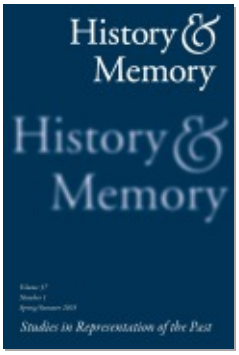
“Via Dolorosa” in the Shtetl: Reenactment of the Jews’ Last Journey in Olkusz, Poland



Yechiel Weizman

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Reenactment of the Jews' Last Journey in Olkusz, Poland

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This article analyzes the controversies and debates over the commemoration of the Holocaust in one Polish town, as a case study that demonstrates the tensions, ambivalences and competing emotions surrounding the memory of the Holocaust in postcommunist Poland. The article focuses on the annual Memorial March in honor of the Jewish victims in the town of Olkusz, which evoked deep divisions regarding the meaning of the wartime heritage and the hierarchy of suffering and martyrdom. Adopting a bottom-up approach to collective memory and analyzing the Memorial March as a performative act of reenactment, this article highlights the ethical, historical and religious challenges inherent in commemorating the Jewish victims of the Holocaust by non-Jewish communities.

Keywords: Holocaust; Olkusz; World War II; memorial march; martyrdom; commemoration

Introduction

Something peculiar was happening on the streets of Olkusz, a sleepy, mid-sized Polish town located between Kraków and Katowice, on the late afternoon of a rainy Monday, June 13, 2022. At first glance, a group of thirty people appeared to be engaged in a combination of a casual walking tour and a ceremonial procession. They were marching slowly and solemnly; once every few minutes, they stopped next to an unmarked point along the route and gathered around a man who seemed to function as the group's tour guide or their priest. At each stop, he took out

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black-and-white photographs and juxtaposed them with the contemporary townscape, as if he was orienting his listeners in their immediate surroundings. At specific stops, the participants somberly recited texts; others laid flowers or lit candles.

This humble and seemingly low-key procession has become a permanent fixture in the local calendar and urban space of Olkusz. Occurring annually since 2006, it marks the anniversary of the deportation of the local Jewish community to Auschwitz in 1942. The Memorial March of Olkusz (*Marsz Pamięci*), which was one of the first initiatives of its kind in the country, started as one townsperson's alternative memorial but has become one of the most contentious municipal events. It redefined and transformed local memory in the cultural and public sphere and evoked deep divisions regarding the meaning of the collective past and identity. A microhistorical study of the public discourse surrounding the Olkusz Memorial March, its cultural significance and social implications articulates the tensions, ambivalences and competing emotions surrounding the memory of the Holocaust in modern postcommunist Poland. Analyzing the Memorial March as a performative act of reenactment which takes place in a space permeated with Chrisitan meaning and Catholic notions of martyrdom, this article sheds light on the deep religious sensibilities and ethical challenges inherent when Jewish victims are commemorated by non-Jewish communities. It also shows the extent to which the public memory or forgetfulness of Jewish victimhood continues to function as the most polarized topic in Polish urban politics and underpins conflicting notions of collective identity and spatial hierarchy, inspiring alternative visions of the meaning of the Holocaust to the Polish-Catholic self-understanding.[1]

Adopting a bottom-up prism to collective memory and focusing on local actors and minor agents rather than state institutions and intellectual elites, this case study translates the larger discussions on the meaning and perception of the history of World War II in present-day Poland into the inner mechanisms and politics of everyday life.[2] Such an approach does not merely elucidate the larger story but proposes to refocus the lens through which the larger picture is usually being produced. Zooming in at the highest resolutions of the local mnemonic wars in the periphery allows us to detect many nuances, multifarious voices and symbolic layers often overlooked when focusing on official commemorative policy and national debates.[3] By doing so, this particular case study reexamines many of the

complexities, paradoxes and ambivalences involved in memorializing the Holocaust in twenty-first-century Poland.

The Life and Death of the Jewish Community

The story of the life, death and afterlife of the Jews in Olkusz is, in many ways, the story of many small to mid-sized towns in Poland. Historical records trace Jewish residency in the town to the beginning of the fourteenth century. Despite economic and religious tensions and sanctions, Jews played a central role in the economic development of the town—an important silver mining center—and during most of the nineteenth century, they were the majority of the inhabitants. In the interwar period, the Jewish community numbered some three thousand people, 25–30 percent of the local population. As in many other towns, Jewish activity was mainly concentrated around the market square. On the eve of World War II, most of the inhabitants and almost all of the shop owners in the town's center were Jews.[4]

Already a few days after the outbreak of the war, on September 5, 1939, German troops arrived at the town. Olkusz was included in the occupied area annexed to the Reich, bordering the General Government to the east. Very soon after the German arrival, Jews fell victim to spontaneous humiliation by soldiers and policemen and to economic sanctions and restrictions on their movement, while cases of terror and persecution were also directed against ethnic Poles.[5] In fact, in the first mass execution in Olkusz, on July 16, 1940, the victims were twenty Polish men who were shot to death after unknown perpetrators murdered a German policeman. The assassination led to another collective reprisal, which targeted the two groups. On Wednesday, July 31, 1940, German police and SS ordered all men between the ages of fifteen and fifty-five, Poles and Jews alike, to report to several locations in the town, where they were forced to lie on the ground for several hours while German soldiers tortured and beat them in various sadistic ways. Two men, one Pole and one Jew, were murdered and many more were severely wounded. Traditionally dressed Jews were particularly humiliated by the Germans. This day became known among the townspeople as "Bloody Wednesday"—*Krwawa środa* in Polish, or *Der blutiker mittwoch* in Yiddish—referring to the blood of the tortured

Fig. 1. Moshe Hagerman standing in the market square in Olkusz, as part of the events of Bloody Wednesday, July 31, 1940. Courtesy of Yad Vashem Photo Archive, file 1278/7.

men which stained the town's cobblestones for many weeks, according to testimonies.[6]

The most well-known photograph from that day, taken by an unknown German cameraman, shows a religious man standing barefoot in the market square wearing damaged *tefillin* (phylacteries) and a t*allit* (prayer shawl) as he is being laughed at and humiliated by several amused uniformed Germans who surround him in a half circle (figure 1). At his feet lie unidentified men, their faces pressed to the ground and their hands folded

behind their backs. The man in the photograph, which has become one of the most iconic Holocaust images, is Moshe Hagerman, a forty-two-year-old teacher at the local *heder* (Jewish elementary school). According to survivors' testimonies, the perpetrators entered his house while he was in the middle of the morning prayer and brought him to the square.[7] There, his *tefillin* were desecrated by several Germans, who then ordered him to put them back on his head and arm.

This religiously charged photo has been interpreted in various historical and symbolic ways: for example, the men lying down are dead, and soon Hagerman will join them after being forced to recite *kaddish* (prayer for the dead). In truth, he did not die just yet. He suffered excessive cruel humiliations that day, as documented in a series of additional photographs, but returned home, wounded and exhausted. Together with the rest of the Jewish community, he was sent to the Olkusz ghetto and ultimately murdered together with his wife, four children and the town's Jewish inhabitants in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in the summer of 1942.[8] Hagerman's afterlife, as one of the central figures in the fierce memory battles in postwar Olkusz, will be discussed later in this article.

The Olkusz ghetto, which was established in September 1941 in one of the town's poorer suburbs, was liquidated in mid-June 1942. A few days beforehand, all of the Jews, around 3,400 people, were evacuated from the ghetto and placed in the National Health Service's building, where they were held without food or water for several days. Only several dozen young men and women were selected to be sent to work and thus escaped deportation. The rest marched in two groups, one on June 13 and the other two days later, through the town center toward the train station. An extensive series of photographs documents the last journey of the Jews through their familiar streets (figure 2). In the photos, meticulously taken by one of the Germans who escorted the convoys around town, the Jews appear to be quiet and relatively calm, most probably unaware of their final destination. The deportation took place in broad daylight, in the middle of residential areas and in the heart of the urban space. In some of the photos one can notice random passersby.

But in a certain sense, this event, which radically and abruptly caused the disappearance of one-third of the population, never *happened*. In other words, it did not register as an event in the local consciousness. The deportation of the Jews was heard and seen by the Polish population, but

Fig. 2. Liquidation of the ghetto in Olkusz, June 1942. Courtesy of Yad Vashem Photo Archive, file 8460/4.

it was not witnessed, in the sense of being attested to.[9] The fate of the Olkusz Jewish community was hardly ever mentioned in local publications in the first decades after the war, and recollections of their plight rarely appeared in wartime testimonies and memoirs of the townspeople. This state of affairs in many ways reflected the prevailing atmosphere in the rest of the country. Although the Holocaust was never a completely mute topic in local conversations and discussions during the years of the Polish People's Republic, a certain tacit understanding sprung up between the authorities and the citizens that encouraged the forgetfulness of the memory of Jews and its exclusion from the public sphere.[10] As Jan Tomasz Gross concludes, "a quiet social agreement was achieved … to put aside the whole 'Jewish issue' in the very general sense."[11]

There was a very material reason why it was better not to talk too much about what had happened to Poland's Jews, particularly in small and mid-sized towns, where Jews often formed the urban middle class.[12] Since the vast majority of the Jews had been deported from their houses and later murdered, their houses, stores, lands, ritual sites, furniture and personal belongings were usually appropriated by their Polish neighbors through many different official and unofficial channels, including plun-

der, extortion and spoilation.[13] Although the collective appropriation of Jewish possessions received legal and social legitimacy in postwar communist Poland, too open a discussion over the Holocaust was undesirable. Reminding the current owners of the bloody provenance of their Jewish property and the violent, sometimes incriminating, circumstances behind the disappearance of the original owners and their dispossession was considered to be too problematic.[14]

Soon after the war, the transfer of private Jewish property into Polish hands was completed in Olkusz. The apartments and shops in the center, predominantly Jewish before 1939, were now occupied by new tenants, many of whom had been allocated a Jewish site by the Germans; now, after the war, they took great pains to settle their ownership status through official approval from the new municipal authorities.[15] The communal Jewish spaces, i.e., the old and the new Jewish cemeteries and the synagogue, were gradually destroyed and vandalized by the local population and became neglected due to lack of care. The synagogue was eventually demolished by the town in 1957.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the official World War II narrative and public commemoration in Olkusz did not include any overt mention of the Jewish suffering. The extensive memorialization of the war, which started only a few days after the town's liberation by the Red Army, focused on the suffering and heroism of the local Polish-Christian population and the fate of the political prisoners who had been sent to the concentration camps. While in the first postwar decades, the wartime past was commemorated within the framework of the communist universalist "struggle against the Fascists," starting in the late 1950s in accordance with the changes in the political system in Poland, a stronger emphasis was placed on patriotic-Catholic martyrdom. The Polish ethnonational memory of the war was interwoven into the communist narrative.[16] Throughout the entire communist period, however, the memory of the Jewish victims remained absent from the vernacular war story. Not a single monument or any form of commemoration erected in the town included a reference to the local Jewish population. The ethos that became the foundational cornerstone of the local war memory revolved around Bloody Wednesday of July 1940. It was framed as an exclusive Polish event, part of the national-patriotic struggle of the local people, and was referred to as the epicenter of the town's wartime trauma. In annual ceremonies, as well as

in the local monuments, the fact that Jews were particularly targeted and humiliated during the events was always omitted.[17]

Commemoration and controversy

Toward the end of the communist period, starting in the mid-1980s, local citizens made their first attempts at dealing with the story of the Jewish community by turning their attention to the most tangible trace of Jewish life—the two neglected cemeteries, which were in a poor state. These pioneer initiatives coincided with a nationwide phenomenon of beginning to "rediscover" Jewish culture in Poland and its destruction during the Holocaust—a phenomenon that also carried some social and economic benefits.[18] At the same time, nationalistic sentiments reemerged in the twilight of the communist era. After 1989, these could be more openly expressed. As part of the bitter cultural wars in post-1989 Poland over the redefinition of a new postcommunist identity, the memory of the war and the Holocaust became a bone of contention between rival ideological circles.[19]

The event that polarized the already contentious public dealing with the memory of the Jewish victims was the publication of the book *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross in 2000.[20] The book unveils the horrifying events of July 10, 1941, in the northeastern town of Jedwabne, when several hundred of the town's Jews were murdered by their Polish neighbors. The majority of the victims were burned alive in a barn. The aftermath of the book's publication was nothing short of explosive and redefined the contours of the heated debate on Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust in the years to come.[21] While the Jedwabne affair evoked collective soul-searching and inspired growing public engagement and grassroots projects that wrestled with the history and memory of the Holocaust, it also led to counterreactions of denial and antagonism, which evoked the patriotic narrative of Polish suffering and martyrdom.[22] This polarized atmosphere was also felt in the provinces, as the history of the war and the Holocaust gradually became one of the main battlegrounds of the local politics of history and its commemoration in space.[23]

This moment is crucial in understanding the ideological climate in which the emotional debate over the wartime legacy of Olkusz and the

memory of the Jewish victims evolved. From this point on, the discussion over the extent of the significance of the Jews in the heritage of World War II became the most divisive topic in the public discourse and a crucial factor in the contesting forces surrounding the reshaping of the urban landscape after 1989. The nationwide resonance of the Holocaust encouraged individuals from Olkusz to increase their attempts to salvage and rediscover the Jewish past of their town. This group, consisting of several local journalists, regional history enthusiasts, cultural activists, and archeologists, invested their efforts mainly in trying to preserve the desolate Jewish cemeteries while also pressuring municipal authorities to actively commemorate the Jewish victims. Town leaders, however, declared their commitment to preserving the material Jewish heritage but renounced their responsibility to commemorate the Holocaust. In a 2001 interview, the mayor argued that the town remembers all of the victims, regardless of their nationality. "Everybody suffered the same," he claimed, and accused Jewish descendants of Olkusz of not sufficiently commemorating "their own tragedy."[24]

The mayor's words reflected a common understanding among municipal leaders in Poland, who were aware of the political sensitivity surrounding the preservation of Jewish heritage in the contemporary atmosphere but at the same time recognized the defensive local sentiment against the growing engagement with the story of the Jewish victims and its commemoration in space. As a local war partisan was quoted in a journalistic report from 2001: "As a Pole, I have the duty to remember and commemorate Poles.... The Jews don't care about us." In the same article, an Olkusz-born historian argued: "It is normal when someone grieves over those who are closer to him. The inhabitants of Olkusz did not forget their Jewish neighbors, but some of the Jews do not want to remember that during the war Poles suffered together with them."[25]

These were familiar voices in the discourse of the Polish-Jewish competition of suffering, but they indicated the growing sentiment that saw the commemoration of the Holocaust as part of a larger project whose aim was to overthrow and undermine the Polish wartime heroic narrative. Although in Olkusz there were no major incidents of involvement of the local population in the murder of Jews in this town—"Olkusz was not Jedwabne," as a local woman proudly wrote—the nationwide aftershocks following the publication of *Neighbors* drew hostile reactions towards

attempts to center Jewish victimhood.[26] As the head of the Olkusz Veterans Union explained, "After Jedwabne, there is no positive atmosphere here for these kinds of things." He admitted that he thought of placing a memorial plaque where three Jews were hanged by Germans during the war but gave up on the idea: "One day later, someone would surely break my windows and spray the Star of David on my walls," he argued.[27]

As in other towns in Poland, the growing engagement with the prewar and wartime Jewish past in the 1990s and early 2000s, exacerbated by the unsettling historical revelations, reaffirmed the feeling that the national and local victimhood ethos was being "abducted" by the Jewish story. It is surely not coincidental that at this moment, more and more "patriotic" war monuments for Polish individuals and units killed in wars started to appear around town as a blatant attempt to buttress the Polish-Catholic image and interpretation of the past. The most grandiose project in this memorialization rush at the beginning of the decade was the Monument in Memory of the Nazi Concentration Camps, which was initiated by a group of local veterans and received the support of the municipal, regional and state authorities. Although the planners of the monument declared that it was meant to memorialize all victims, Jews and Poles, its design, symbolic language, as well as its location in the old Catholic cemetery, left no doubt regarding the hierarchy of suffering it wished to establish. The memorial, inaugurated with great fanfare on June 12, 2005 (a day before the anniversary of the deportation of the Jews), consists of a massive unhewn stone with the inscription: "In memory of residents of Olkusz and the area who were murdered in Nazi prisons and concentration camps, 1939–1945." Next to the text, there is a stone relief of the Auschwitz Cross, a symbol adopted in the 1980s by Polish former inmates, with the letter "P" in its middle, signifying Polish political prisoners. Behind the large stone, there are six marble columns on which several hundred names are engraved, almost all of them Christian Poles who were murdered in the camps. The names of more than three thousand Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz, however, are not mentioned. Instead, at the bottom of the right column, one can read: "In memory of several thousand Jews from Olkusz, most of them anonymous victims, who died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bełżec."

Overwriting the memory of the Jewish victims and simultaneously emphasizing the Polish-Catholic martyrdom of the war was a central aspect

in the Polonization of the Holocaust—a campaign that started already during the 1960s and grew stronger after the transformation of 1989, as part of the merging of nationalism and Catholicism into a conservative axis which saw the growing centrality of the Holocaust as a threat to the ethnoreligious Polish identity and ideal of national victimhood. A central realm of this campaign attempted to "Christianize" iconic Holocaust sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, portraying it as a place of Polish suffering in face of the perceived "threat" of it becoming a symbol of the Jewish fate.[28]

Whereas the monument planners insisted that they did not intend to exclude the memory of the Jews, the crude omission of the names of the Jewish victims and their framing as "anonymous victims" infuriated local Polish critics, who argued that the monument deliberately and shamelessly erased the memory of the Jews. The memorial's initiators justified the design by claiming that since there was no official confirmation of the death of the Jews, they were not included in the list.[29] In an apparent attempt to remedy the criticism, a short quote by the renowned rabbi and thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel was added to the monument: "Different are the languages of prayers, but the tears are the same," a move that was perceived by critics as a cynical act to efface the specificity of the Jewish tragedy under an alleged universalist language.

"The monument of lies" or "the monument of shame and hypocrisy," as it was referred to by its opponents, was fiercely attacked by local activists and citizens in the municipal press, internet forums, and in letters sent to district and state authorities.[30] Its planners were accused of desecrating the memory of the Jews and of fulfilling the Nazi vision of erasing the Jews. "Do they intend to commemorate them, or—as if their death and suffering for being Jews wasn't enough—they also want to humiliate them posthumously?" wrote a local critic in a letter to the local press.[31] "Why establish a monument in the Catholic cemetery if 90 percent of the victims are Jews?," asked Olgerd Dziechciarz, a poet and journalist from Olkusz.[32]

The March

One of the most outspoken critics against the monument was Ireneusz Cieślik, a local journalist and author.[33] Born in Olkusz in 1961, he himself had no idea until his late twenties about the fate of one-third of his home-

town's citizens, other than some vague notion that at some point in the past Jews had lived in Olkusz. After receiving a job offer to document all of the cemeteries in town, he encountered for the first-time unknown writing on the *matzevot* (Jewish headstones). This discovery of the exotic letters led him to study Hebrew and gradually to learn about the life and death of the Jewish community and to work to preserve the Jewish necropolises.[34]

Cieślik made his first appearance in the local battlefield of memories in 2001. On August 3, he was infuriated by an item in the local newspaper, which reported on the annual memorial service marking "the most tragic event that happened in Olkusz during the bloody period of the Nazi occupation."[35] The memorial service, attended by the mayor, representatives of the district authorities, local war veterans and schoolchildren, marked the sixty-first anniversary of Bloody Wednesday. In a long response article, he asked why the events of Bloody Wednesday in 1940 are referred to as "the most tragic event" in the wartime history of Olkusz, while the deportation of one-third of the town's population to their death in 1942 was completely forgotten:

> [The Jews] were the vast majority among the Olkusz residents who were murdered during the occupation. Nevertheless, the story of their death is buried under a deep conspiracy of silence.… I am not aware of any monument, street or square dedicated to the memory of those victims.… No official ceremony commemorates them. It seems that the vast majority of the current citizens of Olkusz have no idea about this tragedy—most probably the biggest tragedy in the history of the town.[36]

Cieślik's letter touched such an exposed nerve that the local newspaper refused to publish it, arguing that it was "too emotional and one-sided." This rejection led him to submit it to a popular Polish weekly *Tygodnik Powszczechny*; its publication attracted nationwide attention to the mnemonic conflicts in one, rather unknown, provincial town. From this moment forward, Cieślik became one of the leading figures in the attempts to preserve Jewish remnants in the town and he developed a strong personal commitment to commemorating the Jewish community. But it was not until 2005, following the debate on the controversial monument in the Catholic cemetery, that his life would become intertwined with the dead Jews of his town. Frustrated and outraged by what he saw as the

deliberate submerging of the Jewish tragedy, he realized that in order to engender a real change in the local commemorative discourse, it was not enough to write angry letters to the press. Arriving at the conclusion that no official body would take upon itself the task of commemoration, he decided to act on his own. In 2006, as the sixty-fourth anniversary of the deportation of the Jews approached, he announced his intention to hold a private "memorial march" that would reenact the Jews' last journey through the town.

On June 13, 2006, he stood alone outside the current headquarters of the district authorities (formerly the building of the National Health Service)—where the Jews had been concentrated after their evacuation from the ghetto—and slowly marched along the exact path taken by the deportees toward the train station, where they were then sent to Auschwitz. This intimate and lonely experience of retracing the footsteps of absent others in his familiar landscape was a transformative moment for him and became his new life project. In an article he wrote after his solitary march, he described it as a meditative experience; reenacting the path taken by Jews merged the horrors of the past into the present-day space and placed him in a double position, that of the victims and the onlookers. Following the Jews' footsteps, he asked himself how they felt walking on a Saturday, forced to profane their holy day, and tried to imagine the last gaze directed on their hometown before being locked in the train car. But his gaze was also self-reflective: "If a similar event had taken place today and inhabitants of entire neighborhoods had disappeared, would we also then silently take their houses and never mention their tragedy?"[37]

Before the next anniversary in 2007, Cieślik announced his intention to march again along the final route of the Jews, but this time, two other participants, a local journalist and an archeologist who were active in preserving Jewish culture, joined him. In the following years, several other local activists joined the initiative, to form the core group of the marchers. Into the second decade of the 2000s, the march would gradually become highly publicized, attracting additional participants, most of them local citizens, schoolchildren, Jewish representatives from the area, as well as descendants of Olkusz's Jews from around the world.[38]

The number of participants in the Memorial March usually does not exceed several dozen, but it has already become a local tradition, which is very well known among the local population—even those who never

participated in the march or show no particular interest in the event, as I learned from my conversations with Olkusz inhabitants. Every year, on June 13 in the late afternoon, the group of marchers gather next to the building of the former National Health Service, which currently houses the offices of the Olkusz district authorities. In the first events, there were even a few elderly people among the marchers who remembered their Jewish neighbors and their deportation, but today there are no longer eyewitnesses to the historical event. Apart from the core group of founding activists (residents of Olkusz or Olkusz born) most of the other participants are local inhabitants, men and women, born in the 1950s–1970s who work in various professions and seem to share some level of personal interest in the Jewish history of Olkusz and some general lay Catholic sensibilities. Some of them participate in the march almost every year, while others take part in it occasionally. Sometimes, local high school teachers bring their students to the march but usually the representation of younger participants is relatively low.

From my conversations over the years with the marchers it appears that most of them frame their participation in the event in moral and religious terms and as deeply connected to their local and Christian identity. The recurring answers to the question "Why are you marching?" emphasize the feeling of personal commitment and obligation to remember the Jews who were "citizens of our town" and the importance of reminding the current town's inhabitants of the Jewish tragedy. Many of the participants talk about stories they heard from their parents who remembered their Jewish acquaintances and told them about their wartime fate.

After a short introduction by the organizers, the group embarks on the march toward the train station. They stop next to specific "stations" along the route, in the exact places where the Jewish convoys were documented in the historical photographs taken by the unknown German cameraman. Next to each station, Cieślik or one of the other activists read Jewish and Polish testimonies, and using the photographs, they meticulously recreate the last march of the deportees. Since 2009, the participants have placed posters with the names and addresses of the Jewish deportees on billboards along the route, as a direct response to their omission from the monument in the Catholic cemetery which framed them as "anonymous victims." Sometimes one can see passersby stop next to the lists and closely examine the names and familiar addresses, which are populated today by

Fig. 3. Ireneusz Cieślik displaying historical photographs at the Memorial March in Olkusz, June 13, 2014. Photo by the author.

other inhabitants.[39] The procession ends at the train station with a short memorial service in which "El maleh rahamim" (God full of mercy) and "Kaddish" (Jewish prayer for the dead) are recited by one of the Jewish participants. Occasionally, Christian texts (such as "Ojcze nasz"—Our Father) are recited by some of the participants and usually people light candles in the shape of the Star of David.

At each of the fixed stations along the route the procession stops and Cieślik stands in front of the group, holding the photograph high and angled, as if superimposing the horrific black-and-white past on the background of the everyday, neutral space (figure 3). The black-and-white photos of the Jewish victims are used both as a historical aid and also as a visual compass and spatial scale. The participants can anchor the wartime past in the present landscape and get a clearer idea of where exactly the Jews stood and what happened to them at each stage of the march, but the marchers also position themselves in space through the photos. This attempt at bodily orientation through the visual image creates an interesting and delicate choreography as the participants move around and position

themselves vis-à-vis the photographs, alternating between the multiple perspectives. Some try to stand exactly where the Jews stood, others adopt the point of view of the photographer and directly look at the place where decades ago the Jews stood, while others seem to assume a third perspective as if to retrace the onlookers' stance, placing themselves outside the frame and looking at the scene from a certain distance.

The deportees' photographs thus function as the vehicle that perpetuates the violent past in the present townscape and turns the memorial march into a chronotope, merging the site of tragedy with the time of the event. The pictures fulfill the traditional role of the photograph as index, which literally preserves a trace of the past, by "recording" the concrete interaction between the light and the Jewish deportees as captured on the negative. But as physical objects, the pictures also become a kind of material trace, a relic in and of themselves as well as a metonym of the absent and "traceless" Jews. Seen in this light, the march is perhaps not only a recreation of the victims' last journey but also their symbolic funeral—which they never received.

This juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and the grey past with the colorful and living present renders the townscape into an urban palimpsest, able to absorb into its fabric the memory of past events and absent people.[40] The recurring act of marching aims at cracking the decades-long silence over the fate of the Jews, by making visible the invisibility and forgetfulness of their life and death. "The march," explains Cieślik, "is also an occasion for the public expression of our refusal to live in a world where racist criteria determine the value of a tragedy and its victims."[41] The injection of the past into the present-day space, thus breaks the silence and creates a "porous" townscape and enables the "variety of temporal dimensions [to be] embedded in physical space," as Svetlana Boym reflected.[42] The leaking of time into space is achieved through the performative marching and the use of photographs which demonstrate the power of what Roland Barthes called the "punctum"—the unique unmediated and emotive essence of a photograph that works on the viewer and makes visible the absent and unacknowledged past and people.[43]

Walking in the city, says Michel de Certeau, is a kind of enunciation that endows new meanings to urban space. It is an everyday act that has the potential to undermine political and ideological hermetic narratives.[44] The commemorative walk along the road taken by the Olkusz Jews, while

"imprinting" the image of the past on the surface of the presence, is thus an attempt to punctuate the everydayness of the local landscape that for years remained oblivious to the Jewish tragedy and to inscribe the Jews' absence as its integral part. The Memorial March in Olkusz is not an act of historical reenactment per se, nor do the participants conceptualize their actions as such. Unlike examples of historical reenactments of the Holocaust which put on theatrical-sensational performances in which the participants are "stepping into the shoes" of the victims, the march in Olkusz refrains from any attempt at "reliving" the deportation.[45] Yet the embodied experience of walking the exact route taken by the suffering Jews and the meticulous attempt to position oneself in space through the victims' eyes turn the march into a refractive and affective experience which functions as a mediated and fragmented reenactment of the past that is at the same time aware of its limitations and retains a critical distance from the events.[46]

If we understand the event as a performative act of symbolic reenactment, then the reference to the march's stops under the religiously laden term "stations" and labeling them according to a numerical order is perhaps not incidental. The slow and solemn march, recreating the victims' walk toward their death, stopping and reflecting at particular points on the suffering route of the deportees toward their ultimate martyrdom, bears an immediate association with the Christian tradition of the reconstruction of Via Dolorosa, which is both an act of reenactment *and* a sacred memorial march. Although the march's organizers wish to refrain from "Christianizing" it, the association with the reenactment of Christ's final walk of suffering was made by some of the participants. "If we compare our march to the Way of the Cross [*Droga krzyżowa*]," wrote one of the marchers in 2013, "Then the intersection of Kościuszki street is the first station."[47]

This symbolic resemblance to the Via Dolorosa is perhaps also demonstrated by the adoption of the iconic photograph of Moshe Hagerman, which came to be the representational "martyr" of the commemoration events. Standing humiliated and barefoot in the square with his desecrated *tefillin*, the photograph of the world-famous Jew from Olkusz has become the visual logo of the march. The image of the "sublime" victim, who seems to transcend his suffering and retains some inner and spiritual core, has inspired Jewish theological readings which framed him as the paradigm

of the humiliation, but at the same time religious defiance, of the Jews in the Holocaust.[48] Although Hagerman's photograph was not taken during the deportation of Jews but two years earlier, it epitomizes the pinnacle of the Jews' last journey, a visual metonym of the entire Jewish community and their fate.[49] The strong religious charge of the image appears to have also touched deep Christian sensibilities among local inhabitants of the protagonist's hometown. For the aforementioned Olgerd Dziechciarz who is one of the march's organizers, Hagerman's photo resembles the painting "Jesus Carrying the Cross" by Hieronymus Bosch: "I cannot help but think that the photograph and the painting have something in common. They are both so mystically charged, and I can see God's hand in both of them. Moshe Hagerman, just like the other Jew from 2,000 years ago, has a face of inner serenity, as if he is oblivious to the people around who mock him."[50]

The comparison between the Jewish victims and Christ raises a host of theological and ethical questions, which were critically discussed in scholarship and in intellectual debates worldwide.[51] But in Poland, the discussions on the Jewish tragedy were always held in the framework of the Catholic normative system. From their inception, both expressions of empathy toward the Jewish tragedy and manifestations of antagonism and hostility that the memory of Holocaust evoked were formulated within an inner Polish-Catholic debate.[52] Markedly, the first activists who began wrestling with the memory of the Jews in 1970s Communist Poland came from Catholic-liberal circles, and early attempts to commemorate the murdered Polish Jews were often expressed using Christian vocabulary and practices—as it was perhaps the only available language for expressing such sensibilities.

In the contemporary context of the debates within Polish Catholicism, framing the Holocaust in Christian terms can be understood according to two different approaches which in many ways represent the conflicting understandings of Polish Pope John Paul II's famous saying from 1979: "Auschwitz is the Golgotha of our times."[53] Adherents of the conservative-nationalist threads within the church tend to "Christianize" and Polonize the Holocaust, invoking Catholic images and symbols that work to efface or universalize the Jewish suffering and at the same time establish the place of Poles as the ultimate victims.[54] The more open and liberal streams in the Polish Catholic world, on the other hand, reject the attempt to de-

Judaize the Holocaust and use Christian symbols and metaphors not in order to appropriate the Jewish experience but rather to emphasize their deep empathy to the victims as Jews, while acknowledging the uniqueness of the Jewish suffering.[55] Among the most progressive circles of the Catholic-liberal camp, the Holocaust is perceived as a seismic event which should make Christians rethink the fundamentals of their religious beliefs, to fight antisemitism, and to reconsider their own identity as Christians and Poles.[56]

When he looks at Moshe Hagerman's photograph and recalls the painting of the tormented Jesus, the Olkusz journalist quoted above does not seem to subjugate the Jewish experience to the Christian notion of suffering but perhaps to "Judaize" the paradigmatic Christian experience of victimhood, thus endowing Hagerman with a unique status as a kind of "local saint," yet retaining his Jewishness and placing him next to Jesus—who is referred to as "the other Jew." While this comparison might invite critical observations on the attempt to extract redemptive meaning from the Jewish tragedy, it seems to reflect not so much an appropriation of the Jewish victim but rather an act of familiarization and adoption into the vernacular canon.

Antagonism and backlash

The route of the march goes through the city center in full view of the passersby, at the busy hour of early evening (figure 4). Although the march has already became a local tradition and in recent years it has been well publicized, it still attracts sometimes surprised and curious looks, but only rarely do the marchers encounter direct animosity or hostile reactions from onlookers. But while the march itself usually remains a peaceful event, it continues to evoke a fair amount of antagonism, which is evident in the tense relations surrounding it with the authorities. Since its inception, the march was perceived as a protest act against town leaders, and as a counteract to the controversial "Holocaust" monument in the Catholic cemetery. In the first years of the event, city officials tried to ignore the march, but as it attracted growing national and international publicity, they were forced to reconsider their stance concerning the memory of the Jews and started holding their own official commemoration events

Fig. 4. The Memorial March in Olkusz, June 13, 2022. Photo by the author.

on June 13. To the dismay of many in town, however, these took place next to the contested monument in the Catholic cemetery—which only drew further criticism by the march's organizers who accused the town of disregarding Jewish sensibilities and once again "Christianizing" the victims. At the same time, the mayor refused to take part in the Memorial March, and it was not until 2013 that he and other city and district officials accepted the invitation and participated in the march.[57] The organizers, encouraged by their success in popularizing the march and reshaping the local war narrative, tried to leverage the march's growing recognition and pressured the authorities to install a permanent memorial plaque at the "first station" (the current offices of the district authorities) as a commemorative gesture to the Jewish community. The procrastination of the authorities to support the placement of this humble plaque led to further quarrels between the activists and the authorities, which culminated in a mini-scandal in the 2014 Memorial March, during which the mayor angrily left the scene after being accused by the organizers of disregarding the memory of the Jewish victims. In the following year, the march was boycotted by the municipality.[58]

This episode might sound like an anecdotal dispute in one provincial mid-sized Polish town; however, it demonstrates the extent to which the question of the visibility and official acknowledgment of the Jewish tragedy has become a "battlefield," in which "groups compete for the fullest possible representation of their identities, trying, according to the means at their disposal, to structure the landscape and invest it with the meaning that is appropriate with respect to their identities."[59] In Olkusz, this mnemonic sparring match was being played out in attempts to rewrite the urban space through material commemoration but also through the performative sphere. The more the Memorial March became entrenched in the local culture, the more it generated an undercurrent of backlash at the grassroots level. One day in July 2013, posters inviting the public to participate in a very different "Memorial March" appeared in the local and regional press around Olkusz and on social media. This time, the commemorated event was Bloody Wednesday (July 31, 1940) which for decades had cemented the local heroic ethnic-Polish war narrative and which lately, as people in town worryingly observed, was being "Judaized" and portrayed around the world as a persecution of Jews only.[60]

The march, whose slogan was "Srebrne miasto zawsze polskie" (The Silver City [Olkusz's epithet] Always Polish), was organized by ultranationalist groups, football fan clubs and youth movements from the area, and it was supported by radical right-wing political circles and media outlets.[61] One and a half months after the "Jewish" Memorial March, on July 31, several dozen people gathered in the main square and started marching throughout the town, carrying flags and posters of extreme nationalist and anticommunist messages and symbols which seemed to be borrowed from the vocabulary of the prewar ethnonationalist and antisemitic circles. Reciting slogans, they marched through the town's central streets, carrying torches and posters, at certain places intersecting with the route of the original Memorial March, and ending with a religious-militant ceremony next to the disputed Catholic cemetery monument.[62]

The event reflected the strengthening nationalist sentiments in the country around those years, culminating in 2015 with the rise to power of the radical right-populist Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość—PiS), which won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. A central aspect of their campaign was aimed at returning to the forefront the exclusive Catholic and ethnonational wartime discourse of patriotic

heroic sacrifice and stoking the fear that the national narrative was under attack by anti-Polish circles. But the new "Polish" Memorial March in Olkusz was more than a reflection of the general atmosphere in the country. It was discussed, both by its supporters and opponents around town, in connection to the "original" Jewish march and as part of the polarized mnemonic struggle over the memory of the war.[63] Seen in this light, it was an inadvertent recognition of the original march's success at inscribing the Jewish memory into the urban fabric and local discourse, and at the same time an attempt to compete with its hegemony. As an anonymous citizen defiantly commented in one of the online discussions: "The Jewish march had only half of the amount of participants."[64] By adopting a similar performative practice of the commemorative walk, the participants wished to reclaim the local memoryscape and reinstate Polish suffering as the true representative local story, after it had been allegedly "appropriated" by the memory of the Jewish victims.

The organizers of the alternative, nationalist Memorial March tried to establish it as a local tradition, similar to its Jewish counterpart, but it never became a rooted component in the local calendar and memory culture. It lasted only three years and never managed to undermine the status of the Jewish Memorial March as the exemplary commemorative practice of the town. Despite the nationwide strengthening of the Catholic-right-wing historical policy, it appears that the nationalist sentiment expressed in the march did not gather enough support among the townspeople, and its organizers were perceived as radical outsiders. In fact, during the years of PiS-ruled Poland, the status of the original Jewish Memorial March was not only maintained but also strengthened and institutionalized.[65] The 2017 march was, for the first time, officially supported and endorsed by town and district authorities. It was launched with a celebratory inauguration of the contested memorial plaque to the Jewish community, which was finally placed next to the march's "first station," after the town and district leaders succumbed to the public pressure and agreed to fund it as promised.[66] The events surrounding the march that year, which marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Jews' deportation, were the most extensive public commemoration of Olkusz Jews since the war.

Throughout these heated debates, the initiatives to offset the dominance of the Holocaust in the town's spatial hierarchy of suffering and victimhood intensified. As part of the dialectical reshaping of the local

memoryscape, during the second decade of the twenty-first century another series of monuments appeared in Olkusz, in an apparent attempt to bolster the symbolic skyline around the ethnonational Catholic memory. These memorials particularly emphasize the plight of the Polish nation under the Soviets and the communists—a sentiment that functioned as a key component in the historical policy propagated extensively throughout the country by PiS circles and which often carried implicit, or explicit, anti-Jewish undertones, accusing the Jews of collaborating with the communist regime.[67] The anticommunist trope became a central element in the mainstream Polish political discourse in recent years. As Kate Korycki argues this discourse establishes the symmetry of suffering between Jews and Poles, and ultimately—by blaming the Jews in the crimes of communism—"neutralizes" the Holocaust and justifies anti-Jewish violence.[68] To emphasize the reversal and reclaiming of victimhood, the anticommunist meaning is often woven together with Christian-martyrologist meaning, demonstrating a pervasive Polish pattern of "secularization of religion and religious symbols, through their political instrumentalization and then their *resacralization*, now as *national* symbols."[69]

These nationwide tendencies appeared to have also find their way into the local commemorative landscape. Thus, for example, 2015 saw the inauguration of a colossal marble cross in the center of Olkusz honoring the "million victims of communism." The cross is located right on the route of the Jews' last road (and of the Jewish Memorial March), very close to the place where, on March 1942, three Jewish men who were caught trying to smuggle food into the ghetto were hanged by the Germans in a public execution.[70] It features the thorn-crowned Jesus comforting a Catholic priest who was murdered by the communist security services in 1984. In the same year another anticommunist memorial was inaugurated: a massive monument in the old Catholic cemetery, "Katyń's Pietà"—commemorating the murder of thousands of Polish soldiers and officers by the Soviets in the forest of Katyń in 1941. Standing right next to the grandiose World War II monument, it shows the Mother of God looking down with sorrow on a handcuffed Polish officer who is lying dead in her lap. The huge cross-shaped Million Victims of Communism monument is the departure point of yet another Memorial March that takes place in Olkusz every March 1 since 2016, honoring the controversial "Cursed Soldiers" (*Żołnierze wyklęci*)—units of nationalist anti-Soviet and anticommunist

underground fighters that continued to fight for Polish independence into the 1950s.[71] This march, which is organized by the city Heritage Museum and local associations goes through the town's center, cutting across the Market Square and ends in the Military Cemetery, next to the Katyń Cross, a large wooden cross that was erected already in the 1990s.[72]

Analyzing these changes in the commemorative landscape as a dialectical contest over symbolic dominance and visibility in space, we can see how this "spree" to reinforce the nationalist-Catholic historical identity and ideal of victimhood wishes to produce a cohesive attempt at counteracting the increasing visibility of the Jewish tragedy. As Elżbieta Janicka has shown with regard to the area of the former Warsaw Ghetto, in the creation of this multilayered topography, memorial crosses and other Christian symbols are often planted in proximity to Holocaust-related sites, according to certain "symbolic axes" which consolidate the supremacy of the national martyrology, while concurrently trying to devalue any "danger" to the dominant narrative of Polish innocence.[73] Against these apparent attempts to reinterpret the memoryscape of Olkusz through the prism of the Catholic-Nationalistic narrative, the Jewish Memorial March poses a mnemonic threat. It does so not merely by "secularizing" the commemorative discourse but by offering an alternative martyrology that undermines the exclusivist understanding of the national and religious identity and integrates the memory of Jewish victimhood into the heart of the local heritage.

Reenacting the gaze

Eighty years after the deadly summer of 1942, which marked the peak of the extermination of Polish Jews, large-scale commemorative events for the murdered Jews were held in almost every town and city across the country. The anniversary in 2022 was also marked in Olkusz, and the Memorial March that year garnered special attention and excitement. Once again, the visual symbol chosen to illustrate the march and its accompanying events was the famous image of Moshe Hagerman. In the days leading up to the march, the suffering Jew from the market square became omnipresent. His photograph was printed, distributed and hung all around the physical and virtual space of town. Eighty years after his

Fig. 5. Information boards commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto in Olkusz, June 13, 2022. Photo by the author.

death, the iconized man from the photograph has become the pride of town, "the most well-known person from Olkusz"—as he is often referred to. A day before the march, during a tour following the Jewish traces of Olkusz, some of the participants were holding a copy of the photograph, while the guide was showing them exactly where Hagerman had stood in the market square. Interestingly enough, in many of the publications and posters, he was cropped out of the original photo and was shown standing alone, without the mocking Germans behind him and the persecuted men at his feet, who were retouched out of the photograph (figure 5). Leaving out the historical markers from the photograph turned the Jewish man into a decontextualized figure, allegedly "untouched" by the horrific reality, and seemed to endow his image with an aura of sublime devotion.

Hagerman was also about to play a special and controversial role during the march on June 13. For some years, several local activists, among them the march organizers and one Jewish descendant of Olkusz, had been trying to promote an initiative to erect a permanent monument exactly in the place where he was forced to stand on that July day in 1940. According to the future project, designed by a German artist, the iconic photograph was to be printed on a glass surface in real size. The initiators were hoping to receive the town's permission and to gather enough resources in order to inaugurate the monument as part of the 2022 Memorial March, marking the eightieth anniversary of the deportation, but the mayor refused to approve the establishment of the memorial in the square, arguing that it might create a "bad impression" and a depressing atmosphere.[74]

Once again, the confrontational debates between the local memory activists and the authorities over the commemoration of the Jews infiltrated into the annual Memorial March. Frustrated by the failure to erect the monument, the organizers decided to turn that year's event into a protest against the mayor's refusal to support the initiative. Shortly after the start of the procession, the organizers suddenly deviated from the usual route and led the group to a new "station"—the market square, next to the point where the famous photograph was taken. I participated in the march that year for the second time. As we were standing there, confused, Ireneusz Cieślik unrolled a large poster, and there, before our eyes, Moshe Hagerman appeared, hauntingly life-size, standing exactly where he had been captured by the German camera on Bloody Wednesday (figure 6). The participants then positioned themselves in a half-circle in front of the two-dimensional humiliated Jew, almost mirroring the Germans in the photo, while Hagerman himself remained caught in the cross-fire of the multiple gazes. While I took photos of this unsettling moment, I realized that I was no longer in my comfortable participant-observer position; I found myself standing more or less where the anonymous German cameraman had stood in 1940.

After a few moments of silence, the organizers laid flowers and lit candles in the shape of a Star of David at the foot of the poster. Cieślik delivered a short speech in which he expressed his disappointment with the town's reluctance to approve the construction of the monument and promised to continue the campaign to commemorate Hagerman in the square. "People from all over the world know this photograph, but there

Fig. 6. Poster of Moshe Hagerman, the Memorial March in Olkusz, June 13, 2022. Photo by the author.

are still Olkusz residents who have no idea that it was taken here," he said. After the speech, the poster was taken down and rerolled, and the march continued on its usual route to the train station, where the concluding ceremony was held.

This unusual episode in the square left the participants with mixed emotional reactions. In the heated discussion that ensued, two different and seemingly irreconcilable approaches were voiced. Most of the local inhabitants interpreted the mayor's refusal to authorize the initiative as yet another proof of the authorities' reluctance to remember the Jewish victims and it only made them more convinced that erecting this memorial is a highly worthy cause and a moral debt to the Jewish victims and to their memory. This logic indeed abstracted Hagerman and treated him as a symbol of the Jewish fate. But placing him for posterity in the square was perceived by most of the locals not as an objectification (as critics of the initiative argued) but rather as an act of relocalization and recontextualization of the iconic image by "bringing him back to his hometown," as many of them asserted. Others—mostly outside participants—were disturbed

by the ethical and aesthetic predicament of commemorating the Jews through the Nazi lens and were uneasy with the idea of "reenacting" and adopting the dehumanizing Nazi gaze, thus condemning him forever to remain a victim in an endless recursion that perpetuates his humiliation.[75] Some of the local participants agreed that using a Nazi photograph for commemoration might be problematic but insisted that memorializing Hagerman in such a way "subverts" the Germans' intentions and in fact brings him back his dignity.

This last and peculiar act in the story raises some concluding thoughts which reflect upon the never-ending memory battles in Olkusz, and perhaps reaches the crux of the contested and often dissonant nature of the public engagement with the history and memory of the Holocaust in contemporary Poland. As the analysis of the confrontational mnemonic struggles in this particular town shows, the bone of contention, which takes on different forms and spatial expressions, revolves around one question, namely—who are *the* victims? This question, as we have seen, pertains to deep Christian sensibilities among the local population, and the conflicting answers given to it render the local memoryscape a religiously-laden battleground of competing martyrologies. In a semiotic field suffused with Catholic connotations and a landscape packed with memorial crosses and other Chrisitan symbols, and in a country whose notions of victimhood and suffering are imbued with Christian meaning (as demonstrated by the rooted Polish self-image as the "Christ of Nations"), it seems that every act, or counteract, of commemoration touches a deep religious chord and takes part in a performative reinterpretation of the boundaries of the ethnoreligious community. If we understand the Olkusz Memorial March as some sort of a symbolic and alternative "Via Dolorosa" and if Moshe Hagerman is its symbolic "martyr," then these religious associations (whether implicit or explicit) do not intend to "Christianize" the Holocaust but rather to "resacralize" the Jews and to "canonize" them into the local memory as the ultimate (Jewish) victims through an intimate and ritualistic act of recreating their final march.

But what happens to the object of commemoration when the act of compassionate reenactment becomes such a constitutive component in the self-perception of the commemorating group? To what extent, then, does the ethical imperative to fight forgetfulness run the risk of evolving into some kind of a possessive wish to "eternalize" the memory of

the victims? The last act in the local memory wars in Olkusz highlights a tension inherent perhaps in every act of memorialization of the Holocaust and other mass atrocities; how to give the victims an "everlasting memory" but avoid objectifying them and replicating their essentialization as humiliated martyrs?

Notes

1. See, for example, Marta Duch-Dyngosz, "From Absence to Loss: Holocaust Commemoration in Present-day Poland," *Remembrance and Solidarity: Studies in 20th Century European History* 5 (2017): 115–37; Joanna Beata Michlic, "Memories of Jews and the Holocaust in Postcommunist Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland," in David M. Seymour and Mercedes Camino, eds., *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 146–74. See also Scott Ury, ed., "Re-membering Poland: History, Memory and Society in East Central Europe," special issue, *History & Memory* 34, no. 2 (2022).

2. For other examples of the microhistorical approach in the study of the memory of the Holocaust in Poland, see Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, "The Transnational Dynamics of Local Remembrance: The Jewish Past in a Former Shtetl in Poland," *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 301–14.

3. See Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Zofia Wóycicka, "New Constellations of Mnemonic Wars: An Introduction," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1275–88.

4. On the history and demography of the Jewish community of Olkusz until the Holocaust, see Krzysztof Kocjan, *Żydowski Olkusz* [Olkusz Jews] (Olkusz-Bukowno: Afront, 2022).

5. For the history of World War II and the Holocaust in Olkusz, see Adam Cyra, *Mieszkańcy Ziemi Olkuskiej w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych* [Residents of Olkusz Land in Nazi prisons and concentration camps] (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2005); Krzysztof Kocjan, *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów* [The Holocaust of Olkusz's Jews] (Bukowno: Afront, 2017). On the fate of the Jews in the larger area of East-Upper Silesia (Zagłębie), see Aleksandra Namysło, ed., *Zagłada Żydów zagłębiowskich* [The Holocaust of the Jews of Zaglembie] (Warsaw: Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 2004).

6. Jewish testimonies from Bloody Wednesday appear in the town's Yizkor Book, see Zvi Yashiv, ed., *The Olkusz Yizkor Book* [in Hebrew and Yiddish] (Tel Aviv: Organization of Former Residents of Olkusz in Israel, 1972). Recollections of Polish citizens from this day are gathered in *Krwawa Środa 1940 w Olkuszu:*

wybór źródeł [1940 Bloody Wednsday in Olkusz: Selection of sources] (Kraków and Olkusz: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej—Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu & Urząd Miasta i Gminy Olkusz, 2020); *Krwawa środa 1940: Z dawnych dni ziemi olkuskiej* [Bloody Wednesday 1940: From the old days of the Olkusz Land] (Olkusz: Wydział Kultury, Kultury Fizycznej i Sportu Urzędu Miasta i Gminy Olkusz, 1984).

7. Yad Vashem Archive, 0.3, file 11107, testimony of David Dror (Blady), October 10, 1998.

8. Kocjan, *Zagłada*, 116.

9. On the notion of the Holocaust as an "unwitnessed event," see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

10. For the postwar presence of the Holocaust in Polish folklore, see, for example, Dionizjusz Czubala, "Pamięć Zagłady w narracji folklorystycznej" [Holocaust memory in folklore narratives], *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017): 203–29. On the ambivalent meaning of "silence" in postwar Poland regarding the fate of the Jews, see Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "How to Exit the Conspiracy of Silence? Social Sciences Facing Polish-Jewish Relations," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 1 (2011): 129–52; Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Melancholic Nationalism and the Pathologies of Commemorating the Holocaust in Poland," in Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska, eds., *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 301–26. See also Michael Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

11. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Strach: Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie, Historia moralnej zapaści* [Fear: Antisemitism in Poland right after the war, a history of moral collapse] (Kraków: Znak, 2006), 304. (This quote does not appear in the English translation of the book.)

12. Kazimierz Wyka, *Życie na niby: Szkice z lat 1939–1945* [A make-believe life: Sketches from 1939–1945] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1985), 139–78.

13. For the fate of primarily private Jewish property in Poland during the war and early postwar years, see Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, eds., *Klucze i kasa: O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950* [Keys and cashbox: On Jewish property in Poland under German occupation and in the early postwar years, 1939–1950] (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014). See also Monika Krawczyk, "The Effect of the Legal Status of Jewish Property in Post-War Poland," in Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, eds., *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 791–821.

14. Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja: Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [The sleep-through revolution: Exercises in historical logic] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyka Polityczna, 2014), provides an insightful psychosocial analysis of the implications of the collective appropriation of Jewish assets by Polish society.

15. Unlike many provincial towns in the General Government (and in other areas of occupied eastern Europe), where local inhabitants in many cases could simply enter empty Jewish houses, in Olkusz (which was included within the new German Reich) the policy concerning Jewish real-estate was much more supervised and controlled by the German authorities. It meant that Polish citizens usually had to receive permission from the Germans to occupy a Jewish house.

16. See Joanna Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2015); Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration 1945–1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

17. Conversely, in most Jewish recollections and descriptions of that day, it was referred to as an exclusive anti-Jewish event, failing to mention that also non-Jewish Poles were persecuted.

18. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989); Monika Murzyn-Kupisz, "Rediscovering the Jewish Past in the Polish Provinces," in Erica Lehrer and Michael Meng, eds., *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 115–48.

19. Antony Polonsky, ed., "'*My Brother's Keeper?' Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: Rutledge, 1990). See also Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

20. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

21. See Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

22. Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, "Collective Remembrance in Jedwabne: Unsettled Memory of World War II in Postcommunist Poland," *History & Memory* 18, no. 1 (2006): 152–78.

23. On the effects of the book's publication on the Holocaust discourse in Poland, see Piotr Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem: Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej* [After Jedwabne: Anatomy of a functional memory] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2018).

24. Ireneusz Dańko, "Wyblakła już pamięć sąsiadów Olkuscy Żydzi: Śladem zagłady" [The faded memory of Olkusz Jewish neighbors: A trace of the Holocaust], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 16, 2001. Many of the media reports and discussions on the mnemonic wars in Olkusz from the early 2000s are collected in Ireneusz Cieślik, Olgerd Dziechciarz, and Krzysztof Kocjan, eds., *Olkusz—Zagłada i pamięć: Dyskusja o ofiarach wojny i świadectwa ocalałych Żydów* [Olkusz—Holocaust and memory: Discussions on the war victims and testimonies of Jewish survivors] (Olkusz: Brama, 2007).

25. Dańko, "Wyblakła już pamięć."

26. Janina Cyra, "Olkusz nie był Jedwabnem" [Olkusz was not Jedwabne], *Słowo Żydowskie*, no. 7–8 (319–320), April 2004, 17.

27. Dańko, "Wyblakła już pamięć."

28. As evident, for example, in the War of Crosses during the 1980s–90s on the former site of Auschwitz-Birkenau. See Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*.

29. One of the monument's initiators was Dr. Adam Cyra, an Olkusz-born historian who worked at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. See Adam Cyra, "Pomnik na starym cmentarzu w Olkuszu" [The monument in Olkusz old cemetery]; cited in Cieślik, Dziechciarz, and Kocjan, *Zagłada i pamięć*, 136–40. After the publication of *Neighbors* he tried to undermine Gross's findings and to protect one of the leading perpetrators from Jedwabne. See Adam Cyra, "Jedwabne—Oświęcim—Sachsenhausen," *Rzeczpospolita*, February 2, 2001.

30. Olgerd Dziechciarz, "Pomnik kłamstwa?" [The monument of lies?], *Gazeta Krakowska*, August 5, 2004; Włodzimierz Baran, "Pomnik hańby i hipokryzji" [The monumemt of shame and hypocrisy], August 12, 2004, Zwolnieni-zatrudnieni.w.interia.pl; cited in Cieślik, Dziechciarz and Kocjan, *Zagłada i pamięć*, 126. The vast correspondence concerning the monument is located in the archive of the Council for the Protection of Memory of Struggle and Martyrdom. See Archiwum Akt Nowych, Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, file 1096.

31. Ireneusz Cieślik, "Nie dzielić ofiar" [Do not divide the victims], *Przegląd Olkuski*, November 21, 2003.

32. Dziechciarz, "Pomnik kłamstwa?"

33. He is also a theologist who contributes regularly to the Catholic-liberal "Więź"—a journal known for its critical stance towards the hierarchy of the Polish Catholic Church on a number of issues, particularly in relation to Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust.

34. Interview with Ireneusz Cieślik, Olkusz, June 13, 2014.

35. "Pamięć o męczeństwie... W 61 rocznicę Krwawej Środy" [The memory of martyrdom... On the 61st anniversary of Bloody Wednesday], *Przegląd Olkuski*, August 3, 2001.

36. Ireneusz Cieślik, "Zbiorowa skleroza?" [Collective sclerosis?], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, October 21, 2001.

37. Ireneusz Cieślik, ed., *10 lat Marszu Pamięci w rocznicę wymordowania Żydów z Ollkusza* [10 years of the Memorial March on the anniversary of the murder of the Jews of Olkusz] (Olkusz: Centrum Poligraficzno-Reklamowe Omega Art 2016), 6.

38. While memorial marches have become a prevailing practice in recent years in Poland, commemorating different victims of World War II (Jews and non-Jews), in 2006 they were still not common in the Polish field of commemoration. The only similar event at that time was the Memorial March for the Jews of Kraków, which was established in the 1980s by the local Jewish community, and the March of the Living—an Israeli-led march from Auschwitz to Birkenau. The annual Memorial March marking the Great Deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, started in 2012. The first Memorial March honoring the civilian victims of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising was held in 2015.

39. Usually, as the organizers observed, several hours after the march the lists are taken off and thrown to the garbage.

40. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

41. Quoted in Ewa Karabin, "Recovered Names," in Cieślik, ed., *10 lat Marszu Pamięci*, 35.

42. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 66–67.

43. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 27.

44. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984).

45. For a critical analysis of the historical reenactment of the liquidation of the Będzin Ghetto, see Tomasz Żukowski, "Correction of the Reality: Reenacting the Destruction of the Będzin Ghetto (2010)," in Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, eds., *Philo-Semitic Violence: Poland's Jewish Past in New Polish Narratives* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 57–90.

46. For an interesting analysis of walking as commemoration of the Jewish past, see Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius, "Palimpsestic Memoryscape: Heterotopias, 'Multiculturalism' and Racism in Białystok," *History & Memory* 34, no. 2 (2022): 33–75.

47. Jarosław Nowosad, "Szkoda, panie Hagierman" [Too bad, Mr. Hagerman], in *10 lat Marszu Pamięci*, 18.

48. See, for example, David Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable: Literary and Photographic Transcendence* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), 209–11.

49. The comparison between the image of Hagerman to the suffering Jesus was also made by the Polish-born Jewish author Ka-Tzetnik (Yehiel De-Nur), in his analysis of the photograph. See Ka-Tzetnik, *Shivitti: A Vision* (Nevada City, CA: Gateway Books, 1998), xvii–xix, 5.

50. Olgerd Dziechciarz, "Książka o Zagładzie" [A book about the Holocaust], *Gazeta Krakowska*, December 2, 2002.

51. See, for example, Tom Lawson, "Shaping the Holocaust: The Influence of Christian Discourse on Perceptions of the European Jewish Tragedy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, no. 3 (2007): 404–20; Laura Bender Herron, "Redemptive Memory: The Christianization of the Holocaust in America," *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 6, no. 2 (2005): 61–92.

52. Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, "The Polish Catholic Church and the Public Memory of the Shoah: Between Mnemonic Backlash and Settling Accounts with the Past," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 128 (2023): 67–98.

53. On the different attitudes in the Polish Catholic world to the Holocaust, see Joanna Barcik "'A my mamy Kolbego': Polskie myślenie religijne wobec Auschwitz" ["And we have Kolbe": Polish religious thinking on Auschwitz], *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 272, no. 2 (2019): 151–64; Stanisław Obirek, "Dialog chrześcijańsko-żydowski z Zagładą w tle" [Christian-Jewish dialogue with the Holocaust in the background], *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i Materiały* 5 (2009): 299–316.

54. In recent years conservative Catholic groups are holding extravagant "Via Dolorosa" marches in commemoration of the Polish war victims in places such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka, in which the marchers carry large wooden crosses.

55. Using Christian symbols in Jewish or Holocaust-related contexts is not only a matter of differing theological views or polarized ideological and political debates. For instance, in the countryside, signposts directing to Jewish cemeteries sometimes bear the image of a cross—not necessarily as an attempt to "Christianize" Jewish spaces but rather to indicate that these places are considered, at least nominally "religious sites" (even if many of them are not revered by the local population as holy sites).

56. One of the most recognized figures in this stream is Wojciech Lemański, a former parish priest who used to hold commemoration ceremonies in Treblinka, wearing a Jewish *kippah* (skullcap). His radical views on Judaism and the Holocaust and his criticism of the Church's hierarchy led to his expulsion from the Polish Catholic Church. See "'Nie mogę być kapłanem Boga dzielnicowego': Z

ks. Wojciechem Lemańskim rozmawiają Joanna Tokarska-Bakir i Michał Pawilno-Pacewicz" ["I can't be a priest of a divisive God. Wojciech Lemański speaks with Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Michał Pawilno-Pacewicz], *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 3–4 (2015): 5–22.

57. The reason for the authorities' change of policy probably has to do with the fact that in 2013 the Memorial March gained substantial recognition and popularity, after the march organizers won the prestigious Stanisław Musiał Prize—which is awarded every year to Polish groups and individuals who work for the promotion of Polish-Jewish dialogue.

58. Between 2006 and 2014 the mayor, Dariusz Rzepka, was a member of the centrist-liberal party "Citizen Platfrom" (Platforma Obywatelska). Roman Piaśnik, who has been mayor since 2014, is an independent candidate who is not connected to any national political party. In 2018 he defeated the candidate of the Populist right-wing party PiS, who was endorsed by then Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

59. Sławomir Kapralski, "Battlefields of Memory: Landscape and Identity in Polish-Jewish Relations," *History & Memory* 13, no. 2 (2001): 37.

60. Jacek Sypień, "Luki w pamięci" [Voids in memory], *Dziennik Polski*, May 12, 2005.

61. "Marsz pamięci ofiar 'Krwawej Środy' w Olkuszu" [Memorial March for the victims of "Bloody Wednesday" in Olkusz], *Nacjonalista.pl*, July 29, 2013, https://www.nacjonalista.pl/2013/07/29/marsz-pamieci-ofiar-krwawej-srody-w-olkuszu; "Olkusz: Marsz Pamięci Ofiar Krwawej Środy—zaproszenie," *autonom.pl*, July 20, 2013, http://autonom.pl/olkusz-marsz-pamieci-ofiar-krwawej-srody-zaproszenie/.

62. Alicja Renkiewicz, "Marsz kibiców w rocznicę Krwawej Środy" [Supporters march on the anniversary of Bloody Wednesday], *Olkuski Przegląd*, July 30, 2014, https://przeglad.olkuski.pl/marsz-kibicow-w-rocznice-krwawej-srody/.

63. Piotr Kubiczek, "Małopolscy Patrioci w hołdzie ofiarom Krwawej Środy" [The Patriots of Lesser Poland in honor of the victims of Bloody Wednesday], *Olkuski Przegląd*, August 4, 2015, https://przeglad.olkuski.pl/patriotyczne--wspomnienie-krwawej-srody/; Renkiewicz, "Marsz kibiców." The opinion that the nationalist march was an attempt to "compete" with the Jewish march was raised by many of the participants in the original Memorial March with whom I talked.

64. A comment by "Irma" in Renkiewicz, "Marsz kibiców."

65. In the 2023 national elections, PiS lost its majority in the parliament and for the first time since 2015 did not manage to form a coalition.

66. The writing on the plaque—in Hebrew, Polish, German, and English—is as follows: "In memory of Jewish community from Olkusz. Murdered by Germans in

June 1942. In this building the Jewish from Olkusz had been imprisoned before they were transported to gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and death camp." (The grammatical errors are in the original English text.)

67. On the notion of *Żydokomuna* (Judeo-communism) and its contemporary uses in the antisemitic discourse in Poland, see Anna Zawadzka, "*Żydokomuna*: The Construction of the Insult," in Anna Wolff-Powęska and Piotr Forecki, eds., *World War II and Two Occupations: Dilemmas of Polish Memory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 249–80.

68. Kate Korycki, *Weaponizing the Past: Collective Memory and Jews, Poles, and Communists in Twenty-First Century Poland* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2023).

69. Geneviève Zubrzycki, "The Cross, the Madonna and the Jew," in Mitchell Young, Eric Zuelow and Andreas Sturm, eds., *Nationalism in a Global Era* (London: Routledge, 2007): 134.

70. This site is marked with a plastic commemoration board which was placed there several years ago by the cultural association "Brama" (The Gate).

71. The commemoration of this group is a subject of heated controversies, since many of these units were accused of murdering Jews after the war under the pretext of fighting the communists. See Krzysztof Jaskulewski and Piotr Majewski, "The Contested Symbolism of the 'Cursed Soldiers': Hegemony, Memory and the Politics of Fear in Poland," *History & Memory* 36, no. 1 (2024): 111–39.

72. On the cultural and political meaning of planting crosses in the public space, particularly in the anticommunist context, see Magdalena Waligórska, *Cross Purposes: Catholicism and the Political Imagination in Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

73. Thus, for example, the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East in Muranów (colloquially called Golgotha of the East, *Golgota Wschodu*)—which displays dozens of crosses squeezed on a train car—refracts and counters the nearby Umschlagplatz monument, she argues, by equating between the fate of the Jewish deportees to the German extermination camps with the Polish victims of communism. See Elżbieta Janicka, "Instead of Negationism: The Symbolic Topography of the former Warsaw Ghetto vis-à-vis Holocaust Narratives," *Holocaust Studies and Materials* 4 (2017): 212–61. The practice of commemorating the suffering of Poles (mainly at the hands of the communists/Soviets) through Christian symbols has become pervasive in recent years also in small towns, among them localities where Poles were involved in anti-Jewish violence during the war. It has been argued that such symbols function as "countermemorials" to the Holocaust in an attempt to rewrite places identified with the Holocaust into symbolic Polish domains by offsetting the balance of Polish-Jewish suffering. See Zuzanna Bogumił, "Pamięć religijna społeczności lokalnych" [Religious memory of local communities], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 61, no. 3 (2017): 161–84.

74. In addition, not enough money was collected as very few Jewish descendants of Olkusz across the world supported the project.

75. For the ethical and historiographical dangers of using perpetrators' photographs in research and commemoration, see, for example, Cornelia Brink, "Secular Icons: Looking at Photographs from Nazi Concentration Camps," *History & Memory* 12, no. 1 (2000): 135–50; Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008): 309–30.

Yechiel Weizman is a faculty member at the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, Bar Ilan University. He is the author of *Unsettled Heritage: Living Next to Poland's Material Jewish Traces after the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2022). (yechiel.weizman@biu.ac.il)