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MAKING SENSE OF THE HOLOCAUST IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND: THE REAL AND THE IMAGINED, THE CONTRADICTIONS AND THE PARADOXES

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Introduction

There are numerous voices from among senior scholars in our generation that tell us that it is impossible to make sense of the Holocaust. The Holocaust has altered the basic understanding we have of humanity. How to identify its causes poses almost impossible challenges for the writing of history – because the enormous scale and intensity of the genocide are completely outside the continuity of ordinary historical development. The Holocaust is also a European problem, because it is a tragic and ominous legacy of European civilisation, and testimony to its greatest failure. And, in addition, it is a Polish problem, given that the Holocaust largely unfolded on Polish soil.

The sheer magnitude of those events – the terror and the suffering experienced by the unarmed victims, the brutal murder of huge numbers of children, the stupendous loss of life and the destruction of entire Jewish communities, the industrialised death camps, the forced ethnic cleansing and repopulating of previously multi-ethnic towns and villages, and the devastation of the local Jewish heritage – the sheer magnitude of those events that we collectively term 'the Holocaust' is simply too much for us to make sense of.

My experience as a foreigner in Poland in listening to people speaking about the Holocaust has overwhelmingly been an awareness of numerous discourses and multiple contours of memory. There is no unanimity or shared vision, and it is impossible to generalise – whether on the philosophical challenges, the historiographic challenges, the European challenges, or the Polish challenges. Frankly, given the immensity of the Holocaust especially as seen from Poland, I do not think it could be otherwise.

But here in Poland there has been a particular problem, because this unmastered and probably unmasterable past has been overlaid by at least two other factors since the end of the war more than seventy years ago. One is the basic fact that Poles themselves also experienced colossal suffering during the war; the other was that during forty years of communist rule the entire historical record was falsified, so that in the public discourse the Holocaust largely disappeared into the generalised crimes of the fascist German occupation. Only in recent years, since the end of communist rule in 1989, has the Holocaust become part of the normal curriculum in Polish schools and the whole subject opened up for research in a spirit of free enquiry by a new generation of historians undertaking scholarly re-examination of narratives which had been sensitive if not taboo. These past 25 years have proved to be an exceptionally fertile period of time, marked by the appearance of numerous specialist monographs and important historical debates, whether for example over the representativeness and typicality of Poles who risked their lives to save and rescue Jews during the war, or who, on the contrary, participated in the mass murder of Jews such as in the town of Jedwabne and elsewhere in north-eastern Poland in 1941 (for a key survey article of scholarly work during this period, see Polonsky 2007; the debate in Poland over Jedwabne was one of the most prolonged and far-reaching of any discussion of the Jewish issue in the country since the Second World War, and for an extensive English-language collection of articles from the Polish debate see Polonsky and Michlic 2004). For me as an anthropologist, coming to Poland on brief visits throughout this period, the subject has been hugely interesting – as if I have been privileged to observe from the inside the fluidity and multi-dimensionality of thinking about this unmastered and unmasterable past. During these 25 years, the scholarly world in Poland has developed, as elsewhere in Europe

– collective knowledge of the historical facts of the Holocaust has filtered into a wide range of academic approaches. Indeed, what we now have is a chorus of voices, a chorus of very different scholarly approaches within the broad field of Holocaust studies which derive from a wide range of perspectives and intellectual disciplines.

This chorus of voices brings with it important issues for us to consider. Young people in other countries, far removed from the Polish issues and far removed from scholarly conferences such as this, usually either know very little about the Holocaust or else become deeply emotional about the basic historical facts when they first encounter them. This is especially true if they are first-time visitors to the Auschwitz museum, and especially true also for Jewish visitors there. The Jewish world has largely constructed for itself a distinctive outlook regarding the Holocaust that relies on a stable narrative of the events based on historical antisemitism; it has masked out or turned its back on any uncertainties, it has smoothed out inconsistencies, and in general it presents what it believes is a coherent understanding of the subject. Over-simplified views of the Holocaust are similarly to be found in some of the educational programmes prepared for the very numerous groups of schoolchildren who are brought to Poland from across Europe. Scholars of Holocaust studies, however, are deeply aware of other realities, and we come to the subject with other strategies and perspectives. We know how to listen to different scholarly opinions, and so we hear the chorus of voices. We acknowledge incoherence, we struggle with the intellectual problems – we doubt, we hesitate, and we theorise.

But for many Jews, even seventy years later, the Holocaust is often still too raw for them to be reconciled to, alongside the controversies over Polish-Jewish relations during those terrible times which continue to rumble, not far below the surface. There is not, and cannot be, a quick fix. The reduction of a particularly long and distinguished Jewish civilization in Poland to what is perceived as a desolate, silent, melancholy landscape of ruins requires patient, sensitive attention and may take generations. But that sad landscape of ruins in present-day Poland is largely in the Jewish imagination. It is not entirely real, in the sense that it cannot easily be physically seen by the average foreign Jewish visitor. But for such people it is, nevertheless, entirely real.

Meanwhile, let me say that for me as an anthropologist there is quite a different landscape. What can be observed here is a landscape of contradictions, paradoxes, and a host of difficult questions – cultural questions, theological questions, museum questions, among many others. Cultural questions – for example, how far will reflections on the Holocaust encourage the development of a pluralist, tolerant, and multi-dimensional post-communist Polish identity, with new contours of memory and an openness to pan-European dialogue? (For an important statement about these challenges, by the senior scholar responsible for establishing the Holocaust

studies unit at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, see Mach 2009). Theological questions – for example, are Jewish victims to be understood as actually having been martyrs for their faith, and if so, what are the implications? Where was God in Auschwitz? Museum questions – for example, has enough memorialisation been done here in Poland? Has too much been done? Where is memory located, and where should it be located? Is the balance right in Poland as regards the need for the remembrance of the victims as opposed to the need for education? These are all complex and pressing issues, on which there are earnest debates. There is no quick fix to settling such matters, no final solution to such problems. It is of course a very large subject, and I can cover only a few issues here. All I can do is to dip my toe in the water and offer some descriptive material regarding just two examples of how people make sense of the Holocaust in the Polish context – Auschwitz and Jewish Kraków.

Auschwitz

The site of the former concentration camp at Auschwitz has been a Polish state museum since 1947. A first-time visitor would normally assume that the museum presents one single coherent history of the place, based on the bland 'historical facts' that have been assembled by the museum's historical specialists. In fact, the permanent exhibition installed at the museum in 1955 put the focus on Auschwitz as the key representative site of *Polish* national martyrdom during the German occupation. It quite deliberately marginalised *Jewish* victimhood there, and certainly made no attempt to cover the history of the Holocaust as such (Huener 2003). The historical distortions were introduced during communist times, but they have slowly been corrected since 1989, and visitors are now informed about a much wider range of historical facts – in particular, that Jewish victimhood at Auschwitz, amounting to about 1.1 million people, constituted 92% of those murdered there, as against about 75,000 Christian Poles, together with smaller numbers of Sinti and Roma Gypsies, Soviet prisoners of war, as well as communists, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. [These figures come from a landmark, authoritative study by Franciszek Piper, then head of the Auschwitz museum's historical research department (Piper 1991); for a recent survey article about the negotiation of shifts in interpretation of Auschwitz as a heritage site, see Webber 2016]. Presenting these numbers should not undermine the importance of Auschwitz as a symbol for Poles or for Gypsies or for Russians; but the emphasis is clearly tilted nowadays towards Auschwitz as a place of *Jewish* martyrdom, as delivered to the visitors through the exhibitions and guides, as well as on the informational signs that are to be found throughout the site, which since 1995 have included information in Hebrew, as well as in Polish and English.

However, in addition there are a dozen or so 'national exhibitions' housed in former barracks, presented by various European associations of former Auschwitz prisoners or other national agencies, in order to give their own Auschwitz narratives. In fact each of them clearly presents a different perspective on the importance of Auschwitz in the context of their own particular national circumstances during the Second World War. Through these national exhibitions, visitors can absorb the idea that there is in fact a specifically Hungarian narrative of Auschwitz, a specifically Dutch narrative, a Sinti and Roma narrative, a French narrative, and so on. These narratives are all structured quite differently, telling quite different stories, identifying quite different heroes and villains, displaying quite different photographs, and in general demonstrating the very different ways that the history and meaning of Auschwitz are to be understood.

So the question of whether there is a single master narrative of Auschwitz that would help visitors make sense of the Holocaust is not at all straightforward to answer. However, there are at least two other narrativisations or frames of reference which add yet further complications. One of them is of course the standard approach of humanist educators – that Auschwitz has the key emblematic role to remind the world of the importance of human rights and of the dangers of intolerance, fascism, xenophobia, and state-sponsored violence in general. The immense scale of the atrocities committed at the Auschwitz concentration camp is to be read in the context of the capacity of humanity to undertake genocide; and so this approach sees Auschwitz not at all in terms of a Polish or Jewish or Hungarian narrative but in terms of a universalist meaning – for example, stressing the universal slogan of 'Never Again!' and therefore bracketing Auschwitz together with other instances of genocide elsewhere in the world, in a transnational cross -referencing of historical atrocities. UNESCO put the Auschwitz site on its World Heritage List in 1979 precisely for this reason – because it was concerned with crimes against humanity in general and the struggle for world peace and security.

But against all of that there is also a fourth kind of narrative that is found at this place, namely the personal memories of Auschwitz survivors. Tour leaders of Jewish groups regularly bring a survivor with them, so that at specific points along the visitor route they can tell their own stories in addition to the explanations and commentaries given by the official guides. The realities presented by the survivors are quite different from what the guides have to say: they derive from their personal experiences and their personal emotions. They speak about what Auschwitz was 'really' like; and it is these personal encounters with the subject which is how the Holocaust is conventionally presented in the Jewish world, especially in Israel, even at its main Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Survivors cannot in any case offer a global view of the historical facts about the Holocaust as supplied by the guides, since such facts were not available to them at

the time; all that was discovered by historians researching the subject only after the war was over. But survivors are routinely relied on as speakers at the main commemorative events, such as the large ceremony in January 2015 marking the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Some of them are excellent speakers – even seventy years on, they still can present their Holocaust experiences very powerfully, as raw events; and they can also add their optimistic comments on their hopes for the future following the defeat of the genocidal perpetrators, something which is of course totally beyond the scope of the historians, who are limited to describing the original historical facts.

In short, what is actually to be found in Auschwitz today are four broad kinds of memory, four kinds of histories, reliant on quite different methodologies and rules of evidence. There is thus no overall coherence how Auschwitz is understood at the site. On the contrary; there are multiple perspectives, a chorus of voices available there regarding the story it has to tell. It certainly is not at all made clear by the museum guides whose history should prevail, in whose history Auschwitz is or should be located, or whose memory it belongs to. German history? Jewish history? Polish history? European history? World history? It is an ethical dilemma. The museum exhibitions make no explicit attempt to encourage visitors even to ask these questions, although implicitly it does suggest that Auschwitz belongs to all of these, and much more. The Holocaust is both a Jewish catastrophe and a universal catastrophe at the same time. Both approaches are of course necessary, and so the challenge for the memorialization of the Holocaust is to look both ways simultaneously, even if there are moral and intellectual contradictions.

And so here we get to the heart of the matter that I would like to focus on in this essay. The coexistence of these alternative narratives and alternative histories is an uneasy one. Sometimes they are simply contested, as for example when Israeli tour groups try to refuse the services of an official Auschwitz museum guide and thereby contest their pedagogic credentials, or – more famously – when in the 1980s Jewish leaders protested about what they saw as the 'dejudaisation' of Auschwitz (an Auschwitz without Jews), as demonstrated in their eyes through the existence of a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz, which was indeed eventually removed from the site. But most of the time, most people would simply acknowledge, in a non-confrontational manner, that different people see Auschwitz differently and would not be concerned about the contradictions and the paradoxes, if they are even aware of them – that issue is for us as scholars to deal with, not for the ordinary Auschwitz visitor.

I'm all in favour of the contradictions and paradoxes. The reason is that they are highly productive and probably go to the heart of what genocide is all about: ordinary peacetime

morality, underpinned by neat, conceptually familiar categories of explanation, is out of place here. For example, even the apparently simple generalised category of victimhood is not without problems: there were Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz (such as the Sonderkommando) who were forced into collaborating with the murderers and in that sense could be said to have facilitated the mass murders themselves. The existence of such multiple approaches and alternative narratives point to the fundamentally subversive character of the historical Auschwitz, something which profoundly influences how Auschwitz is presented and understood today.

On the one hand, Auschwitz is a cemetery, the largest cemetery in Europe, and probably the largest cemetery known to humanity. On the other hand, Auschwitz is a place of atrocity; the place was never intended to be a cemetery or to be treated as one. It certainly is not at all presented today as a cemetery, for example with more than one million tombstones. The result is that Auschwitz is a cemetery, but at the same time it is not a cemetery. Or take another example. One the one hand, Auschwitz is conventionally understood by most people today as the key symbol of the Holocaust, although during the first forty years after the war the place was presented as the key symbol of the horrific brutality suffered by Poles during the German occupation. Maybe, when contemplated from a distance, Auschwitz is indeed a convenient shorthand symbol. Encountered close-up, however, Auschwitz is not just a symbol – it is a real place. It certainly awakens people to the concrete historical realities: by visiting Auschwitz, people can gain a strong sense that Auschwitz really existed, that mass murder really happened there. Visitors commonly say they have come to see 'Auschwitz', not 'the Auschwitz museum' – as if in some sense the site is still so totally authentic that it possesses its original character, whatever that may be. They can say that they are visiting 'Auschwitz' because of the simultaneities: Auschwitz is both a symbol and not a symbol at the same time. But Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust does not in any case tell the whole historical story of the Holocaust, and in fact it distorts it. What cannot be seen at Auschwitz are all the things that happened to the Jews before they ever even arrived at the death camp: all that has to be imagined. I mean the discrimination; the humiliations; the ghettoisation; the random shootings; the imprisonment; the torture; the process of the deportations; the deaths from hunger, disease, and the strenuous forced labour; the murder by shooting in nearby forests; the heroic deaths through resistance of some kind; and so on. All that has to be imagined at Auschwitz, which in any case tends to focus on the methods of the perpetrators rather than the suffering of the victims. Too much of their Holocaust narrative is hidden from view at death camps such as Auschwitz.

I pass on now to some further difficulties. On the one hand, Auschwitz is preserved as a museum, under the authority of the Museums Department of the Polish Ministry of Culture;

but of course it is not at all an ordinary museum, and it is not usually understood by visitors as a museum. What is the 'real' Auschwitz, and where – within the territory of the Auschwitz museum – is it physically located? Is it to be found in Birkenau's wide open spaces and ruins, where so much has disappeared, or is it in the many different museum exhibitions inside the well -maintained, freshly repainted brick-built barracks of the original camp of Auschwitz I? Indeed, that part of the Auschwitz museum is relatively sanitized, even aestheticized. In Auschwitz -Birkenau, however, the landscape is hard to read. Much of it is in ruins, but the ruins exist as ruins for several quite different reasons. Some of these ruins, of course, simply express the passage of time since the end of the war. However, one of the gas chambers and crematoria is in ruins because it was destroyed during an uprising by Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando in October 1944. Meanwhile the other main gas chambers are in ruins because they were destroyed by the Germans a short while later – as the end of the war was approaching, the Germans intended to destroy the evidence of their crimes; but although they started that work they did not succeed in dismantling them completely before the camp was liberated by the Red Army. And then after the liberation, as local society tried to return to ordinary peacetime, there was a great shortage of ordinary building materials, and so many of the former prisoner barracks in Birkenau fell into ruin because they were dismantled by local Poles who were in need of building materials. So the landscape of ruins at Auschwitz represents a complex history. The ruins do not all have the same meaning. On the contrary; they derive from the deliberate interventions of Jews and Germans and Poles, as well as the passage of time. Meanwhile (contrary to what visitors imagine), the barbed wire that surrounds many of these ruins is not original – it has been restored by the museum.

In other words, these ruins of the past are thus hard to read, and are full of paradox and contradiction. The existence of these four kinds of ruin, side by side, confuses the issues. It is a multi-dimensionality that is not really relevant to the narrative the museum wants to tell; and so, in an effort to renew its credibility as the guardian of this heritage, the museum has recently launched a major fundraising initiative to make further restorations and prevent further deterioration. After all, the museum has restored the watchtowers and the two important entry -gates (one at Auschwitz I and one at Auschwitz-Birkenau), as well as the railway line (so very important in the history of the Holocaust), and there are ponds in Birkenau into which human ashes were dumped. There are also large amounts of the prisoners' personal belongings on display in the museum's showcases, such as the collection of shoes, suitcases, and children's clothes. Visitors routinely take photos of these things; it is clearly good for the visitors' imagination of a former concentration camp and death camp to see it surrounded with barbed

wire and watchtowers. But in restoring all these elements, perhaps the museum has ended up creating a place which is too top-heavy with its visual exotica? The question remains whether all these surviving realia really do appropriately represent the historical Auschwitz as the authentic epicenter of evil, whether the need for the tourist gaze at these visual exotica should indeed be taken as decisive. What difference would it make to the meaning of the site if the ruins slowly sank quietly into the ground? After all, no original structures remain at all of the death camp at Bełżec, which since 2004 is now completely covered by a very large memorial. In what way is meaning dependent on the survival of the original historical artefacts? The memorial at Bełżec is architecturally very powerful, suggesting that meaning can certainly be attempted even after the physical realities are gone.

In thinking about how people make sense of the Holocaust in contemporary Poland, it is instructive to pause for a moment in order to make a brief comparison between present-day Auschwitz and present-day Bełżec. They are completely different in their histories – for example, there were fewer than ten people who survived Bełżec, as compared with the estimated 200,000 people who survived Auschwitz (Piper 1991: 92; as he notes, it is a very high figure as compared to other death camps, though it includes prisoners who were transferred to other camps). The significant result that Bełżec is not at all well known compared with Auschwitz. There is only one published survivor's testimony from Bełżec, just one (Reder 2000, first published in Kraków in 1946). Before the new memorial was built at Bełżec in 2004, the place was just an empty field, with just a couple of small monuments. In effect, what there was at Bełżec, for 60 years after the war, was simply nothingness. So here comes the question: could the empty field of Bełżec have become the symbol of the Holocaust, or is it that Auschwitz became the symbol, not just because it had the largest number of victims and a huge number of survivors, but also because of the sheer physicality of the post-war site? Auschwitz is understood as authentic because it looks authentic; and the museum's restoration programme today is intended to make sure that Auschwitz will continue to look authentic. But because of its physicality it encourages people to focus too literally on what is there rather than meditating on what Auschwitz destroyed and the nothingness it created – to let people's imagination turn to a powerful sense of the incomprehensibility of the mass murders. In other words, not all Holocaust sites say the same thing; on the contrary, they may differ substantially from each other in their capacity to awaken visitors to imagine the historical realities of the Holocaust. Perhaps the imagination cannot really feed on nothingness; or perhaps it can. But these two voices from what has been left behind of the death camps in Poland, those of Auschwitz and Bełżec, once again remind us that there is no single reality here; there is a chorus of voices.

To sum up about Auschwitz before I move on. The Auschwitz site is characterized by numerous contradictions – as an emblematic site of 'undesirable heritage' or 'difficult heritage' (for these concepts see Macdonald 2009), it is simultaneously a symbol, a cemetery, a museum, and a place of 'dark tourism' (Lennon and Foley 2010) that continues to attract huge numbers of visitors (according to the museum's annual report posted on its website, visitor numbers reached over 1.7 million in 2015). Different people move through the site with different mental landscapes, and they see different things there. Auschwitz is also a pilgrimage site, especially for religious Jews and Catholics wishing to meditate or to say prayers in memory of the dead. And it offers itself as a powerful setting for the enactment of important memorial events. Ceremonies are held annually on 27th January, the date of the liberation in 1945. At the important anniversaries, such as the fiftieth or sixtieth anniversary of the liberation – or most recently at the seventieth anniversary – vast crowds attend the ceremonies, including numerous heads of state as well as Auschwitz survivors. Auschwitz-Birkenau is physically transformed into a theatrical stage -set, where rows of seating are provided at the main monument in Birkenau, alongside the railway tracks and the ruins of the gas chambers. It is an exceptionally powerful architectural environment. In 2015, for the seventieth anniversary, the ceremony was held inside a tent that had been erected immediately in front of the main entry-gate. Through the use of curtains and special lighting effects, the watch-tower became that afternoon a theatrical prop – the building was of course perfectly real but it was made to function as if it had been specially made as a theatrical backdrop. The double identity of the watch-tower that day was perhaps a clear statement of the multi-dimensionality of this very complex place. The first such massive event in Birkenau was in 1979, when the Pope came to visit; an estimated 300,000 people were present. An altar and gigantic cross had been specially erected, transforming the site into a public Christian setting suitable for the Pope's celebration of the Mass. The homily which he delivered there stressed Poland's wartime sacrifice, which he framed as an integral part of the conscience of contemporary humanity and the Christian commitment to human rights; but he also specifically paid homage to Jewish suffering at Auschwitz (Huener 2003: 212–225). That was then. Today's 27th January anniversary ceremonies are secular rituals, where instead of Christian symbols huge overhead television screens dominate the scene, and the event is relayed on television around the world. The speeches today emphasise Jewish victimhood. Poland's wartime sacrifice is still there, but it has receded into the background. So Birkenau continues to present itself as a setting for quite different cultural enactments of the imagined meanings of the Auschwitz memory. The setting 'explains' and animates the various performances, permitting a theatrical unpacking of the historical imagination in the public space.

In reviewing the multidimensionality, contradictions, and paradoxes of present-day Auschwitz, what emerges is not at all a stable, coherent picture, but rather, as befits a place of such complex heritage, a jumble of many different styles of meaning from many different sources – a colourful collage blending together reality, dreams, memories, and political visions of all kinds. The ideas presented in the main speeches at the big ceremonies are often tangled and chaotic, without any evident need for chronological sequence. On the contrary, past, present, and future coexist here unselfconsciously. Almost by definition, in any speech which emphasizes the relevance of the past, there is no boundary of any importance between the historical and the contemporary. Episodic, disconnected moments from the historical facts, from survivor memories, and from national histories are linked up with present-day spiritual messages or political visions for the future that claim an integrated view. In one sense it is simply disorder, reflecting the basic truth that Auschwitz memory is divided and fragmented. In another sense, when looked at in this way, the cacophony is in fact an extremely potent mixture, allowing in a sense of the subversive character both of the genocide itself and its aftermath. Inasmuch as the genocide tore the previous world to pieces, it is not inappropriate that the memory is pieced together from the fragments that were left behind. There is no single narrative, nor a holistic outlook on what happened. If Auschwitz is inclusive of so many different identities, as a symbol, a cemetery, a pilgrimage site, a museum, a place of 'dark' tourism, and a theatre, there is not, and probably never can be, just one single authority to whom Auschwitz morally belongs. Meanwhile, in the perspective of the victims, the entire genocidal enterprise is fundamentally incomprehensible and meaningless. The Auschwitz memorial site is thus in this sense a very strange place – and, in terms of its mission, understandably so. But it is this chorus of voices which we as scholars should listen to, indeed speak about, and bring multi-ethnic groups of students to study. I think that it is only by acknowledging the cacophony of voices and multiple narratives that one can begin to make sense of the Holocaust. Poland is the perfect place to do that, because Poland is where these narratives co-exist most strongly. Holocaust museums, even concentration camp museums, in other locations do not present the complexities as Poland can.

Jewish Kraków

In the time I have remaining to me for this lecture on making sense of the Holocaust in Poland, I would like to move slightly further afield intellectually and say something about Jewish Poland today. In fact it is a key element of the subject, since the Holocaust is always, at the very least, a sub-text in the encounter with Jewish Poland. Before the Holocaust, Poland had been the

centre of the Jewish world for several centuries. There were established Jewish communities in as many as 1,200 towns and villages in this country. Nearly all of them were destroyed in the Holocaust – and in present-day Poland there are only about ten Jewish communities to be found. It is a gigantic task to find appropriate ways to memorialise this vanished population, but since the transition to democratic government in 1989 many kinds of Poles are doing what they can to meet up to the challenge in many places across the country. Part of what they are doing involves the attempt to make sense of the Holocaust, and once again it is often multi-dimensional and brings with it the full range of contradictions and paradoxes.

For reasons of space, I shall restrict my comments here to present-day Jewish Kraków. It is a place which is both real and imagined, at the same time. There are real, functioning synagogues still standing, used by a tiny community of only a few hundred people; but for many foreign Jews, probably most Jews of the world, Jewish Kraków is essentially in ruins. Poland is imagined as one enormous Holocaust graveyard, where nothing Jewish is left, certainly nothing of a living Judaism of any importance. The post-Holocaust Poland of this Jewish imagination lies desolate and is physically in ruins. There are some small synagogues in Kraków that really are in ruins, and one can occasionally glimpse fading pre-war inscriptions in Hebrew which in their own way as fragments also directly document a Jewish world that is in ruins. The 60,000 Jews of Kraków were uprooted from their homes during the Holocaust, forced into a ghetto across the river, and then taken away to be murdered. But many of the buildings they left behind have remained, largely intact – or at least sufficiently intact as to be capable of being restored. Jews have lived in Kraków for seven hundred years, and Kazimierz is remarkable for being able to offer a real sense of such a very long Jewish past. Virtually nowhere else in Poland, virtually nowhere else in Europe, other than Venice or Prague, is it possible to see an entire Jewish quarter, dating in part from medieval times, still standing, including a number of major synagogue buildings and two relatively intact Jewish cemeteries. Visitors who come to Kazimierz with their imagination of a Jewish world that is in ruins can be shown what is surely an extremely depressing post -Holocaust sight – the outward spectacle of a Jewish town but with hardly any Jews. Making sense of the Holocaust in such an environment strongly suggests the sense of an absent presence, or the presence of absence.

One can also find in Kraków several memorials marking original Holocaust sites. For example, there are two surviving substantial fragments of the wall which surrounded the ghetto across the river; there is a Holocaust monument in the square used by the Germans as an Umschlagplatz or deportation site next to the former ghetto, and there are Jewish monuments at the site of the former concentration camp in the neighbourhood of Płaszów, where

commemorative ceremonies take place each year on the anniversary of the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto in 1943, attended by many hundreds of local people.

These three features of Kraków – ruins, the presence of absence, and physical reminders of the Holocaust – coexist uneasily. The parallel with what I have been saying about Auschwitz immediately springs to mind. What can be found in the 'real' Jewish Kraków thus includes the greatness of the past, the awareness that that past does not exist anymore, and a historical consciousness of the horrors of the Holocaust which brought that past to an end.

Given that semantic complexity, what, then, does the real Jewish Kraków consist of? Which part of it can be taken as representative of the present day? It is a complicated matter also because the realities have changed so much since the end of the war, and they are continuing to change. It is hard to generalise. At one extreme, much has been disappearing; on the other hand, at the other extreme there has been a magnificent, conscious effort by different municipal and foreign agencies since 1989 to publicly restore the memory of the local Jewish past as an expression, perhaps, of healing and remembrance – as if to say that Jewish Kraków belongs not only to Jewish history but also is an integral part of the history of Kraków itself, and indeed of Polish history. For example, at least four synagogue buildings have been thoroughly renovated, including their magnificent painted interiors.

Renovating synagogues of course adds to the semantic complexity, however. The tiny Jewish community of Kraków does not actually *need* more synagogues, although occasionally a renovated synagogue will be used for prayer services (especially when large groups of Jewish visitors arrive in the city, as part of a Jewish heritage tour). So yes, a renovated synagogue does in some sense become an active synagogue once again, although many Jews will also understand such places as a kind of Holocaust memorial (that is, in memory of the Jews who once used to pray there). But otherwise it is understood as a museum whose cultural meaning belongs only to the past, as part of the local heritage – something which is demonstrated by the fact that it is a place for which tourists have to buy an entry ticket. The renovated Tempel synagogue in Kazimierz is an interesting case, as it is large enough also to be used sometimes as an ordinary concert hall. The building is therefore a synagogue but also an active museum holding its own concerts. Another example of this kind of ambiguity is the restoration of the historic tombstones of the old Jewish cemetery established in the sixteenth century, undertaken as a conservation project by the city council in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the finely carved tombstones in this cemetery are beautiful and worth preserving, but the effect of the restoration has been to turn the old cemetery into a museum, or in effect a lapidarium. For Orthodox Jews, whose heritage it also is, the cemetery is not at all a museum or lapidarium. For them, it has true sanctity

– it contains many graves of very distinguished rabbis and scholars, who over many centuries made Poland a world centre of Jewish spirituality. And so, especially on the anniversary of the death of those rabbis, they come on pilgrimage to the cemetery in order to pray at those graves and reconnect with the sanctity they feel there. They may be quite unconcerned with the artistic beauty of the tombstones – at least, that is not why they have come.

There is an uneasy coexistence between such multiple roles. Of course many people would neither notice nor care. But there are indeed moments when the contradictions and paradoxes rise to the surface. One obvious instance arises from time to time on Jewish religious festivals, when it is unclear if Jewish ritual regulations governing synagogues actually apply in such buildings that have become museums. A larger issue relates to the opening of kosher-style restaurants, Jewish bookshops and other Jewish-themed shops, complete with new signage in Hebrew or Yiddish, enabling tourist agencies to promote Kazimierz as if in some sense its Jewish identity is somehow alive and well. The complicated truth is that at one level it really is – there has been an extraordinary revival of Jewish life taking place here since 1989. Kazimierz is simply buzzing today with Jewish cultural events of all kinds, including special lectures, discussion groups, klezmer concerts, and film and drama evenings. Certainly some local Jews come to such events, but they are attended principally by people who are not Jewish. In particular, for the past 25 years there has been an annual Jewish Culture Festival, which is the largest of its kind in Europe today. Janusz Makuch, the organizer of the festival, and himself not Jewish, is thus in the curious situation of directing a Jewish culture festival for other non-Jews in a former Jewish neighbourhood that today is considered by many Jews a Jewish ghost town. The interesting thing is that he says that this is in fact his mission – to facilitate the performance of Jewish culture in a country which is the world's largest Jewish graveyard, as a way of both honouring the dead and demonstrating Jewish survival (as quoted in Gruber 2002: 47). It's a very clear statement about the paradoxes of making Jewish memory in present-day Poland; and once again, the Holocaust sub-text is clear. There is certainly a nostalgia for the Jewish culture that has otherwise been lost from the Polish landscape and a desire to find ways to celebrate it and bring it to life. It may be, in part, a fashionable, exotic form of entertainment, but behind the nostalgia also rests the awareness of the Holocaust past and a genuine, deepening interest in the history, culture, and religion of the vanished Jews of the city, who before the war amounted to as much as 25 per cent of Krakow's population.

Whose history is it, anyway, and how should it be told in the public space? There are multiple types of memory at work here, in relation both to observable reality and to the imagination. In a manner reminiscent of what I was saying before about Auschwitz, physical

space may be deeply ambiguous in its meanings. Different people move through the city with different mental landscapes of the place, depending on whether they are local people or tourists – or whether they are Jewish pilgrims returning to their place of origin, in search of their roots or otherwise attempting to reconnect with their imagined past. Especially for the foreign descendants of survivors this is a visit to a country which is indeed familiar to them from their family memory, but it may not exist in real space at all, let alone Polish space. Like all pilgrims, such Jews arrive in the city, usually from far away, and then go from memorial place to memorial place, ignoring the space in-between – because it is of no intrinsic interest to them; such spaces are not what they have come to see or to experience. Like all pilgrims, they see things which are not physically visible and are not even signposted, and they *ignore* many things which are actually there and which *are* signposted, and which are for example the things that the tourists focus on. This is what I mean by saying that different people walk in different mental landscapes on their routes through the city.

Much has been written about the mental landscape of foreign Jewish visitors who usually arrive with a mythologised, demonised view of an antisemitic Poland, and who may return home with such stereotypes intact, even if they will today not encounter much by way of actual antisemitism. These visitors, especially those from Israel, focus their visits on the idea of Poland as the main setting of the Holocaust, which they understand as having taken place in this country with the full support and indeed cooperation of the local population; and so they spend their time here at the former concentration camps and death camps, rather than learning about or being inspired by the colossal spiritual and cultural achievements of Polish Jewry over many centuries. The Polish Foreign Ministry is in despair over such people. The surviving synagogue buildings in Kraków, some of them several hundred years old, are massive structures built in a grand style, clearly demonstrating that the Jews of Kraków historically felt very much at home here – if only the foreign Jews would develop the mental space to recognise any of that. The massive new Jewish historical museum in Warsaw, which opened only in the autumn of 2014, does fully describe competition and conflict between Jewish Poles and Christian Poles over the centuries; but it also insists on showing that there also was a broad spectrum of Polish – Jewish relations. Coexistence also included cooperation and normal friendly relations, and all that also has to be included in the historical narrative. In the Holocaust section of the museum in Warsaw, the spectrum of Polish attitudes to the Jews is an essential component of the historical facts that are presented there – certainly most Poles, for one reason or another, may have been indifferent to the fate of the Jews, but there was a spectrum ranging from betrayal at one extreme to the willingness to help and rescue Jews (even at the risk of one's life) at the other extreme. Once

again, we are back to the issue of the need to represent the cacophony and articulate the chorus of voices – that is our job as scholars. In the words of Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the chief curator of the Warsaw museum's core exhibition, the aim is to present all the voices – "not one voice, the voice of the historian, but many voices, a chorus that is sometimes in harmony, sometimes dissonant" (2014: 34).

Let me give one final example from Kraków before I come to my conclusion. Perhaps the clearest example of the multi-dimensionality of Jewish Kraków is the use of the urban space of Kazimierz as a theatrical stage-set for the enactment of memory. The main street in Kazimierz is regularly used as a 'theatre of memory' for at least two kinds of performance. At one of them, ceremonies are held for the March of the Living – this is an annual event on Holocaust Remembrance Day designed to enact a Zionist narrative of Jewish history and to promote Jewish identity, and in particular an attachment to the State of Israel, among Jewish youth worldwide. Large groups of participants are dressed in blue-and-white uniforms, which are the colours of the Israeli flag, and indeed often hold Israeli flags, at ceremonies that are intended to demonstrate Jewish survival after the Holocaust. But the same space is regularly used for a different imagined meaning altogether – for the open-air concert of Jewish music marking the finale of the annual Jewish Culture Festival – in other words, as a theatrical stage-set for a *Polish* celebration of Jewish culture. Both these kinds of events are thus enacted in a 'theatre of memory', using the same urban space, where the architectural environment of the synagogues in this street are perfectly real but at the same time re-casted as props for a stage-set. These are two different cultural enactments of the imagined Jewish Kraków, by two different agencies of memory, though both of them are intended to restore the Jewish presence in a setting otherwise dominated by the sense of Jewish absence. The actual buildings are in that sense treated as if they were actors, 'explaining' the theatre, animating it, demonstrating that the theatre really belongs to the setting, and in this way being made meaningful as part of Jewish memory. On such occasions it is as if the historical imagination of Jews or about Jews is being almost literally unpacked here in the public space.

In reviewing all this material, what emerges cannot be described as a stable, coherent picture of an imagined Jewish Kraków, but rather a jumble of many different kinds of spaces and their respective meanings. Is Jewish Kraków a relic, a cultural treasure, a reminder of the death and destruction, a place where spirituality still hovers, or a celebration of the Jewish culture that once existed here? In truth, it is all these meanings together, at the same time, including the present-day Jewish revival. Perhaps one can suggest that reality can in a sense be compared to a television provider offering multiple channels: many programmes are available and can be seen, but one can tune in to only one of them at a time. Many Jews, returning to reconnect with their

roots and reclaim their past, tune in to their pre-programmed channel and then both recognise and fail to recognise what they see before their eyes. They may find the house where their family used to live long ago – but it isn't the 'same' house as the one that has been imagined in the family memory: so much of the environment has changed that in fact it may now be unrecognisable. What is today real is contradicted by what has been imagined; and what has been imagined is contradicted by what is today real. But the contradictions are themselves an integral part of such a journey, which by definition is tangled and chaotic, all overlaid by awareness of the great disaster. It is best understood as disorder – divided and fragmented. Past, present, and future coexist here unselfconsciously: memories from childhood coexist alongside later fantasies. As one can see from the memoirs, the encounter with the past is characterised more by episodic, disconnected moments than by the unfolding of an integrated experience. Perhaps this is why there is so much confusion about the Jewish past in Poland, especially among people who have come just on a brief visit to the country. I am not at all sure that making the trip to Poland really does help them genuinely make sense of the Holocaust.

In this context, a post-modern view of fragments needs to be properly acknowledged – the idea that Jewish life is in pieces, literally in pieces, after the Holocaust. Building up a picture of Jewish religion and culture out of the fragments which still survive in Kraków is in this view either an illusion, or it should be recognised for what it really is – a partial view, not at all anything that can approach a holistic view of pre-war Jewish life or of the Holocaust that brought it to an end. In the real world, different people put spiritual values and ordinary vernacular styles beside each other, and blend together whatever cultural symbols, episodic past encounters, quotations, and clichés come to mind. The memoirs and testimonies, of both Auschwitz and Jewish Kraków, are vital to understanding what is in people's imagination. A synagogue may still really be there, part of the real Kraków, but it cannot have any of those historical and emotional meanings for visitors without the knowledge of what this place once represented in the past. The curious thing is that such knowledge can survive in the imagined Kraków, even if this synagogue no longer exists. The imagination can assume it is still there, whether it actually is or isn't. But for that one needs the memoirs, the historians, and the museum people: one needs all these people who tell each generation about the past. This is how these two approaches to the past and the present – the reality and the imagination – may in fact often inform each other, even in dreaming about the future, and so they need to be read together.

Conclusion

The issues I have been describing in this text were very much in my mind when I curated a permanent photographic exhibition called *Traces of Memory* at the Galicia Jewish Museum here in Kraków on the subject of the Jewish heritage; and in conclusion I would like to mention just a few words about it. It is not at all a historical exhibition using old black-and-white photos arranged chronologically, but rather a portrayal of *present-day* realities using colour photos, and specifically to show the simultaneity of contradictions and paradoxes as they exist today. My purpose was both to acknowledge the existence of simplistic popular stereotypes or single-issue subjective memories of the imagined past, and also to challenge them. To achieve that objective, the exhibition is arranged in terms of five themes which together articulate a multi-dimensional view of the subject – in other words, that today's realities express profound diversity in their meanings. So yes, there is a section showing ruins (in fact it is the opening section), but to avoid giving the impression that the ruins of the past are all that there exists of Jewish Poland, the following section directly contradicts that – by showing photos which offer glimpses of the pre-Holocaust Jewish world that existed here and that can still be seen today (for example, synagogues or Jewish cemeteries that are in perfect condition). The Holocaust is in the centre of the exhibition – but the exhibition's narrative does not either begin with the Holocaust nor does it end with the Holocaust. What follows the Holocaust section are photos showing the both the erasure of memory in recent decades and also the opposite of that, i.e. the attempts that have been made at memorialisation; and the last section consists of portraits of the wide range of people who are involved as memory-makers – for example, scholars, politicians, Holocaust survivors, souvenir dealers, pilgrims, tourists, students, and simply ordinary local people. These five themes are intended to represent the chorus of voices that coexist with each other today. What they point to is that it is certainly true that in Poland today one can find ruined synagogues and concentration camp museums, but it simply is *not* true that that is *all* that one can find here; there is also active memorialisation, and there is also Jewish revival here. So, once again, the contradictions and paradoxes form the central message. This is why a view on the Holocaust from contemporary Poland is indeed interesting and instructive.

It's a fairly unconventional approach for a museum, but my argument is that it is based on the need to be honest and inclusive about the realities (for details of the Traces of Memory exhibition, see the companion volume (Webber 2009); for a full-scale academic study, by a former director of the museum, see Gerrard 2012). Honouring and commemorating the victims of the Holocaust includes the celebration of their Jewish culture. Janusz Makuch, the director of

the Jewish Culture Festival, is certainly right: performing Jewish culture here by definition honours the victims of the Holocaust and keeps their memory alive. Elsewhere people might think that these are two quite different things, but not so here in Poland – they are two related aspects of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional realities. Among the different voices that interlock with each other and need to be heard are the voices of the Holocaust dead and the voices of the Jews who created a great civilization here.

To finish now on a more abstract way of putting all this – in making sense of the Holocaust there is bound to be problems, contradictions, and questions. There cannot be, and should not be, a fixed interpretative scheme or some kind of unified, well-integrated, and stable history. It has to be a struggle, a constant challenge, and perhaps an overpowering sense of inadequacy in understanding the catastrophe. In this context, the real and the imagined need to be read together, even if they sometimes function as polar opposites. If all we are doing is to smooth out inconsistencies, and mask out or turn our backs on doubts, hesitations and uncertainties, we may not have grasped how totally subversive is a genocide or how very differently different people actually cope in trying to make sense of a deeply problematic past. We need the 'difficult questions' that disturb the tranquillity and coherence of an otherwise stereotyped view of things. After all, academic scholars are independent voices, as consultants and intermediaries between the Holocaust establishment and the public, contributing many perspectives in an interdisciplinary manner. The job of scholars is to challenge preconceptions, mystifications, stereotypes, and simplifications – in effect, to question common assumptions and so to problematize the subject. It may often be an uncomfortable place to sit, especially if we can glimpse only from far away what the survivors describe so vividly. So we must at all times endow our work with a sense of humility, especially in thinking how to make the transition from the vast and overwhelming detail of the history of the Holocaust to general issues of wider relevance.

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ABSTRACT

Making Sense of the Holocaust in Contemporary Poland:
The Real and the Imagined, the Contradictions and the Paradoxes

This article, written from an anthropological perspective and based on extended personal fieldwork by the author, consists of a detailed discussion of two places of Holocaust memory in present-day Poland: the memorial museum at Auschwitz and selected Jewish sites in the city of Kraków. The principal argument is that both the Auschwitz museum and Jewish Kraków have meanings which are multi-layered and multi-dimensional. For example, Auschwitz means different things to different people; some of those meanings are particularist (relating to the histories of different victim groups), some are universal. Similarly, the character of Jewish Kraków is understood not only in relation to the physical presence of a former Jewish quarter (now substantially restored), but also in relation to the overpowering awareness of ruin and the absence of Jews. The investigation and analysis of common interpretations of these two places reveal that they rest on numerous contradictions and paradoxes; the real and the imagined, usually understood as polar opposites, may in fact coexist in people's minds. In a sense it can be described as a 'chorus of voices', all of which need to be heard and acknowledged. But these voices are not always in harmony; on the contrary, what often comes across is dissonance or cacophony. In other words, there is no fixed interpretative scheme, no unified or stable approach. Nor, perhaps, should there be, in approaching something so totally subversive as genocide. The job of the scholar, in representing and problematizing how people make sense of the Holocaust in such contexts, thus requires the recognition of ethnographic inconsistencies and uncertainties, and in consequence to challenge preconceptions, mystifications, stereotypes, and simplifications.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust, contemporary Poland, Auschwitz, Auschwitz museum, Jewish Kraków, the real and the imagined, Galicia Jewish Museum, memory and memorialization

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