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Speaking Truth to Implicated Subjects: Kathleen A. Balgley's *Letters to My Father: Excavating a Jewish Identity in Poland and Belarus* (2022)

Kathleen A. Balgley's *Letters to My Father*, belongs to a genre Marianne Hirsch identified as Jewish second-generation "narratives of return" to Eastern/Central Europe (Hirsch, *Postmemory*, 205) – texts belonging to different genres, written by the children of Jews who left this region.¹ Some emigrated before World War II; others after the Holocaust. Whether they witnessed the annihilation of Eastern European Jews first-hand or from afar, by dint of the fact that they managed to escape death they can be defined as survivors and their children as the second generation. As Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have observed, in such narratives Eastern/Central Europe emerges as a "nexus between nostalgic and traumatic memory" (viii) and the writers drawn to that "nexus" function as "ghostly revenants or haunting reminders of a forgotten world" (Hirsch and Spitzer xx). In order to bring out the singularity of Balgley's book, I will compare it with several other second-generation Jewish memoirs. While all of them testify to a personal transformation, I believe Balgley's documents an unusual degree of engagement with living Poles – an engagement I see as based on the compulsion to speak the truth about the Jewish experience and hear it acknowledged. Her efforts to publish a *Letters to My Father* published in Poland make this aspect of the memoir all the more apparent. The many recent efforts to whitewash ethnic Poles' implication in the plight of Jews² makes Balgley's project particularly relevant in Poland today.

Narratives of "return"

Balgley was born in 1952 in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, as the third of four children. Since her Jewish immigrant father, Ely Balgley, concealed his ethnic identity, she was raised as a Catholic by her Irish-American mother, Margaret O'Hara, and had strong ties with her multiethnic maternal family. Her memoir only mentions one brief visit to the Jewish grandparents in Brooklyn at the age of five, a meeting for which no-one had prepared her, and a revisit three years later, when Ely Balgley moved his family to Cranford, New Jersey. All her efforts to learn more about what it meant to be Jewish met with her father's obstinate silence and her mother's sorrowful "Shhhhh" (25). As the book's subtitle suggests, what she

¹ In recent years, the trope of the Jewish return to the roots has become powerful enough to have been picked up by mainstream cinema, yielding two well-received feature films of "third-generation" returns: *Treasure* (2024, dir. Julia von Heinz) and *Real Pain* (2024, dir. Jesse Eisenberg).

² The phenomenon of "whitewashing" Poles' implication in the Holocaust and postwar pogroms has been documented in Jan Grabowski in *Polacy, nic się nie stało! Polemiki z Zagładą w tle* (2021); Jan Grabowski, *Whitewash: Poland and the Jews* (2024) [*Wybielanie: Polska wobec Zagłady Żydów* 2024]; and Jan Grabowski and Shira Klein, "Wikipedia's Intentional Distortion of the History of the Holocaust" (2023). In 2024, someone erected rocks with the inscriptions "Jedwabne" and "Radziłów" in Treblinka, implying these pogroms were carried out by German Nazis, and in July 2025, next to the monument commemorating the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom, an unidentified Polish nationalist group erected a counter-monument with plaques distorting historical evidence.

learned about her Jewish heritage as an adult had to be “excavated” with considerable effort: found in books (Balgley 65-67), wrested from relatives, and dug up in East/Central European archives.

Unlike most second generation memoirs of diasporic Jews’ travels to Eastern/Central Europe, Balgley’s is not an account of a tour guided by a native informant, centered around a visit to a concentration camp. It documents a carefully planned long-term expedition (1987 to 1989, preceded by a reconnaissance trip in 1984 and a Polish language course) to understand the country her father had turned his back on, and thus to recover a positive Polish-Jewish identity for him and his descendants. Other second-generation memoirs tend to focus on a “primordial site of origin” (Hirsch and Spitzer 9): Arnold Zable pilgrimaged from Melbourne to Białystok to measure it against the memories of the Białystoker Jewish community in Australia; Louise Steinman “returned” to her ancestral Radomsko; her traveling companion Cheryl Holtzman – to Kolomyia in Ukraine; Hirsch and Spitzer – to Chernivtsi. In contrast to these second-generation travelers, Balgley lived for two years in Polish cities with which she had no family connection – Dąbrowa Górnicza and Wrocław. It was not until 2014 that she visited Brest and Kobrin, Belarus, so perhaps her interest was less in the “site of origin” than in the cultural phenomenon of antisemitism that drove her family from Europe.

During the Cold War, such journeys were not impossible, but western visitors faced bureaucratic obstacles, invigilation, and other deterrents. Most chose not to go. Symptomatically, when in the 1970s Art Spiegelman decided to explore his father’s experience of Poland, rather than travel to there himself he relied on his father’s vivid memories. Balgley’s “return” to Poland was one of the earliest. She arrived in the fall of 1987 as a Fulbright literature professor. Arnold Zable traveled from Melbourne, Australia to Białystok after the 1989 collapse of communism and published *Jewels and Ashes* in 1991. Lily Brett, also raised in Melbourne, fictionalized her experience of visiting Łódź with her father in *Too Many Men* (1999). Eva Hoffman, who emigrated from Poland to Canada at the age of thirteen, returned in the early 1990s to assess the new Poland in *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993) and published the memoir *After Such Knowledge* (2004), based on several more trips to Poland. Hirsch and Spitzer first traveled to Chernivtsi, Ukraine, in 1998, and published their historical study/memoir *Ghosts of Home* in 2010. The American journalist and artist Louise Steinman first went to Poland in 2000 to meditate at the Bearing Witness Retreat at Auschwitz. Her 2013 *The Crooked Mirror* is an account of this and several subsequent journeys to Eastern/Central Europe, during which she became involved in the work of grass-roots initiative to revive Jewish history. It is with the latter book that Balgley’s memoir has the most in common: both are the effect of long-term commitment to understanding Poland. Their authors came to see the land of the Shoah, mourn, and make their own memories, but kept returning to leave their mark, speaking frankly with ethnic Poles about historical wrongs and demanding recognition on behalf of the victims as a form of symbolic reparations.

Balgley as “candle child” and teller of new stories

Balgley identifies herself as a “candle child” who, “designated and unbidden, becomes a receptacle for history lost, the source of light for forgotten or repressed memory” (xviii). The Israeli psychotherapist Dina Wardi theorized the designated second-generation survivor as a

mourner and an instrument of commemoration.³ Helen Epstein defined the children of Holocaust survivors as a distinctive group and named it the “second generation.” It is to Marianne Hirsch that we owe the notion of “the generation of postmemory” – a generation that did not remember the wartime atrocities but was enveloped in the survivors’ traumatic memories. Hoffman, who claimed to be “congenitally not a joiner of groups,” nonetheless welcomed the term, because it “provided a sort of illumination and a sort of relief” (*After Such Knowledge* 27). As she went on to explain, the children of survivors, who grew up “in the postwar Jewish dispersion in different countries and cultures” (Hoffman 28), envisioned a journey to the “roots” as a way to understand the source of certain “patterns of feeling and family relations,” or their own “sensations of panic and deadliness, of shame and guilt” (63). In some instances noted by Hoffman, these “patterns of feelings” lacked any apparent cause, particularly when “the parents remain[ed] seemingly calm and unbothered . . . conceal[ing] their worst anxieties, even as the children sense[d] them under the skin” (65).⁴

That was certainly the case of Balgley and her father. Although he had immigrated to the US as a boy of eight, nineteen years before World War II, his subsequent denial of his Jewishness was clearly caused by his awareness of antisemitism in Europe both before and during the Holocaust, as well as in the US. Balgley recalls his emotional outburst on hearing about the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich, followed by a depression, which she later recognized as a pattern. When presidential candidate Barack Obama’s citizenship was challenged, Ely Balgley revealed that he had struggled from 1937 to 1954 to receive US citizenship, which was derivative of his father’s misplaced citizenship papers (283-307). One might dismiss this saga as the effect of ordinary bureaucratic assiduity, yet the period in question coincided with rising antisemitism in the US, and a general fear of the racial other. In 1942, citizens of Japanese descent lost their civil rights overnight. Their immigrant parents, who had previously been ineligible for citizenship, were only allowed to undergo naturalization in the 1950s. As a child, Balgley had been unaware of the Holocaust and she did not hear about her father’s citizenship struggle until the 2010s, but she must have sensed his suppressed anxiety and outrage underneath the suave demeanor of the successful engineer.

Balgley’s “return” to Poland could be attributed as much to family history as to the specific intellectual climate in which she came of age. In the 1970s, following the Civil Rights struggle, the affirmation of Americans’ racial diversity and immigrant roots replaced the official policy of assimilationism, allowing second-generation Jewish Americans to embrace an ethnic identity defined by their European roots. Educated as a literature scholar at the University of Illinois, Urbana, and the University of California, San Diego, Balgley took the license to explore her family background within the context of the growing understanding of the Holocaust, as well as a renewal of interest in Poland, still firmly behind the Iron Curtain but brought to international attention by the Solidarity strikes of the early 1980s. At UC San Diego, Balgley read up on the history of European Jews, met Czesław Miłosz, and studied both his poetry and *The Captive Mind*.

In light of this new-found cultural and historical awareness, she came to see her father’s erasure of his Jewishness as problematic and sought a way to fill the void created by

³ Dina Wardi explored the concept of the “candle child” in her study *Memorial Candles* (Wardi qtd. in Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, p. 64).

⁴ Although Hoffman’s father made no secret of his Jewish identity, like Ely Balgley he refused to speak about it, retreating to “his cocoon of fundamental silence.” This evidently caused tension, to which his body reacted once in a while, when “he raged and exploded, scattering rancor at those near him” (67).

his silence. Balgley seems also to have been driven by a craving for cultural fullness and human contact. Aware that the ancestral land is more than a cemetery, she found a way to engage with the living culture. As a committed feminist, she may have found it easier to go against her father's wishes. To sum up, Balgley traveled to Poland for a variety of reasons: out of the need to understand why her father had concealed his Jewishness (65, 71), because she was "powerfully drawn to [her] veiled Jewish half" (71) and "felt an incompleteness in [her] identity—[she] wanted to know as much as [she] could learn about Jewishness in Poland, and about [her] own Jewish history" (92), and, in the face of her father's ambivalence about life, "to rescue hope" (xviii, 146). She also felt provoked by "serious-minded, intelligent Poles [she] met in America [who] adamantly denied Polish anti-Semitism" (71), to find evidence to the contrary in Poland.

After a year at the University of Silesia in Sosnowiec, Balgley requested an extension of her fellowship and spent a second year at the University of Wrocław. During this time, and for many years afterwards, she explored her relation to Poland. She tracked down scattered relatives in the US, Israel, and France. In 2012, she revisited Eastern Europe to research family history in Warsaw and in Belarussian archives. At the Jewish museum in Kobrin, Belarus, she found the name of an ancestor engraved not the wall in a corridor inaccessible to visitors (358). She trudged through mud in an abandoned graveyard in rural Belarus (355) and through fallen leaves at Warsaw's Jewish cemetery to find ancestral graves. From hostile archivists at state institutions she wrested genealogical information and documentation of various Balgleys' everyday lives (325-327, 329-348). *Letters to My Father* includes detailed accounts of these treks, spliced with photographs and information about family members killed in the Holocaust, as well as those who survived.

Memory is tied to places and communities. To use Marianne Hirsch's words from another context, the Balgley family had experienced a "traumatic interruption, exile, and diaspora," losing "the embodied connections that forge community and society," as well as connections to place. Another vital purpose of Balgley's memoir, then, was "to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* 33). In other words, Balgley countered forgetting with the work of gathering the traces of family members who had been annihilated and reintroducing them to the living.

Balgley may have also traveled to Poland to not let second-hand or inherited memory take precedence over her own. Building on Hirsch's ideas on postmemory, Esther Jilovsky argues that for the second generation, visits to Eastern/Central Europe can "provide a tool for bypassing secondary witnessing and attempting to become primary witnesses of the Holocaust" (145). Jilovsky questions this strategy ("how can someone become a witness to something they did not go through" 146), yet in Balgley's case it may have been imperative to go and make her own memories, given her father's silence on the circumstances of his leaving Poland, combined with the traumatic response to the annihilation of his extended family. If, as Hirsch points out, it is the predicament of the second generation to grow up dominated by "the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (*Family Frames* 22), then in the absence of such stories the need to witness and tell one's own must be all the more pressing.

Poland as imagined by the Jewish diaspora

According to Hoffman, the journeys to the “roots” began after a more general “period of forgetfulness,” during which there had been virtually no public discussion of the Holocaust (84). Germany was, by then, “America’s new democratic friend,” she writes, so “it was suddenly not in anyone’s interest to dwell on the vileness of the recent German regime” (84). Poland, by contrast, evoked “layers of association” which the survivors shared with their children, becoming in their minds “one big cemetery,” “a dark, submerged Atlantis,” “a terra incognita, an imagined entity made up of received ideas and fierce opinions, scraps of family anecdotes and an almost entire absence of information.” As Hoffman wryly observes, in North America prejudice towards Poland was “permitted” (9).

For the second-generation writers, Poland tended to be suspended in a different chronotope, “never entirely in the present,” connected with an “often unknowable and irretrievably lost past” (Becker 109). Since Zable came to Poland carrying a notebook filled with his father’s and mother’s memories of Białystok, a city they had left just before World War II, in the memoir he treats it as a screen for projecting his parents’ stories. Part I brings to life the Białystok of his parents’ youth; Part II traces the history of the city’s Jews during World War II, based on family letters and unspecified historical sources. The book’s narrative structure reveals the subordinate status of present-day Poland in relation to scenes from the notebook: descriptions of often derelict or empty present-day places are spliced with much more interesting, idealized visions preserved by his parents. Zable knows that his father idealized the world of his youth (“Father is at pains not to romanticize Warsaw, yet his growing excitement in describing it betrays his efforts” 40), but his account consistently reproduces the contrast between the living past and dead present. He travels alone, speaks no Polish, and only has meaningful conversations in Yiddish with a few remaining Jews, so contemporary Poland for him is mute while the past resonates with his parents’ voices. Białystok appears simultaneously familiar and strange: “It’s as if I had always been here” (45) and yet, “more than ever, Białystok seems ethereal, a dream whose texture eludes me” (49). Back in Melbourne, he realizes that Białystok lives on in his mother’s kitchen: she “was somewhere else, perhaps ‘over there,’ in that distant world she had left behind . . . this world and yener velt were all intertwined. Over there was over here, and here was over there” (187).

Balgley’s Poland

Unsurprisingly, Balgley’s vision of Poland at the outset of her journey conforms to the stereotype of the “dark, submerged Atlantis” critiqued by Hoffman (9). “I felt I needed to go to the heart of darkness,” Balgley recalls, “the epicenter of Jewish suffering” (71). When Balgley’s father, having tried to dissuade her, eventually changes his mind and follows her there in 1988, he is shocked at what he encounters: “tears streaming down his face, he said: ‘I thought Poland was a land of ashes! A dead winter place! And yet it is beautiful spring here. The trees bloom! In spite of everything, life is here!’” (146).

Determined to counter her father’s silence, in Poland, Balgley faces another curtain of forgetting: the near-total erasure of Polish-Jewish history. On realizing this, she finds herself confronting ethnic Poles about this over and over again – particularly about the denial of their own implication in the Holocaust (65, 70-71). Large segments of *Letters to My Father* can be read as Balgley’s ongoing conversation with ethnic Poles that began in the 1980s. Her memoir documents a process of forging genuine relations with Poles from all walks of life and with a handful Polish Jews. Perhaps because as a teacher she shared the day-to-day hardships with Poles during two of the most austere years preceding the collapse of

communism, she was able to expose their historical ignorance and/or denial of the past while writing about them without prejudice. In acknowledging their survival skills, resilience, and hospitality, she decidedly goes against the tradition of Jewish writings in which Poland functions as scorched earth and is important only as the site of Holocaust memorials. In effect, what emerges from Balgley's two-year Fulbright experience is a nuanced account of life in late-communist Poland from an outsider's perspective.

The "returning" Jew's sense that Poland exists in a different chronotope than the "New World" is generally the effect of exposure to first-generation narratives. A striking example of this distance can be found in Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* (1986), where Poland is depicted as a "yener velt" (to use Zable's notion) filtered through the animal cartoon convention for additional distance. Although Balgley's father did not start sharing his memories of Poland until he returned in 1988, she, too, experienced Poland as being in a different chronotope. Symptomatically, the first chapter set in Poland is titled "Forward into the Past: The Fulbright Stories." She often comments on train interiors and women's dress styles as associated with bygone eras. The apartment she has rented in advance from a Polish emigrant is described as a veritable time capsule: "If there was a décor at all, it would have been a version of 1950s America" (97). The rooms "had the feel of people having left in a hurry: children's stuffed animals abounded on every chair, crystal glasses sat in a glass-fronted china cabinet, a dated newspaper left near a style of television set I remembered from my childhood" (97). Treading lightly, Balgley decides to leave things exactly as they are and live the life of the former tenants, in the midst of the surreal décor. Although the apartment turns out to be extremely inconvenient – located on the seventh floor of a building without an elevator and very far from the university – she chooses to keep it.

If there is one element of the Polish landscape that Balgley connects with her father's childhood, it is trees, because he retained a fond memory of a horse chestnut from his childhood and always made sure his family lived near woods. As cover art, she chose an image of a man and a girl surrounded by a forest, painted in the 1920s or 1930s by Jacob Balgley, a relative from Brest (249). Yet she also associates forests with hiding places and execution sites (101). Devastated by a fellow-academic's antisemitism, Balgley wonders: "Why had I come to this place? Who had been hunted and murdered in the woods just adjacent to my apartment . . . the very killing fields of my family and my people?" (106). Given that most pogroms happened in eastern Poland, this fantasy about a Silesian forest might seem far-fetched. But pogroms did take place not far from Dąbrowa Górnicza, in Pardołów and Kraków (Tokarska-Bakir, *Kocia muzyka*) and, during the Holocaust, Art Spiegelman's parents sought hiding places precisely between Sosnowiec and Dąbrowa Górnicza. A quarter of a century later, Balgley would find out that in 1942 several dozen members of her family, together with some 16,000 other Jews, were marched by the Nazis from Brest to the Bronna Góra forest, where they were murdered and buried in pits. Consequently, the fact that Balgley used the forest as a polyvalent symbol associated with her father and the Jewish annihilation seems quite appropriate.

Truth-telling

The memoir's secondary goal appears to have crystallized in the course of Balgley's encounters with Poles. It involved "speaking truth," not so much "to power" as to those who had willfully forgotten the history of Polish antisemitism or grown up after the war without such knowledge. I will discuss two truth-telling episodes involving teachers and students at University of Silesia and one at the University of Wrocław. Today, academic publications on

Polish-Jewish history would fill a library. Beyond academia, Polish journalists regularly revisit Holocaust history and cases of ethnic Poles' indifference to the plight of Jews.⁵ But in 1980s Poland, as Hoffman explains, "most younger Poles were not likely to learn anything about the vanished world of Polish Jews in the course of their Communist-sponsored education. The official taboo on the subject of Jewishness meant that until recently – until 1989 to be exact – there has been almost no public discussion in Poland of the Holocaust or the longer Jewish history, no revision of received narratives or rhetoric, no pressure to correct stale stereotypes or face the challenge of opposing opinion" (*After Such Knowledge* 138-139). Consequently, on her quest for knowledge Balgley found herself prodding strangers, friends, fellow-teachers, and students out of their ignorance, at considerable emotional cost to herself.

In line with Michael Rothberg, I would call those ethnic Poles "implicated subjects." They fit this category in that they "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm." Neither perpetrators nor bystanders, implicated subjects "contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination" (Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject* 1). Since the young and middle-aged Poles Balgley came to know in the 1980s were over four decades removed from the events of the Holocaust, none had been directly involved in the plight of the Jews. Some may have remembered the expulsion of Jews in 1968. Yet, no matter how belated, "their actions and inactions" can be said to have helped "produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators" in that they maintained the silence surrounding Polish-Jewish relations and thus supported "the structures of inequality that mar[red] the present" (1).

As the memoir's protagonist and narrator, Balgley reminds Poles about forgotten historical events and attempts to hold them accountable for the ongoing erasure of Jewish history. Initially at least, she seems unaware of the collective forgetting, reinforced by socialist propaganda and an educational policy that commemorated Holocaust victims *as* Poles without referring explicitly to their Jewishness. After the shocking realization that Jews have been erased from the Polish national consciousness, she gets down to the work of restoring memory as a precondition for reconciliation. Balgley of course does not use the word implication; she writes about "the question of Polish collusion with the Nazis" (67). Had Rothberg's concept been available in the 1980s, I believe Balgley's efforts to share her knowledge of Jewish history with Poles would not have led to explosive reactions.

The first truth-telling episode takes place in 1987, soon after Balgley's arrival at the University of Silesia in Sosnowiec, at a party hosted by a fellow academic named Marzena in the memoir. When a male Polish American starts dropping the names of Polish authors to show off, Balgley jumps in with the words, "And so many of them are Jewish Polish writers.' A silence descended on the gathering; people stole glances at one another" (104). Despite these warning signals, or because of them, Balgley continues, "You know, it strikes me as ironic that we Americans teach the history of American prejudice in our ethnic American literature classes to our Polish students, but we do not address ethnic prejudice in their own country. I know that my family experienced pogroms before the war here in Poland. Family lore has it that a relative of mine, a physician, was killed by his Polish neighbors" (104-105). Balgley the protagonist of this scene briefly weighs up the "unfairness" of springing this statement on the other guests against "a much larger 'unfairness'" (of Polish Jews being deliberately erased from public consciousness) and decides to pursue the subject. But her host's reply "They must have had good reason for it" catches her completely off guard (105). As Balgley wonders how such outrageous words make no impression on "polite, intelligent,

⁵ See for instance the writings of Engelking, Grabowski, Tokarska-Bakir, and Tryczyk.

and supposedly civilized people,” the face of the detested government spokesman, Jerzy Urban, appears on the television screen and Marzena gestures towards it “as if to say, ‘Well, there you have it – this is why Poles don’t trust Jews.’” (105).

Although the scene makes Balgley physically ill, she does not leave abruptly, afraid she would be typecast as the “overreacting Jewess” (106). Yet her new colleagues’ inability to recognize and collectively stand up to antisemitism evidently triggers a panic reaction. Back in her flat, still wearing her coat and scarf, she lies on her bed for hours “staring straight up into the dark. Suddenly everything in my flat’s block seemed alien, foreign in a frightening way” (106). Then she attempts to look at the party scene from a different angle and blames herself for being “an ignorant little girl from California who thought she could take on such questions – and alone.” She also wonders what right she has to “condemn the silent ones tonight? Especially the Poles. What did I know of their experience, privileged visitor that I was?” (106). Though this event does not deter her from broaching the subject in other contexts, it does make her determined to understand the cultural and historical context of Poles’ apparent obtuseness if not hypocrisy.

A similar dynamic characterizes the second truth-telling episode: this time, Balgley challenges her students and is shocked at their response, but then she reflects on what happened without malice, trying to throw light on her students’ behavior. When she asks a class whether *The Painted Bird* “felt more Polish to them than American,” a female student insists, “But Jerzy Kosiński is not Polish. He is Jewish. And that is an entirely different tradition from our Polish one.” Instead of replying right away, Balgley waits out the embarrassed silence to “let the issue sink in – a teaching moment” and only then asks “what it meant that the historical list of the most revered Polish writers were in large part Jews. Bolesław Leśmian, Antoni Słonimski, Bruno Schulz, Aleksander Wat, Julian Tuwim, among others” (107). She notes with satisfaction “a few nods of recognition of the contradiction between what the girl had said and what I now asked” (108), and in the following paragraph explains: “It is important to remember that in 1987, unlike today, the entire subject of Jewishness in Poland was not one discussed openly.” At the same time, she shows that the willful refusal to think through the history of Polish-Jewish relations has kept people like her father in the ethnic closet, suffering phantom pains from an amputated identity: “At every turn I was struck by how the hiddenness of Polish complicity and responsibility echoed the hiddenness of my father’s and my Jewish identity. An enormous and emotional subject – simply skipped over” (108).

Balgley’s conception of ethnic Poles’ “complicity,” however, does not blind her to the exigencies of the life they lived. By way of introduction to the third truth-telling episode, set at the University of Wrocław in the winter of 1988/89, she describes the absurdity of teaching in an unheated building while “outside the windows on the frozen ground lay a stack of radiators torn from the classrooms, gathering layers from the quickly falling snow.” She and her students laugh at the absurdity of the scene, though they “shiver[] inside without heat.” For Balgley, the scene “distilled” “all of Polish life under communism: everything in a constant state of *remont*’ (ubiquitous signs indicating ‘renovation’), buildings growing old before they were finished . . . an external manifestation of the existential plight of my Polish students” (222). The students themselves are anything but obtuse:

The contrast between the building’s dispiriting surroundings and the faces of my students never ceased to strike me. They were confronted at every turn with the signs of decaying society, yet the vitality of these students lit the room like nothing else could. . . . They were alive, they were ready for all exigencies, intellectual and

otherwise. . . . Although most of those students had not traveled outside their own country, they were worldly and prematurely wise. (221-222)

It is those very students Balgley spurs to reflect on Jewishness some four months into their master's seminar on feminist and ethnic American literature. "Surely, I reasoned, I had been candid about my country's atrocities, we had surely established enough trust for them to speak openly about their own country's past. I mildly queried, 'What are your thoughts about the Jewish community so significant in Polish history?'" (230). In response, most students lower their heads, blush, and one blurts out, "I am sick and tired of hearing this charge of Polish anti-Semitism! I have only met one Jew in my life and I didn't like him!" before rushing out of room and slamming the door (230).

Had Rothberg's concept of the "implicated subject" been available at the time, this and the two earlier episodes might have had a different outcome. "Implication," as I understand it, is a call to eradicate the consequences of past wrongs by opposing the erasure of historical truth and making amends in the present. Rather than being shamed for the sins of the fathers, "implicated subjects" are asked to take stock of power relations in the present and commit to changing them by leaning towards the victims rather than the privileged oppressors – seeking the truth, resigning from unearned privilege, and redistributing symbolic power. "Implication" also seems useful for describing Balgley's ambivalent position vis à vis ethnic Poles, which is otherwise difficult to grasp. She did not literally "speak truth to power" but attempted to raise awareness of Poland's Jewish history by talking with people who had not been directly involved in the plight of Polish Jews but who could nonetheless be said to "contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination" (Rothberg 1), at least on the symbolic level.

Living in a socialist state, the Poles Balgley met – teachers, students, housewives, taxi drivers, farmers – were deprived not just of political power but also of most civil rights that Balgley took for granted. Most owned virtually nothing and had few prospects. Some evidently resented being deprived of upward and geographical mobility (131-134). To them, Balgley may have seemed privileged: she had come to Poland from the "free world" by choice, as an emissary of the US government (represented by the Fulbright Committee). While there, she traveled to a conference in Yugoslavia, to visit relatives in Israel, and to attend job interviews in the US.

But there are other ways of looking at these relative positions. No matter how confined their potential and aspirations, the Poles Balgley met were alive and enjoyed some degree of self-determination at least in their private lives, while most of Balgley's Kobrin and Brest ancestors were dead and buried in the Bronna Góra forest. Balgley's own position of privilege was also unstable: directly connected with the Balgleys buried in a mass grave at Bronna Góra, she could never be immune to antisemitism. Less obviously, as an American in communist Poland, where most English departments had been shut down from the 1950s to the 1970s for teaching the language, literature, and culture of the enemy, Balgley was in a precarious position, tolerated rather than welcomed. Moreover, as she learned half-way through her stay, her travel privileges could easily be revoked by Polish government officials (215-217).

For Balgley, the attempts to get her interlocutors to acknowledge the existence of Polish antisemitism and think about the implications of the near-total absence of Jews in 1980s Poland proved frustrating and, in one or two instances, traumatizing. To me, as one of her students, her many attempts at truth-telling seemed puzzling and ineffectual. Had we tried to find answers to her questions rather than slam the door, we would have found no

Jewish Studies programs, no textbooks, only hearsay about this or that prominent writer's Jewish heritage. Nevertheless, Balgley's seminar proved to be a formative experience for all involved, perhaps *because* of the shocking, awkward, or embarrassing moments. Arguably, her strategy *was* effective, since several of us went on to study and teach minority literatures, while the one who slammed the door "published articles on Polish Jewish writers" (233). Dorota Głowacka, a half-Jewish doctoral student Balgley befriended, emigrated to Canada and specialized in Holocaust Studies. She is currently a Norman Raab Foundation Fellow at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Spurred by Balgley's example, I pressed my father about his roots and found out his mother had been Jewish. Even if none of these developments was solely the outcome of Balgley's agency, she deserves recognition for broaching the subject of Polish antisemitism in the 1980s, and attempting to draw Poles' attention to their "entanglement in historical and present-day injustices" (Rothberg 2), one aspect of which was the continued denial of the centrality of Jews in Polish history.

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