. Expressed first in the Jewish

community, it might change the perception of the current war in the future.

Concluding remarks

In North American and Western European discourses, the interpretation of World War II is inextricably linked to the Holocaust, which has become a negative foundation myth of Europe. Therefore, Ukraine's desired integration into the European Union implies the inclusion of the Holocaust in the country's national narrative, a process which began way before the full-scale Russian invasion. One of the main difficulties on this path lies in reconciling remembering the victims of the Shoah with the positive image of the glorified "liberation struggle." Even more complicated when coming to terms with the past is the marginalization of the Shoah as a narrative belonging to one specific group and not as part of a national history.

Forms of public remembrance have been ongoing since the late 1990s, in contrast to the suppression of the Shoah during the Soviet period. For members of the Jewish community in Lviv, who are still predominantly lacking religious identification, participating in commemorative events became one of the most significant rituals in building identity and replaced religious rites as an affirmative performative action. At the same time, other commemorative actors have become active in this field: first, the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe and then the "Territory of Terror" Museum. In collaboration with the city municipality, these institutions are dedicated to the research and popularization of Jewish history in the region. By aiming to close the gap left after the period of silence that surrounded the Shoah in the Soviet era, their actions are oriented toward the international memorial canon. Although these efforts are undoubtedly outstanding, there is a risk that the local Jewish community could

be marginalized or even excluded from the public memory work. Due to not being religious or conscious of their ancestors' history, these people are perceived as not authentic enough to be legitimate bearers of memory. While potentially neglecting the complex Soviet Jewish identity that has been shaped by numerous historical ruptures, "the Jew" becomes a phantom and the perpetual "Other." Squeezed between Soviet and Western memorial cultures, the public memory of the Shoah shows itself as open to the national or even nationalistic narrative, thus creating hybrid forms of Jewish-Ukrainian identity. The diversity of the actors involved and the efforts made to commemorate the past reveal that the act of remembering the Shoah is highly contested.



Image 1. Commemorations on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day at the monument to the victims of the Lemberg ghetto. Lwiw. January 27, 2023. © Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair



Image 2. Memorial site “Spaces of Synagogues.” Lwiw. January 28, 2023. © Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair

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