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# On Writing and Righting History: The Stakes of Holocaust Interpretation and Remembrance in Poland and the United States

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**ON *WRITING* AND *RIGHTING* HISTORY: THE STAKES OF HOLOCAUST  
INTERPRETATION AND REMEMBRANCE IN POLAND AND THE UNITED STATES**

Noa Gutow-Ellis

History

Colby College

May 2019

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Reader: Dr. Raffael Scheck

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Telling stories makes us human, but not all our stories are humane.

—Alon Confino  
*A World Without Jews:  
the Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*

...Nations don't suffer – people do.

—Brian Porter-Szûcs  
*Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*

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I sat down in Kate Hollander's office sometime in November and told her that although it felt strange to say, I was having fun writing my thesis. I figured I'd need to revel in that feeling while it lasted. "It never stops being fun," she said. She was right.

For the fun, for the opportunity to immerse myself in my historical curiosities, for the funding of my research in Poland and New York through the Barry Fund and the Sarah Janney Internship Fund, and for the office space among them, I extend heartfelt gratitude to the History Department.

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As fun as research and writing was, this thesis is ultimately about what people *do* with their collective histories of suffering. There is no way I could have sustained my work on this topic without Andrew Pauker supporting me, making me laugh, and laughing back.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his opening remarks at a 2012 ceremony awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States, President Barack Obama joked, “No one ever picks up a guitar, or fights a disease, or starts a movement, thinking, ‘You know what, if I keep this up, in 2012, I could get a medal in the White House from a guy named Barack Obama.’”<sup>1</sup> Nor did anyone think that what began as a lighthearted set of remarks would turn serious—“diplomatic gaffe”<sup>2</sup> serious—when President Obama awarded the medal posthumously to Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski. Obama said of Karski, “...Resistance fighters told him that Jews were being murdered on a massive scale, and smuggled him into the Warsaw Ghetto and a \*Polish death camp\* to see for himself.”<sup>3</sup> The asterisks are not my own addition. They direct the reader to an amendment at the top of the archived document reading, “\*Note – the language in asterisks below is historically inaccurate. It should have been: ‘Nazi death camps in German occupied Poland.’ We regret the error.”<sup>4</sup>

This amendment came following outrage from Poland. Prime Minister Donald Tusk of Poland released a statement declaring President Obama guilty of “ignorance, lack of knowledge, [and] bad intentions.”<sup>5</sup> President Obama sent a formal letter of apology to Bronisław Komorowski, then-President of Poland, two days after his contested remarks in which he specifically acknowledged the suffering of “the Polish people.”<sup>6</sup> Yet the apology did not detract

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Presidential Medal of Freedom Ceremony,” (speech, Washington, D.C., May 29, 2012), The White House, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/29/remarks-president-presidential-medal-freedom-ceremony>.

<sup>2</sup> “Obama apologises to President Komorowski over ‘Polish death camp’ gaffe,” *The News.Pl* [English language extension of Poland’s public radio] June 1, 2012, <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/101343,Obama-apologises-to-President-Komorowski-over-Polish-death-camp-gaffe>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Landler, “Polish Premier Denounces Obama for Referring to a ‘Polish Death Camp’” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from President Barack Obama to His Excellency Bronislaw Komorowski, President of the Republic of Poland. May 31, 2012.

from the uproar in Poland about President Obama’s misuse of words.<sup>7</sup> Almost six years later, in January 2018, news outlets like the *Washington Post* attributed the occurrence as one of the inciting factors of the passage of the now-infamous “Holocaust bill” in Poland.<sup>8</sup> The bill, an amendment to the existing Act on the Institute of National Remembrance—the law that established what is essentially the Polish governmental arm to remember and teach about national history—promised prison time or a fine for any statement “accusing the Polish state or people of involvement or responsibility for the Nazi occupation during World War II.”<sup>9</sup> This included banning and punishing individuals for using phrases like “Polish death camps” in reference to Nazi concentration camps built on occupied Polish soil in wartime. Under such a law, President Obama would have committed a crime.

In speaking publicly about the law, former United States Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “[it] adversely affects freedom of speech and academic inquiry,” but maintained that “the United States reaffirms that terms like ‘Polish death camps’ are painful and misleading.”<sup>10</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued the bill was an “attempt to rewrite history.”<sup>11</sup> International outcry existed before the law had even passed, which the Polish government called inappropriate meddling in their country’s independent legislative affairs. On January 28, just before news broke that the ‘Holocaust bill’ was signed into law, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, a government ministry dedicated to archives, history education, and discussed in depth in chapter three, issued a press release in response to calls from the Ambassador of Israel

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<sup>7</sup> “Obama angers Poles with ‘death camp’ remarks,” The BBC. May 30, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18264036>

<sup>8</sup> Rick Noack, “Obama once referred to a ‘Polish death camp.’ In Poland, that could soon be punishable by 3 years in prison.” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2016. Also: Ruth Eglash and Avi Selk’s “Israel and Poland try to tamp down tensions after Poland’s ‘death camp’ law sparks Israeli outrage.” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Tara John, “Poland Just Passed a Holocaust Bill That Is Causing Outrage. Here’s What You Need To Know.” *Time Magazine*, Feb. 1, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> James Masters, “Polish President signs controversial Holocaust bill into law,” *CNN*, Feb. 7, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> John, “Poland Just Passed a Holocaust Bill That Is Causing Outrage. Here’s What You Need To Know.”

for Poland to change the bill's language. The Institute of National Remembrance [in Polish, *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, or IPN] claimed, in part:

For several dozen years, Poland has been repeatedly slandered and portrayed as Hitler's accomplice, therefore, defending the good name of our nation against statements that have nothing to do with historical truth seems to be an obvious and necessary stance. Earlier, this defense was not effective enough, and the position of the Polish authorities was not always recognised in the public sphere.<sup>12</sup>

This press release picked up language Tusk used to accuse Obama of “bad intentions,” namely that misrepresenting what one claims to be “historical truth” is consequential enough to call for imprisonment. The legislation and the reasoning behind it were hugely contested, heated, and watched within the communities who study the events of World War II. The Polish government has a history of working to silence historians whose findings they do not agree with or do not see as representing Polish national history in a positive light. This thesis explores the deliberate attempts by the Polish government to control and shape their historical narrative, the significant departure that takes place when a politician moves from accusing someone of ignorance or lack of knowledge to *bad intentions*. Of great importance is the fact that Tusk accused an American of bad intentions regarding interpreting and publicly speaking a Polish figure from the Second World War. It is to the role of the United States—and American Jews in particular—in shaping narratives about the Holocaust in Poland we now turn.

News of this bill was widely reported in the United States in early 2018, around the same time I learned I would spend that summer interning at the Galicia Jewish Museum, a Jewish culture and Holocaust museum in Kraków, Poland. I had friends and family ask me how it was possible I'd be spending my summer working at a Holocaust museum in Poland if it did not sound possible to speak freely about it? All I knew was that, well, I had no idea.

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<sup>12</sup> “Statement of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in reference to the appeal of the Ambassador to Israel to change the amendment to the Act on the IPN – 28 January.” Institute of National Remembrance. Jan. 28, 2018. [https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/1014,Statement-of-the-Institute-of-National-Remembrance-IPN-in-reference-to-the-appeal.ht](https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/1014,Statement-of-the-Institute-of-National-Remembrance-IPN-in-reference-to-the-appeal)



My first day on the job at the museum had not even come to a close before it became clear to me that the Holocaust bill did not affect the work of the museum or its employees—there was, as it turned out, a legal stipulation protecting certain institutions, as multiple Poles explained to me—but even the thought of the law’s existence mattered deeply, though not exclusively, to one group of tourists in particular who consistently asked about it: American Jews. Heritage trips through Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular Poland, are popular within American Jewish communities. Teenagers and young adults often travel through a program called March of the Living, which brings together thousands of young Jews in Poland on the Israeli Day of Holocaust Remembrance to march from Auschwitz I to Birkenau, a sub-camp typically visited in tandem with Auschwitz I, before all traveling to Israel. Some Jewish day schools, like the one I attended in Houston, Texas, take students on trips modeled on March of the Living but go at a different time of year. And many Jewish adults and seniors utilize certain travel agencies to plan family heritage trips or attend organized trips through local synagogues or community centers.

The Holocaust occupies a central space in the heart and conscious of American Jews. The Pew Research Center found in 2013 that 73% of American Jews said “remembering the Holocaust” was “an essential part of what being Jewish means to them.” This far outnumbered the 19% of American Jews who said “observing Jewish law” or the 43% who said “caring about Israel” were essential to their Jewish identity.<sup>13</sup> Since the 1970s, scholars have documented the Americanization of the Holocaust—the process by which the Holocaust moved from the margins to the center of American life—largely underpinned by cultural works such as the explosive successes of books or plays like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, films such as Steven Spielberg’s

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<sup>13</sup> Becka A. Alper, “70 years after WWII, the Holocaust is still very important to American Jews,” *Pew Research Center: Fact Tank*. August 13, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/13/70-years-after-wwii-the-holocaust-is-still-very-important-to-american-jews/>

*Schindler's List*, and prominent museums like the United States Holocaust and Memorial Museum, established in Washington, D.C. in 1993 well before the National Museum of the American Indian or the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Scholarly questions surrounding the Americanization of the Holocaust ask why, exactly, a museum dedicated to the systematic murder of European Jewry would earn the attention of museum-going Americans before, say, museums dedicated to crimes against humanity on American soil. And scholars of this process investigate how and why 73% of American Jews would declare that remembering the Holocaust is an *essential* part of their Jewish identity, outnumbering any of the religiously codified aspects of what it typically means to identify as a Jew. Scholarship on the Americanization of the Holocaust often looks inward at the American Jewish community. This thesis takes that scholarship and uses it to look outward toward where the histories encapsulated by the Holocaust and the subsequent stories American Jews encounter took place: Poland.

With this project, I argue that the case of the Polish Holocaust bill and the Americanization of the Holocaust are closely intertwined. Poland as an independent nation-state is relatively young. It was not until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 that Poland became able to write its own national history as Americans today interact with and understand it. But by that time, American cultural markers of the Holocaust had well been established and equated the horrors of the Holocaust with the geographic space of Poland. Polish national history, sensitive to the fact that Germany and the Soviet Union occupied their territory for the duration of the Second World War, rejects the notion that “Poles” or “Poland” as contemporaries see them had any involvement in the horrific suffering Jews experienced during World War II. 3 million Polish Jews and 3 million primarily Catholic Poles died in the war. Yet the fact that scholarship separates these identities, that Polish Jews are always qualified as such and never enlisted simply as “Poles,” is worth parsing. Polish history does not view World War II through the lens of

Jewish suffering; they view it through the lens of Polish Catholic suffering. American Jews, however, very much view World War II through the lens of Jewish suffering. This places the two groups at an impasse, the stories they shape their historical narratives around at odds with each other.

In 2017, Nobel prize-winning writer Kazuo Ishiguro spent part of his Nobel Lecture explaining a past moment in which he had to reckon with the kinds of stories he had already told and the kinds of stories he still wanted to tell. “Does a nation remember and forget in much the same way as an individual does?” he asked. “Or are there important differences? What exactly are the memories of a nation? Where are they kept? How are they shaped and controlled?” He continues, asking, “...Can stable, free nations really be built on foundations of willful amnesia and frustrated justice?”<sup>14</sup> These questions are, in a way, similar to the guiding questions of this project save for one caveat. My work is guided by the principle that historian Brian Porter-Szûcs has laid out: “nations don’t suffer—people do.”<sup>15</sup> The people who make up nations are the ones deciding what stories are told, and where they are kept, and what has to be cast aside. This is all to say: the stakes of the differences between Poles and American Jews in interpreting the Holocaust are high and emotional because, at their core, they are all centered on individual people and their stories. And not just stories from any time or place: these are stories of deep suffering. The suffering experienced by Polish Catholics, Polish Jews, and all those in between during the Second World War is unfathomable to many. As we will later see, some newspapers found the atrocities so unthinkable that they did not print them. This thesis looks at what groups of people have done and continue to do with these moments of suffering in their collective histories. The longstanding separateness between “Poles” and “Jews” within these stories,

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<sup>14</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, “Nobel Lecture” (speech, Oslo, Norway, Dec. 7, 2017), Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/25124-kazuo-ishiguro-nobel-lecture-2017/>.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Porter-Szûcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 4.

something this project explores, has led to fights over perceived differences in experiences of suffering. Underneath it all—this project, the stories of suffering from World War II, the ways in which history is remembered or forgotten—is this central question posed by Kazuo Ishiguro toward the end of his Nobel lecture. “...In the end, stories are about one person saying to another: This is the way it feels to be me. Can you understand what I’m saying? Does it also feel this way to you?”<sup>16</sup> With that, we begin.

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<sup>16</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, “Nobel Lecture” (speech, Oslo, Norway, Dec. 7, 2017), Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/25124-kazuo-ishiguro-nobel-lecture-2017/>.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Stories of Separate Suffering: Tracing the Historiography of American and Polish Interpretations of the Holocaust**

Sitting behind the front desk at the Galicia Jewish Museum this summer, a museum located in the heart of Kazimierz—Kraków’s Jewish quarter, home to famous synagogues and cemeteries, kitschy restaurants, Jewish bookstores and *Schindler’s List* tour stops—I sold entrance tickets to many American Jews visiting Poland to retrace their family history. Most striking to me was how the families knew about the past in terms of death. “This is the name of the village where my grandfather was killed,” they could say. Yet the families often knew nothing about the past in terms of life. “What kind of life did my grandfather lead in the village?” was their often-unanswerable question. The American Jews tracing their roots had virtually no answers, and no way to answer, these questions. Anthropologist Erica Lehrer writes of a similar reckoning during her fieldwork in Kazimierz spent researching her 2013 book *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*. She says of seeing an American Jewish performer at a Polish synagogue, “I was perplexed by his presence...He was the Jewish present; what was he doing here in the Jewish past?”<sup>17</sup> There is a tension that exists today between difficult historical accounts and filtered contemporary representations of Poland. It is precisely a desire to visit the sites of a Jewish past decimated in wartime as the draw of Poland for American Jewish tourists on heritage or mission trips. These make up some of the more than one million tourists who visit Auschwitz each year, as well as the writers, artists, and filmmakers using Poland to tell stories like Steven Spielberg and his Academy Award winning film, *Schindler’s List*.<sup>18</sup> Visiting Poland to seek stories of Jewish suffering causes strife among Poles who interpret

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<sup>17</sup> Erica Lehrer. *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) 25.

<sup>18</sup> “Visitors to the Auschwitz Site,” State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, [http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=82&Itemid=173&lang=en](http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82&Itemid=173&lang=en).

history, particularly the outcome of World War II, as part of a forward looking, Catholic-Pole-specific, nationalist narrative.

Historical spots of mass atrocity in Poland in particular are today often spots for major tourist traffic. This is a source of anxiety for many Poles, especially Polish leaders trying to establish their nation on the world stage in a light beyond what happened to Polish Jews in World War II. An example of an institution encouraging Americans to visit Poland specifically through the lens of touring Holocaust sites comes from a Global Volunteers: Poland brochure published in 1994, the same year Steven Spielberg released *Schindler's List*. Erica Lehrer writes of the brochure, noting the complexities of developing an understanding of a nation through the lens of its darkest histories:

Of course, such attractions may well generate interest in history as much as obscuring or distorting it, but it was still a discomfiting suggestion about the relative value of historical traces and their re-presentation as entertainment to receive a brochure from a U.S. volunteer organization describing the area around Krakow “as a beautifully quaint region which is only a half-hour drive from Auschwitz, the site of the Academy Award winning movie *Schindler's List* [sic].<sup>19</sup>

Lehrer is writing of the tension between American and Polish interpretations of the Holocaust. Both groups use the Holocaust to make entirely different associations about the geographic space of Poland: Americans see it as a site of atrocities whereas Poland sees it as a land where their nation overcame the yoke of wartime occupation. We arrive here because Americans understand the Holocaust by way of cultural markers such as *Schindler's List* which places Poland at the center of narratives of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. It is important to note that this brochure invokes both the suffering associated with *Schindler's List* and touring Auschwitz as a draw enticing enough to encourage someone to travel to Poland in the first place. Notably, the Academy Award winning film is not a documentary, as criticism discussed later in this chapter

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<sup>19</sup> Lehrer. *Jewish Poland Revisited*, 33. [Reference to 1994 brochure from Global Volunteers Poland]

argues, yet Steven Spielberg made clear that his goal in creating the film was “to educate high school students about the Holocaust, which ‘had been treated as just a footnote in so many textbooks or not mentioned at all.’”<sup>20</sup> It is in large part through *Schindler’s List* that American Jews (and Americans in general) come to associate the Holocaust with Poland—the entire movie was deliberately filmed on location in Poland and children of survivors stood as background actors—and view the Holocaust through a narrative of Jewish suffering. And, as I will later argue, this notion of American Jewish tourism to Poland did not begin in the 1990s upon the movie’s release. In 1969, the American Jewish Congress—an organization formed to represent American Jewish interests at the 1918 Peace Conference and established permanently as “one of the most influential agencies in defending the interests of the American Jewish community”<sup>21</sup> — published a guidebook and accompanying advertisement to encourage American Jews to visit places such as Poland. The book asked travelers to pay respect to the dead and to reflect, through good-willed actions while abroad and at home, on their experiences when they returned home because “the antonym for Auschwitz is justice—justice here, freedom now—not for ourselves alone but for every man who is our brother.”<sup>22</sup> While the guidebook had tips and reasoning for visiting countries all across Europe, the American Jewish Congress placed special focus on Poland, writing, “All of Poland is a Jewish memorial.”<sup>23</sup> This key archival find shows that as early as the 1960s, American Jewish institutions engaged the broader community in asking questions such as, “Why should the vacationer go out of his way to visit the places where

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 163.

<sup>21</sup> Adina Anflik, Marvin Rusinek, Vital Zajka, and Eric Fritzler. “Historical Note” in “Guide to the Records of the American Jewish Congress, undated, 1916-2006,” American Jewish Historical Society.

<sup>22</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance* advertisement, 1993-4; American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 646; folder 18; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>23</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 7.

European Jewry suffered its catastrophe?”<sup>24</sup> The connotation of the question in context was that such an action should not be much of a question at all but rather an accepted, newfound pilgrimage instead.

Tension arises because the Holocaust and the Second World War more broadly, to Poles, are narratives of Polish suffering that took place in the geographic space of Nazi occupied Poland and Soviet-occupied Poland in 1939-41 and after 1944 when Poles did not have independence under outside regimes. To have bus after bus of American Jews searching for, as the American Jewish Congress asked, “mass graves [of Jews] covered by a single stone,” takes away from the distinctly Polish stories of suffering that the nation wants acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> One way to understand the different interpretations of the past is to understand the different ways in which contemporaries experienced the war. Historian Tony Judt argues that there has to be a balance between noting that “In retrospect, ‘Auschwitz’ is the most important thing to know about World War Two,” and noting that is not how Europeans understood the situation at the time. In other words, it is not how contemporaries experienced the war. The French, Judt argues, accepted Vichy not because “it pleased them to live under a regime that persecuted Jews, but because Pétainist rule allowed the French to continue leading their lives in an illusion of security and normality and with minimum disruption.”<sup>26</sup> This is significant because Judt acknowledges the role of the Holocaust and narratives of Jewish suffering in contemporary interpretations of World War II, but places it as one of many distressing aspects of the war to Europeans living in wartime. Tension exists because some nations, like Germany, have responded to contemporary interpretations of the genocide of Jews as central to World War II with memorials, laws banning

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<sup>24</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance* advertisement, 1993-4; American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 646; folder 18; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>25</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



Holocaust denial, museums, and education efforts. In nations such as Poland, the immense atrocities of World War II indeed take center stage in national memory, *but*, “It is just that Jews were not part of the story.”<sup>27</sup>

It is vital to note that “Pole” and “Jew” are considered two separate groups of people. When the word “Pole” is used in this chapter, it denotes a non-Jewish (likely Catholic) Pole. Jewish Poles will always be classified as such. By the time of the Second World War, Jews had lived in Poland for centuries but were classified as Other as they still are today. In his book *The Jews in Polish Culture*, originally published in Polish in 1961, Aleksander Hertz—an eminent Polish social scientist who researched and published heavily in the 1930s—writes, “The facts of ‘separateness,’ ‘alienness,’ total ‘isolation,’ and social, political, and cultural ‘autonomy’ were always accepted as self-evident by both Jews and Poles.”<sup>28</sup> This started as religious divides between Judaism and Catholicism, the longstanding predominant religion in Poland. It was not until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that Catholic doctrine explicitly stated that all Jews were not to blame for the killing of Jesus Christ—“...what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today”—a longstanding point of anti-Judaic sentiment and tension within the Catholic community.<sup>29</sup> In the twentieth century, Hertz argues, “Generally speaking, [it] could be reduced to a shared belief in the constitutional separateness of Jews, their basic alienness in any human milieu and under all conditions. Racism became the most extreme form those rationalizations took.”<sup>30</sup> Such separateness continued well into the twentieth century and remains today in the twenty-first century. Through the war and into the present day, scholarship on the Second World War

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<sup>27</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 822.

<sup>28</sup> Aleksander Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 13. [Translated by Czesław Miłosz. Originally published as *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej* by Instytut Literacki, Paris, 1961.]

<sup>29</sup> Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* accessed November 18, 2018, [Vatican.va](http://Vatican.va), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, 15.

(especially, though not exclusively, coming out of Poland) differentiates between the three million Polish Jews and three million Catholic Poles killed in wartime.

Later scholarship from Joanna Beata Michlic, published decades after the fall of Soviet rule in Poland in 1989, examines the continuation of the separateness of Jews and Poles. In her book *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*, she writes,

The presence of anti-Jewish idioms in Polish cultural and political life [can] be seen as one of the chief markers of the modern Polish ethno-nationalism that began in the late nineteenth century as a manifestation of the wider European phenomenon of exclusivist ethno-linguistic or integral nationalism.<sup>31</sup>

Polish nationalism is specific to the suffering of non-Jewish Poles—a phenomenon historian Tony Judt drew attention to—under occupation, and has been that way throughout Polish histories of occupation going back centuries.

The literature discussed in this chapter provides a look into the histories told over time of the tension and competing narratives between the suffering of Poles and Jews. This accounts for the ways the Holocaust defines Polish national identity to outsiders, and the implications of Americans entering a historical understanding of Poland through works of popular culture that have been largely Americanized—which is to say sometimes simplified and often (mis)directing all blame on Poles and the Polish nation. The direct results are the work on behalf of Poles to revise, rewrite, and ultimately *right* history.

The Holocaust is a historical event that has understandably captured the attention of the world and the United States in particular. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an institution opened in 1993 and dedicated to the murder of European Jewry, came about 11 years before the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian and 23 years prior to the

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<sup>31</sup> Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006): 3.

opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>32</sup> The Holocaust is not an American historical event in that Americans were not the direct victims or perpetrators, nor did the events take place on American soil. Even so, the Holocaust has been and remains at the center of American cultural life. The Holocaust achieved this spot largely in part through its rise in popular culture which is significant because it results in depictions of the Holocaust that may not be historically accurate but are instead adapted for a particular audience.

Consider Steven Spielberg's 1993 Academy Award winning film *Schindler's List*, a work of popular culture which profoundly shaped the Holocaust in American minds. Spielberg's choice to film as much as he could in Poland, an aspect heavily publicized leading up to the movie's release, and the casting of many children of Holocaust survivors or Polish witnesses as actors, created a "deliberate blurring of the borders between cinema and history."<sup>33</sup> *Schindler's List* left such a mark that Michael André Bernstein, a scholar of English, defines the influence of popular culture on the American perception of the Holocaust as "The Schindler's List Effect"—a phenomenon on full display in the travel brochure which Erica Lehrer pointed to earlier in this chapter. The Schindler's List Effect underlies the tension between American and Polish interpretations of the Holocaust and the Polish past. Gary Weissman, scholar of English, argued that through *Schindler's List*, Spielberg turned Poland into a country, a people, and a story entirely composed of suffering. Notably, the suffering is associated with Jews at the hands of Poles—not, as is important to Poles, the suffering of Poles at the hands of Germany, the Soviet Union, and the rest of the world that "betrayed them" and left them behind the Iron Curtain

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<sup>32</sup> Smithsonian Institution Chronology, 2008, Online, Institutional History Division, Smithsonian Institution Archives. [Note: This document was not recent enough to include the 2016 opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.]

<sup>33</sup> Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 169.

following the war.<sup>34</sup> This is the argument of Polish historian Halik Kochanski in her 2012 book, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*.

Borrowing from a movie review that said, “Poland is a special effect which gives the movie a distinct chill,” Gary Weissman shows that *Schindler’s List* irrevocably altered Poland’s reputation among the 25 million Americans who saw the film in theaters, and the 65 million Americans who saw the film on network television.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the ways in which the Holocaust is presented to Americans and placed within the nation’s consciousness puts a story of Jewish suffering and redemption by a German man in a Polish context. This is not how Poland remembers or teaches about the Second World War. The Polish narrative is not about Jewish suffering—it is about Polish suffering at the hands of occupiers as a repeated occurrence in Polish history. Poland contends with outsiders coming into contact with their nation through the lens of the Holocaust and a history of occupation dating back to the eighteenth century meaning the nation only became able to write its own history as of 1989. While Poland saw independence between 1918-1939, and though a country does not require independence to write national histories, post-1989 is when Polish history confronted the Second World War years—the time in which revisionist history came to the forefront of the Polish nationalist project.

Historians trace Polish history back to the founding of the Kingdom of Poland in 1025 which later transformed into the larger Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569. Starting in the 1770s, neighbors Prussia, Russia, and Austria partitioned the Commonwealth three separate times. It was only in 1918 that Poland saw restoration as an independent country, but soon after, in 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union split Poland between them (as well as a small bit to Slovakia). Poland remained part of the Soviet Bloc until 1989 when it held free elections, and in

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<sup>34</sup> Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), xxv.

<sup>35</sup> Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 170/165.

1998 initiated talks to join the European Union. Poland's long history of foreign occupation and rule informs contemporary sensitivities on the part of Poles and the government. Citizens and government officials alike reject blame for the actions of their occupiers, and this is particularly acute in relation to Holocaust memory.

In his book *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, historian Michael C. Steinlauf argues that Poles were witnesses to the Holocaust unlike any other group for three reasons: their closeness to the killing meant that they witnessed but did not necessarily comprehend the widespread, systemized nature of the killing<sup>36</sup>; in addition to their role as witnesses, non-Jewish Poles were victims, “the most relentlessly tormented national group in Hitler's Europe”<sup>37</sup>; and witnessing ranged from benefiting economically, to actively resisting, to risking one's life to hide or save Jews, to simply trying to stay alive in wartime.<sup>38</sup> Steinlauf takes these factors and analyzes how, combined with the Polish historical context of particular post-war moments, each component of Polish witnessing of the Holocaust demonstrates that non-Jewish Poles as a people and Poland as a nation have never quite found *the* response or *the* way to remember the horrors they saw; it is still a work in progress. This is particularly apparent in (and later because of) the post-war years from 1945 until 1989 when Poland was part of the Eastern Bloc and Joseph Stalin deemed their “prehistory” irrelevant. Steinlauf provides the understanding that for Poles, grappling with memories and interpretations of what it meant to be a key witness to the Holocaust was, as of his book's publication in 1997, an entirely recent undertaking. It is no coincidence this is around the same time that Spielberg's *Schindler's List*

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<sup>36</sup> Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, x. For more information on Poles as “the most relentlessly tormented national group in Hitler's Europe,” see Hanik Kochanski's *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. She details aspects such as Poles being the only Europeans whose entire families faced death for assisting Jews in any way, as well as the Nazi ideology stigmatizing Poles as inferior.

<sup>38</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 30/31.

was released in theaters and later on primetime network television in the United States, as it was in the 1990s that films, books, and exhibits such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum all began to make space for themselves within American culture. As a result, it is in this time period, the 1990s, that just as Poles began to confront their own history, they were also confronted with loaded interpretations of their history by Americans.

Polish sociologist Sławomir Kapralski, in his contribution to *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, agrees with and builds on Steinlauf's argument. Kapralski uses the periodization that Steinlauf created to mark when and how Jews and the Holocaust were differently remembered or forgotten in Poland.<sup>39</sup> Kapralski, writing in 2017, contends that it was in part through popular culture—for example, Claude Lanzmann's 1985 award-winning, widely translated film, *Shoah*—that Poles began to be inundated with interpretations of Holocaust memory that contributed to a “progressing threshold of shame.”<sup>40</sup> Poles learned that the interpretations of the Holocaust coming out of America—or, in the case of *Shoah*, were highly lauded and popular in America—and spreading around the world saw Poles as “passive witnesses of the Holocaust who did not express compassion and often seemed to be pleased with Nazi persecutions of the Jews.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Kapralski argues that texts such as Jan T. Gross's widely read *Neighbors* (2001), about an incident in the Polish town of Jedwabne in which Poles committed a massacre against their Jewish neighbors, led the world to see Poles not merely as witnesses but also as perpetrators which directly contradicted how Poles themselves remembered the war years.<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting—and this thesis later explores this in-depth—that Poles had been engaged in confronting questions about their roles in World War II since the late 1980s

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<sup>39</sup> Sławomir Kapralski, “Jews and the Holocaust in Poland's Memoryscapes: An Inquiry Into Transcultural Amnesia,” in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, edited by Tea Sindbæk Anderson and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 170-197. Leiden: Brill, 2017, 173

<sup>40</sup> Kapralski, *Twentieth Century in European Memory*, 186.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Kapralski, *Twentieth Century in European Memory*, 187.

with Jan Błóński's controversial article for a popular Polish weekly, "The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto." The intensity of such national conversations picked up after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 when Poland had a newfound place on the international stage. It is after this time period that we began to see quantitative research on Polish attitudes toward such issues.

In "Polish Remembrance of World War II," Barbara Szacka presents her research project in which she took studies conducted by the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Political Studies to assess the Polish population's contemporary interpretations of the past at three time points: 1965, 1988, and 2003. These years are significant because 1965 was in the midst of Soviet control over Poland; 1988 saw widespread workers strikes that forced the Polish government to negotiate with the Polish Solidarity (anti-communism) movement a year later;<sup>43</sup> and in 2003 Poland signed a treaty to join the European Union the following year.<sup>44</sup> Szacka argues that the data throughout these years shows "a widespread belief among Poles that World War II events constituted sources of pride."<sup>45</sup> Szacka shows that feelings of shame were rare until 2003 when an increased number of respondents frequently mentioned that "behavior towards Jews (failure to help, indifference, participation in action against Jews)" produced feelings of shame. Her argument is significant because it poses the question of *what changed?* She speculates on outside influences that might have caused a general shift from feelings of pride to shame, including newfound widespread knowledge of accounts such as Jan Gross's book on the Jedwabne massacre.<sup>46</sup> I believe Jan Gross's work is indeed a part of the cause of this shift, as his controversial work on Jewish suffering at the hands of anti-Semitic Poles during and after World War II reverberated throughout Poland and resulted in serious legal confrontations for

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<sup>43</sup> Mark Kramer, "The Rise and Fall of Solidarity," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Bruni, "10 Countries Sign to Join European Union," *The New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Szacka, "Polish Remembrance of World War II," *The International Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2006/2007): 17.

<sup>46</sup> Szacka, "Polish Remembrance of World War II," 18.

him by the Polish government when he was investigated for possibly breaking laws against defaming Poland.<sup>47</sup> So too did the success of *Schindler's List*, the immense popularity of books such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* or Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and attention to the Holocaust reverberate throughout in Poland—in particular for the fact that these cultural works all reckon in some way with the events that transpired in the concentration camps on occupied Polish soil. Indeed, it is no coincidence that parts of American popular culture—be it Jan Gross's book *Neighbors* (published in both American academic and popular presses), Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, bestselling books and plays such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*—spread around the world and could have influenced Poles. But why was American popular culture concerned with the Holocaust?

Historian Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* provides the historical framework necessary for understanding the uptick in American culture's attention to the Holocaust in the years following World War II. Novick argues that "America's wartime response to the Holocaust is what a great deal of later Holocaust discourse in the United States has been about," most notably the "...obliviousness of American gentiles," the "indifference...by a timid and self-absorbed American Jewry," and "the abandonment of the Jews by the Roosevelt administration,"<sup>48</sup> all of which "...made the United States a passive accomplice in the crime."<sup>49</sup> Novick also reasons in a way similar to Tony Judt's argument on behalf of Polish witnesses, writing that Americans learned about the Holocaust "in the midst of a global war that eventually killed between fifty and sixty million people," meaning it was "the overall course of the war that

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<sup>47</sup> Craig Whitlock, "A Scholar's Legal Peril in Poland," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, January 18, 2008, and Alex Duval Smith, "Polish move to strip Holocaust expert of award sparks protests," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Novick is referring here to what he views as 3 "counts of indictment of the United States for complicity in the Holocaust: a restrictive prewar immigration policy...the failure to pursue various prospects for threats, reprisals, or negotiations to alleviate the situation of Jews within Hitler's grasp...and...the unwillingness of the U.S. Air Force to bomb either rail lines leading to Auschwitz or the killing facilities themselves" (48-49).

<sup>49</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 19.



dominated the minds of Americans in the early forties.”<sup>50</sup> Novick’s argument reaches into the realm of American (and particularly American Jewish) guilt, processing, and the widespread efforts to remember, largely through the lens of popular culture. Guilt in particular is a phenomenon that I hypothesize rose out of scholarship such as the work of Deborah Lipstadt in her 1986 book, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1939-1945* which was the first comprehensive study of what the American press—and indirectly the American population—knew, reported on, and left out of their newspapers during the Second World War. A review in the *New York Times*, the same newspaper Lipstadt had heavily criticized for its wartime reporting, sums it up best with their headline: “The Unthinkable Was Unprintable.”<sup>51</sup> Historical perspective provides, of course, the knowledge that the unthinkable was indeed taking place.

But the Holocaust did not become a mainstay of American Jewish life and identity—the 73% of American Jews who say remembering the Holocaust in an essential part of being Jewish—through guilt alone. Novick reasons that the organized American Jewish community had reason to be concerned by the 1960s that the continuity of American Jewish life was in trouble. He draws from a 1964 cover story in *Look* magazine titled “The Vanishing American Jew” and the finding that “by the late sixties more than 40 percent of young Jewish men... were marrying gentiles.”<sup>52</sup> Novick argues the response to these communal worries could be summed up by an address Rabbi Joachim Prinz delivered to the American Jewish Congress in which he said “that young Jews’ unwillingness to consider ‘Jewish identification and solidarity,’ their ‘indifference in matters Jewish,’ was largely attributed to their ignorance of the European catastrophe.”<sup>53</sup> Encountering narratives from the Holocaust was then pushed into the

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<sup>50</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Arnold Beichman, “The Unthinkable Was Unprintable,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 1985.

<sup>52</sup> Novick, 185.

<sup>53</sup> Novick, 187.

mainstream American Jewish community, and later, as we will see, into mainstream American culture as well.

Hilene Flanzbaum extends Peter Novick's argument regarding the presence of the Holocaust in American life in her article, "The Americanization of the Holocaust." The Americanization of the Holocaust is a process by which the Holocaust moved from the margins to the center of American life, which Flanzbaum reasons is a direct, simultaneous response to and shaping factor of the American approach to Holocaust memory. "...The American responsibility to remember bears a distinctive national character," she writes, "Not only did the American Jewish community—the largest and wealthiest in the world —feel a moral imperative to remember and educate, it did so in the face of special challenges," which she defines to include popular taste, media hype, and democratic optimism.<sup>54</sup> The Americanization of the Holocaust increased over time, be it through the radio broadcast of the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, the NBC "Holocaust" mini-series in 1978, the release of *Schindler's List* in 1993, or the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in the same year.<sup>55</sup>

What Novick's work gets at and Flanzbaum's builds on is this notion of the Holocaust as doing something to bind American Jewry together, whether through guilt or building an identity around a concept of ensuring together that an event of great importance and sorrow was never forgotten. Yet not all scholars agree with Novick or Flanzbaum. Most notably, historian Hasia Diner argued in her 2009 book *We Remember With Reverence and Love* that Novick's historical study passes over the immediate post-war years in favor of the post-1960s explosion of the Holocaust in Jewish life and popular culture. Diner argues that the years 1945 through 1962 were indeed among the most formative in understanding "the ways in which a group of women and

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<sup>54</sup> Hilene Flanzbaum, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1, no. 1 (1999): 94.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

men, the Jews of the United States, went about the process of shaping, from the ground up, a memorial culture.”<sup>56</sup> While Diner makes a compelling case throughout her book, Novick’s focus on the rise and expansion of the Holocaust in popular culture (both in and beyond America) is interconnected with Polish understanding and memory in a way that Diner’s argument is not, as her interpretations are specific to American Jews within the United States. Novick’s interest is in what the Holocaust did for American Jews while Diner’s interest is in what American Jews did for the Holocaust. My project is more interested in what the Holocaust—a specific portrayal of the Holocaust, we will soon see—did for American Jews and what they then did for and to Polish consciousness with these encounters.

For an understanding of the implications of American historical interpretations of Poland through the lens of the Holocaust in popular culture, we must look to Polish scholarship. Robert Cherry, an economist at Brooklyn College who writes also on anti-Polish biases in the United States, and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, a Polish anthropologist based at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, edited a collection of scholarship called *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future*. A primary chapter in this book, written by Polish historian Mieczysław B. Biskupski, argues that, in particular, “the genre of Holocaust cinema has become noteworthy for its neglect of the Polish context of the issue and its aggressive hostility toward Poland and the Poles.”<sup>57</sup> We must pause to ask: to whom is this neglect noteworthy? Biskupski continues, writing, “Despite the dramatic circumstances of Poland’s involvement in the war, Hollywood chose to ignore Poland, dedicating a mere three films substantially to that country’s plight, far fewer than to quiescent Czechoslovakia, collaborationist France, or insignificant Norway.”<sup>58</sup> As

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<sup>56</sup> Hasia Diner, *We Remember With Love and Reverence* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 9.

<sup>57</sup> Mieczysław B. Biskupski, “Poland and the Poles in the Cinematic Portrayal of the Holocaust,” in *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future*, edited by Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 27.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrated by the pointed adjectives, Biskupski's argument and writing is emotional and impassioned, and must be interpreted accordingly. He demonstrates that Poles feel the narratives of their suffering are left out of the international conversation in favor of Jewish suffering in films such as *Schindler's List* or *Sophie's Choice*, which Biskupski provides as examples. Historian Tony Judt's argument bears repeating here: It is not that Poles are not thinking or remembering World War II—they are—"It's just that Jews are not part of the story."<sup>59</sup> Americans understand the Holocaust in Poland through a lens of Jewish suffering, while Poles see it only through their own suffering.

In Poland, to be Jewish and to be Polish are two separate identities. We know this from scholarship dating from the 1960s and on, and we know it from primary sources. Yekhiel Kirshnbaum, a Polish Jew who lived near Warsaw from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until he moved to Israel in 1968, contributed a piece called "The City Without Jews" to a memorial book of Polish Jewish experiences in wartime. During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, he recounts, he learned that the city council of his town had accumulated clothes, bedding, and other necessities that Germans left upon fleeing—much of those items, of course, originally belonging to the town's Jews. The mayor refused to give the Jews their belonging back, saying it would have to be proven that the items indeed belonged to the Jewish individuals, and Kirshnbaum writes, "This made me terribly angry. I understood that no one would help us, that even in the new Poland, a wall of alienation stood between us and our neighbors."<sup>60</sup> To identify as Polish versus Jewish as completely separate is why, for example, Cherry and Orla-Bukowska's book is titled *Poles and Jews*. Polish Jews do not receive mention, and although Jews were citizens of Poland, Polish scholarship consistently differentiates between the deaths of 3 million Poles in World War II and

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<sup>59</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 822.

<sup>60</sup> Yekhiel Kirshnbaum, "The City Without Jews." *Writing in Witness: A Holocaust Reader*. Eric J. Sundquist, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 389.

the deaths of 3 million (Polish) Jews. The problematic implications arise in what Polish scholarship and national historical narratives deliberately leave out: suffering of Jews at the hands of Poles.

As a result, it is essential to know that the following historiographies are highly controversial, provocative, and contested by the current Polish government. The work of Jan T. Gross in *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* as well as Jan Grabowski's book, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* led to the historians being threatened with prosecution,<sup>61</sup> stripping of their national honors,<sup>62</sup> and national Polish publicity campaigns to delegitimize the scholars and their work.<sup>63</sup> All of this is explored in depth in later chapters. In *Neighbors*, Jan Gross presents for the first time the unpopular work of combining the histories of Poles and Jews in wartime to show that Poles inflicted suffering upon Jews without being made to do so by the Nazis. He uses primary source testimony to paint a picture of the massacre against Jews in the village of Jedwabne in 1941, and writes to overturn the "standard historiography" which he argues "posits that there are two separate wartime histories" pertaining separately to the Jews and all other citizens living in a country under Nazi occupation.<sup>64</sup> Gross's ultimate question, and the most unpopular, is: "How can the wiping out of one-third of its urban population [Jews] be anything other than a central issue of Poland's modern history?"<sup>65</sup> This question unseats the traditional Polish narratives that Polish suffering is completely separate from Jewish suffering and that Jewish suffering is

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<sup>61</sup> Patrick Manning, President, American Historical Association letter to Polish President Andrzej Duda, Nov. 14, 2016. "Letter of Concern to Polish Government regarding Treatment of Historian Jan Gross."

<sup>62</sup> Alex Duval Smith, "Polish move to strip Holocaust expert of award sparks protests," *The Guardian*, Feb. 13, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> "Grabowski Case" *Polish League Against Defamation*, 2017. <http://www.anti-defamation.pl/plad/grabowski-case/>

<sup>64</sup> Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002 and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xviii.

<sup>65</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, xix.

separate from Polish history, and it falls more in line with the narratives presented by American popular culture—namely cinematic presentations of the Holocaust.

Jan Grabowski's book focuses exclusively on *Judenjagden*—Jew hunts—which took place “at the margins of the Holocaust,” as he describes it, in places far from killing centers like Auschwitz or urban centers like Warsaw.<sup>66</sup> These Jew hunts, whose victims numbered in the 200,000s, were typically undertaken by German officers<sup>67</sup>. The questions that Grabowski answers involve “how exactly the Germans knew where to look for the Jews, and [uncovering] the circumstances surrounding the detection and death of unfortunate refugees hidden in the villages and forests of the Polish countryside.”<sup>68</sup> Grabowski's evidence and conclusions put Poles at the center of actions involving betrayal and murder of Jews, and like the findings of Jan Gross, implicate Poles in contributing to the suffering of Polish Jews. This historiography does not fit in with the narratives of Poland—and the work of scholars such as Mieczysław B. Biskupski arguing the prevalence of anti-Polish biases in representations of the Holocaust—in their postwar remembrance.

As the remainder of this thesis will argue and demonstrate, the issue arises when Poland actively works to discount and delegitimize scholarship critical of wartime actions of Poles in relation to the Holocaust. While Poland writes and engages in a revisionist history of its past, it is pushing stories of Jewish suffering out of the picture while American narratives furiously work to make Jewish suffering the *whole* picture. We can see a push and pull between narratives, and ultimately understand that there is no easy dichotomy in Poland or the United States—then or today—between the Jewish past and present, as Erica Lehrer's account of the Jewish performer in Kraków recounted.

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<sup>66</sup> Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German Occupied Poland*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***“The antonym for Auschwitz is justice”<sup>69</sup>: American Jews Encounter Poland***

I was a high school senior a month away from graduation when I first visited Poland. I attended a Jewish day school with the capstone student experience of a month-long trip abroad: a week in Poland followed by three weeks in Israel. It was modeled after March of the Living, a trip for Jewish teenagers around the world (though Americans and Canadians make up most of the numbers) to visit Poland and Israel over Holocaust Remembrance Day and subsequently Israeli Independence Day. The trip brings along Holocaust survivors, too, and everyone marches together from Auschwitz I to Birkenau, the famed concentration camp complex, in an emotional event, a cry signaling *we’re still here*. In embarking on my school trip, I knew almost nothing about Poland except for thinking about it in terms of where the Holocaust happened. I was more excited at the prospect of my first time traveling overseas than for anything I might encounter on the trip. I knew about the Holocaust because I had visited Holocaust museums across the country—from D.C. to L.A.—and taken a class on it in my senior year. I knew to distinguish between the *Gestapo* and the *Einsatzgruppen*; I had heard multiple survivors speak; and when I was thirteen and had a *bat mitzvah*, a Jewish coming of age ceremony, my synagogue gave me the name of Fani Volf, a young girl who died in Auschwitz before she reached age 13, to read aloud at my ceremony. My experience brought to life the origins of what Peter Novick illuminated in remembering and teaching about the Holocaust as a tool for Jewish continuity in the United States. But I hadn’t encountered Poland, not really, not beyond knowing it was where the most well-known camps existed.

I do not remember a lot about that month-long trip but I do distinctly recall being so disturbed during my time in Poland by the “facts” our (American-Israeli) guide gave us. We

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<sup>69</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 3.

visited Majdanek, for example, a concentration camp near Lublin, and he insisted that it “could be up and running in 24 to 48 hours.” Notice the apartment complexes surrounding the camp, he told us, and take this image with you. He wanted us to come away with a mental picture of Poles sitting in their apartments during wartime, ambivalent to the mass murder of Jews taking place just outside their windows. His statement implied Polish complicity, awareness, and complete disregard for Jews during World War II. I was skeptical of this—the apartments did not look to me like they had been standing in the 1940s—and felt there was simply no way that could be the full story. I took the image he instilled of the still-standing concentration camp surrounded by apartments with me for sure, though perhaps not in the way he intended.

This information delivered by the guide was deeply problematic, emotionally manipulative, and just plain false. Over coffee this past January with a friend writing a master’s thesis on March of the Living’s approach to Poland, he recounted trying to suppress laughter when multiple trip leaders told him in interviews that same fact, the 24-48 hours quip, which they always drive home to their groups. “They seem to be implying that the Poles would *do that*,” he exclaimed. Anthropologist Erica Lehrer, who led a March of the Living delegation as part of her fieldwork in the early 2000s and is an authoritative scholar on Jewish mission trips to Poland, described touring Majdanek and hearing the same sentiment from her guide. This is of particular significance, she argues. “Since Germany is rarely mentioned in the context of these trips, presumably it is the local Poles who are envisioned as the camp’s potential new operators.”<sup>70</sup> These anecdotes demonstrate the extent to which Jewish visitors, youth in particular, have been conditioned to think about Poland as land of death, a place filled with decidedly unfriendly and untrustworthy citizens and a population who sat in their apartments literally watching Jews go up in flames. What is not mentioned? The housing surrounding

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<sup>70</sup> Erica Lehrer. *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) 70.



Majdanek is Soviet-era block housing that did not exist in the 1940s. Poles never operated the camps—they were often also imprisoned there—while Germans did. Yet there are no Jewish mission trips to Germany; American Jewish teenagers are sent to visit Auschwitz, not Dachau. Israel, in fact, has sent all eleventh-grade students on a week-long history trip to Poland since 1988.<sup>71</sup>

This chapter explores the historical moments that have shaped the ways American Jews encounter Poland. Doing so allows us to explore what Polish authorities have to respond to in writing—and why they place such emphasis on *righting* international understandings of—their national history especially since they came out from behind the Iron Curtain in 1989. This chapter first looks at tourism to and encounters with Poland through an American Jewish lens. Starting in 1969 when the American Jewish Congress published a guidebook to visiting Jewish memorials across Europe with particular attention to Poland, American Jews learned to see Poland through a lens of Jewish destruction. In 1993, when Steven Spielberg released his Academy Award winning film *Schindler's List* to much success and fanfare, the stakes intensified regarding visitors wanting to see Holocaust sites in Poland. This expanded the audience for dark imagery and narratives vilifying Poland far beyond the American Jewish community. Among the sites in Poland that saw an uptick in visitors post-*Schindler* was the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial Museum—the site of the former concentration camp. Tourism to Auschwitz has a long, storied history that is vital to understanding visitors encounters with Poland. Together, these studies allow us to analyze what exactly is at stake for Poland and their international reputation as they work to *write and right* their history on an international stage.

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<sup>71</sup> Dan Soen, Nitza Davidovich, “Israeli Youth Pilgrimages to Poland: Rationale and Polemics,” *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts, and Audiovisual Communication*, No. 17-18, 12.

## I. The Beginnings of American Jewish Holocaust Tourism

In 1969, long before March of the Living or day school trips to Poland and Israel, the American Jewish Congress urged the American Jewish community to visit Poland and Europe more broadly to pay respect to the masses of Jews killed in the Holocaust. The guidebook built upon knowledge that American Jews already held about the events of World War II and the Holocaust, and it responded to the organized community's chatter at the time about using Holocaust memory and education as a way to bind together an increasingly more casually associated community and tradition. What was new was the prospect of deliberately traveling to visit the sites of mass atrocity. Before and during the war, American newspapers printed detailed, gruesome accounts and photographs of the rising anti-Semitism and ultimately genocide that took place in Europe at the hands of the Nazis as it happened. Readers of papers as central as *The New York Times* and as far off as the smaller *Portland Press Herald* and *Waterville Sentinel* saw repeated wartime coverage relating to Jewish persecution in the 1930s and 1940s. A front-page headline in Maine's *Portland Press Herald* on November 23, 1938—following *Kristallnacht* but before the outbreak of World War II—included the phrase “Exterminate Jews By ‘Fire and Sword,’” and the sub-headline explained, “Nazi leaders called into secret session: Plan Revealed To Hound Jewish People, Make Criminals Out Of Them And Then Liquidate Them.”<sup>72</sup> This shows that Americans received news with serious implications. Words such as “exterminate” and “liquidate” are grave, urgent, and carry heavy weight. Indeed, it was before, during, and after the war that newspapers in the United States ran stories on the specific situation of the Jews facing systematic persecution in Europe. *Portland Press Herald* readers knew of extreme losses to the Jewish community as early as 1944 when the paper ran an Associated Press piece in December

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<sup>72</sup> Edward W. Beattie, Jr., [United Press Staff Correspondent] “Nazi Plan to Exterminate Jews By ‘Fire And Sword,’” *Portland Press Herald*, Nov. 23, 1938. [See also the Nov. 28, 1938 issue of the *New York Times*. The front-page headline read, “President Confers With Ambassadors On Nazi Situation.”]

with the headline, “World Jewish War Losses 6,000,000,” and a line noting that was approximately one-third of the pre-war Jewish population.<sup>73</sup>

Nor did the Holocaust receive little attention in the decades after the war. It is not as though the American Jewish community was not aware of or not thinking or talking about the Holocaust; there was no sort of silent period of pause in the years between 1945 and 1969 when the first war-related, American Jewish community-oriented Holocaust tourism guidebook came on the market. This is an important argument made by Hasia Diner in her book *We Remember With Reverence And Love*. Diner draws on archival material from Jewish summer camps in the 1950s including an essay by a high school student named Sharon Feinman in her camp literary magazine. Feinman wrote of the “master race,” of the “murdered six million Jews,” and yet had hope for her future.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Diner shows that “books and articles, sermons and literary works, liturgies and letters to public officials written by so many of the adults who ran Jewish institutions, staffed the organizations, officiated at synagogues, and published Jewish newspapers and magazines...blended a deeply felt anguish over this very particular Jewish tragedy with concerns for humanity writ large.”<sup>75</sup> American Jews in this time were not silent; they were not oblivious; and although they were not traveling to Poland or to Europe with the direct mission of memorializing Jewish victims of World War II, those perished Jews certainly held a place in their community’s consciousness.

The American Jewish Congress in particular was in a unique position to leverage what was on the minds of American Jews at any given moment in time and put it toward actionable goals to sustain the community’s identity and place within the international social order. It is not a coincidence that the American Jewish Congress published a guidebook in 1969, a short

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<sup>73</sup> Associated Press, “World Jewish War Losses 6,000,000,” *Portland Press Herald*, Dec. 4 1944.

<sup>74</sup> Hasia Diner, *We Remember With Love and Reverence* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 2.

<sup>75</sup> Hasia Diner, *We Remember With Love and Reverence* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 2.

pamphlet-style book encouraging visitation to Holocaust sites across Europe entitled, *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*. In a paper advertisement for the guide, the American Jewish Congress borrowed directly from the guide's introduction in insinuating that American Jewish vacationers should go out of their way to visit the places where European Jewry suffered catastrophe by "recall[ing] the particulars of the Holocaust by his presence at the actual sites."<sup>76</sup>

To publish the guidebook in 1969 was, I argue, in part a move they made as a result of the 1967 Six-Day War; without that war and its imprint on the American Jewish consciousness, American Jewry likely would not have been keen to pick up and travel specifically to Holocaust memorial sites as early as the 1960s. In June 1967, Israel went to war against neighbors Egypt, Jordan, and Syria by launching preemptive strikes against the Egyptian air force after reports confirmed a military threat to Israel. The days were intense and terrifying for American Jews who watched from afar and worried that they might see the second mass slaughter of international Jewry in their lifetimes. The war lasted from June 5<sup>th</sup> until the 10<sup>th</sup>, and on the third day *The New York Times* reported that a luncheon hosted by the United Jewish Appeal saw "\$15 million pledged in 15 minutes."<sup>77</sup> The war touched the hearts of American Jews, and they showed it with their actions and their dollars. There are many arguments to explain why the Six-Day War saw such support from Jews in the United States, and some of those arguments involve most centrally the events of the Holocaust two decades prior. In his book *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America*, Michael L. Morgan explains that American Jewry felt acute guilt over not acting during the Holocaust.<sup>78</sup> As the Six Day War took place, "...there

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Farnsworth Fowle, "Funds For Israel Pouring In Here," *The New York Times*, June 8, 1967.

<sup>78</sup> Some American Jews indeed acted to save as many European Jews as they could during the Holocaust, but there was little they could do. Still, Morgan writes here of the perception of guilt which certainly existed.

appeared a way of working through that evil and that darkness and transcending it, in a sense.”<sup>79</sup> Transcending the darkness led to the Holocaust becoming “central to Jewish identity for many American Jews and, to a certain degree, to American Jewry as a whole,” he argues. “Surely the War contributed to this efflorescence; at least it enabled feelings to be expressed and coped with that had, prior to 1967, disposed of Auschwitz by restricting it to a dark, secluded corner of American Jewish consciousness.”<sup>80</sup> The Six Day War and its effects on American Jews likely led to the publication of the Holocaust memorial guidebook as a way to deepen Jewish communal identity and unity through acting on feelings of guilt by channeling support for an easily identifiable cause.

The guidebook, *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, is a document imploring shared identity building through understanding and memory, not vengeance. The purpose of the visits to the sites listed was—importantly—not to take “a vow of hate toward the murderers [and not to hold] a feeling of shame that a crime of such enormity should have taken place in our own time.”<sup>81</sup> The American Jewish Congress wanted American Jews to know that the Nazi and the world’s disdain for Jews was not limited to European Jewry—that American Jews, too, stood to be victims. The Nazi crusade against Jews was ultimately a universal one and though American Jews were not Holocaust victims, they were not outside of Nazi ideology and imagination.<sup>82</sup> The guidebook invoked gruesome imagery from the Holocaust of what European Jews went through, noting “that [any and all Jews] own children were led into the gas chamber; that his own teeth were

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<sup>79</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 87.

<sup>80</sup> Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America*, 89.

<sup>81</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 2.

<sup>82</sup> For more on the how the Nazis imagined a world without Jews, see Alon Confino’s *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). His beginning point is “January 30, 1933: the construction of a Germany, and later a world, without Jews” (9).

picked over for the gold he had in his mouth.”<sup>83</sup> While the stated purpose of the guidebook was not explicitly to vilify Poland as the geographic space in which the most well-known camps and ghettos resided, the wording and features on the pages of monuments and memorials in Poland are stark. A line in the guidebook such as “All of Poland is a Jewish memorial”<sup>84</sup> is the direct antithesis to the way Poland classified—and into the contemporary moment, wants to classify—itsself on the international stage.

There is a line from the book’s introduction and advertisement copy that encapsulates the main idea of the publication: “But it is not enough to weep for the dead. There is work to be done for the living. The antonym for Auschwitz is justice—justice here, freedom now—not for ourselves alone but for every man who is our brother.”<sup>85</sup> In seeking justice, the American Jewish Congress is not referring to any sort of vengeance against Poland or any Germans, not asking for reparations, and not interested in rehashing the past. Instead, they are invoking reacting to the dark past by working to make a brighter future for other oppressed groups. In this particular case, in 1969, they are asking readers to become involved or build upon existing involvement in the Civil Rights movements sweeping the United States given the period’s ties between the Jewish and African-American communities. The paragraph before this call to action refers to weeping for and crying with other oppressed groups, particularly those persecuted under Adolf Hitler such as Gypsies. A non-comprehensive list of ideas to expand the scope of what it means to weep for and fight for justice with various groups is offered: “The answer must be clear: we weep for the Gypsies, for the American Indian, for the black man in South Africa and the Negro sharecropper

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 7.

<sup>85</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance* advertisement, 1993-4; American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 646; folder 18; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

in America and every person whose dignity as a human being has been denied him.”<sup>86</sup> The overall message and takeaway of the guidebook is not one of vilifying any person, or blaming any group, or boycotting any place; rather, it is a forward-looking, uplifting, call to action to make the world a better place. Scholar Atina Grossmann, in a piece tracing American Jewish political discourse of the 1960s, quoted Bob Ross, then a student at University of Michigan, who explained “he had originally joined the picket line boycotting a segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter because ‘It was the Jewish thing. If you’re silent, you’re complicit.’”<sup>87</sup> In other words: American Jews were not concerned with vilifying Poles or Poland as a land of death, not concerned with casting shame or invoking guilt on any group other than themselves. Silence and standing by in the face of injustice would never again be an option.

A post-it note on the advertisement for the guidebook, found in an archival folder categorized by the years 1993-4, says, “Note – this guide is no longer available. 8/14/93.”<sup>88</sup> Perhaps the guidebook was taken off of the market because it was outdated, or perhaps the American Jewish Congress knew that phrases equating Poland in its entirety with a land of Jewish ashes would not improve relations with Poland as they emerged fresh out of the confines of Soviet rule. Nothing in the archive provided reasoning for what might have been a sudden halt to the guidebook sales. Regardless, American Jewish tourism to Poland did not stop in 1993 when the guidebook went off the market—in fact, it picked up in intensity following the release that year of Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*.

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<sup>86</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance: A Guide to Memorials and Monuments Honoring the Six Million*, American Jewish Congress Public Relations Department, 1969, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Atina Grossmann, “How the Ghosts of the Holocaust Haunted the 1960s, But Quietly,” *Tablet Magazine*, Sept. 18, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> *In Everlasting Remembrance* advertisement, 1993-4; American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 646; folder 18; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

## II. Entering Mainstream America: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*

I underestimated the renown of *Schindler's List* until I spent the summer working in the heart of Kraków's Jewish quarter, the neighborhood in which it was filmed. Of all there is to see in Kraków—and there is a *lot*—tourists want to experience and bear witness to the origins of a film that clearly left a mark on most of them. Oskar Schindler's factory is a tourist attraction so popular that in working the reception desk at the Galicia Jewish Museum I was asked multiple times per shift by visitors to direct them to the factory. Could they still get tickets? (You typically have to reserve tickets in advance.) How far were we located from the museum? (Just across the river.) The factory-turned-museum is so overrun with visitors that a fellow summer expat to Kraków encouraged me *not* to take my visiting family there, reasoning, "it's just not worth it."

Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* was a smashing success financially. Following Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who went to Kraków to profit from the war, the film tells the story of Schindler staffing his metal pot factory with Jews. He originally hired Jews because they were the cheapest labor he could find. Yet Schindler becomes concerned for them as persecution of Jews picks up in intensity, and the film is a story of the redemption of a German man. Schindler becomes a hero when he saves more than 1,000 Jews from their death. The movie brought in \$321 million worldwide—"an unheard-of sum for a movie about the Holocaust"<sup>89</sup>—and within two months of its U.S. release it sold 7.5 million tickets. Historian Tim Cole notes that "US President Bill Clinton urged people to watch *Schindler's List*, as did TV chat show host Oprah Winfrey who told viewers that watching the movie had made her 'a better person.'"<sup>90</sup> It is not every day that a sitting president urges a nation to watch a film, nor is it common for a

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<sup>89</sup> Frank Manchel, "A Reel Witness: Steven Spielberg's Representation of the Holocaust in *Schindler's List*," *Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 1 (1995): 84.

<sup>90</sup> Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler, How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999): 73.



world-famous talk show host to declare herself a changed person thanks to a long movie. NBC played *Schindler's List*, a film running over three hours, in a primetime showing without commercial breaks in 1997 and 65 million people are estimated to have viewed it on television alone.<sup>91</sup> “For Germany and the UK,” wrote scholars Christoph Classen and Kirsten Wachter, “possibly one-third and one-quarter of the populations, respectively, saw the movie.”<sup>92</sup> This was not just any movie that the masses were watching. *Schindler's List* director Spielberg classified the movie not as entertainment but as “a document” of history.<sup>93</sup> Cole argued the film occupied dangerous territory where viewers were likely to interpret it as a primary source.<sup>94</sup> And herein lies the problem: *Schindler's List* came across in many ways as a documentary when it was not.

“For the most part, the film tells its story in isolation, as if nothing else was happening at the time in Poland,” Andrew Nagorski, a former Warsaw bureau chief for *Newsweek* wrote. “Poland, even Kraków outside the ghetto, barely exists. Uninformed viewers, which include many young Americans, may emerge from the film with no idea that the war was aimed at more than the destruction of the Jews or that there were other victims of Nazi atrocities.”<sup>95</sup> He uses his article to detail the nuances in the history of Polish-Jewish relations that Spielberg could have used in his film, highlighting especially Polish Jewish and Catholic relations. The images Spielberg uses of Polish Catholics “seem to suggest that the only roles Poles played was to applaud Nazi terror.”<sup>96</sup> *Schindler's List*, Nagorski points out, was not entirely a Spielberg original: the film adapted Thomas Keneally's book of historical fiction, *Schindler's Ark*. And the book indeed highlighted the nuances of the Polish Jewish-Catholic relationships, describing “the

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<sup>91</sup> Christoph Classen and Kirsten Wachter, “Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* Among History, Memory, and Popular Culture,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (2009): 78.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Nagorski, “Schindler's List and the Polish Question,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 4 (1994): 156.

<sup>94</sup> Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 75.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Nagorski, “Schindler's List and the Polish Question,” 156.

important role of a Polish Catholic who risked his life by acting as a liaison between Jews inside and outside the ghetto.”<sup>97</sup> There is no Polish Catholic acting as a liaison between the Jews on the inside and the world on the outside of the ghetto *Schindler’s List*. This is to say, Spielberg made a distinct choice to make a film of the redemption of a German man on Polish soil without coloring the narrative on the Polish side of things.

One of Spielberg’s primary goals in making *Schindler’s List*, Gary Weissman notes in his scholarship on the movie, “was to educate high school students about the Holocaust, which ‘had been treated as just a footnote in so many textbooks or not mentioned at all.’”<sup>98</sup> Spielberg’s choice to film nearly the entire film in black and white added to the movie’s presentation as more documentary than “based on a true story.” Film critics explained:

For Spielberg himself, filming in monochrome was clearly a matter of authenticity...part of the realist style of his desire for history, for a film that would be “true” to the record. For an audience it works ambiguously. In one way, it distances: it marks this particular past as different, as elsewhere, as “another country.” But in another way, it reduces distance: our images of the Holocaust are constructed in black and white, whether from newsreel or photographs, and the film resonates with this existing archive of representation; it places us immediately into that place of memory.<sup>99</sup>

Black and white movies, Spielberg explained in a *Los Angeles Times* cover story profiling the film’s release, did not typically sell well to television networks or on video cassette. He had to push—hard—to make the movie this way. “...I pleaded my case and said this movie would be a Band-Aid in color, and more of a tourniquet in black-and-white,” Spielberg told the *L.A. Times*.<sup>100</sup> This evidence shows that Spielberg made the movie with a purpose, a mission—something more in mind than simply making money. Yet, according to scholars Geoff Eley and

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004): 163.

<sup>99</sup> Geoff Eley and Atina Grossmann, “Watching Schindler’s List: Not the Last Word,” *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 47.

<sup>100</sup> “Spielberg Tackles Hell on Earth” cover page, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Atina Grossmann, “the success of historical movies does not necessarily correlate with empirical historical truth.”<sup>101</sup> Historical truth looks different to all parties involved in the case of World War II in Poland, a phenomenon explored in-depth in the following chapter, but this assertion is still an important one. The success of *Schindler’s List* is so great in magnitude that it is all too easy to forget that the narratives and images moviegoers take away from it are precisely the narratives and images that Poland, thrust into the movie’s spotlight, wants to avoid.

About twenty minutes in to *Schindler’s List* is a disturbing scene. Jews pack up their belongings under German supervision and walk down a street and into the Kraków Ghetto where they are forced to reside. As the (Polish) Jews make their way, they walk through (Catholic) Poles who have lined the streets and are screaming, throwing dirt, hitting them. The camera pans to one young, blonde, Polish girl in particular who cries out multiple times with anger and hatred evident in her voice, “Goodbye, Jews!”<sup>102</sup> This scene clues the viewer in to an underlying possible interpretation of the movie: Poles hate Jews, so much so that even a young girl has learned to hate them. And yet as the film rolls on, it becomes clear that to be Polish and to be Jewish are not completely separate identities. The camera moves inside a ghetto apartment, following a Jewish family as they move into a now-shared apartment already occupied by another family. “*Dzień dobry*,” the Jews say to one another as they file into the tiny room. *Dzień dobry* is not Yiddish—an insular language of Eastern European Jewry—but Polish, the common secular vernacular, for “good day.” Fleeting Polish is heard elsewhere among Jews in the movie, too, when a photographer is putting people together for a photo and is heard saying, “*prozę*,” the Polish word for “please.”<sup>103</sup> We saw in the previous chapter how Polish historiography separates Polish and Jewish identities, so it is worth noting that Spielberg’s movie conflates the two. In

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<sup>101</sup> Eley and Grossman, “Watching Schindler’s List,” *New German Critique*, 79.

<sup>102</sup> *Schindler’s List*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (1993: Universal Studios).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

doing so, the movie portrays the non-Jewish Poles as the ones full of hate toward Jews. It is the German businessman, Oskar Schindler, who saves the day by saving Jews from their surroundings in (Nazi-occupied) Poland. The film does not shy away, however, from the atrocious actions of German soldiers. There is no question that there are no redeeming moments for the Nazis yet non-Jewish Poles do not see redemption either. As Nagorski notes in his *Foreign Affairs* article, more Poles than any other nationality have been awarded the title Righteous Among the Nations from Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust authority, and that only accounts for documented cases of Poles risking or giving their life to save the life of Jews since a requirement to be bestowed the title is that one risked or gave their life to save a Jew.<sup>104</sup> This is particularly significant because "in occupied Western Europe and even within Germany itself, people who hid Jews faced possible arrest; only in Poland did those people—and even their entire families—who sheltered Jews face death."<sup>105</sup> Yet *Schindler's List* and the publicity surrounding the movie repeatedly focused on the story of German redemption while leaving Poles in the role of victimizer and Poland in the role of land of ashes.

### III. Selling *Schindler's List* to the Public

Among the news clippings saved in the Richard A. Cohen Associates archival folders, the firm who oversaw the publicity for the 1993 *Schindler's List* release, was a cover story for the weekend edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. Written by David Gritten and titled "SPIELBERG TACKLES HELL ON EARTH: On location in Kraków, Poland, with Steven Spielberg as he makes 'Schindler's List,'" it featured a quote from the film's Polish cinematographer. In introducing Janusz Kaminski, Gritten qualifies him, noting Kaminski "has lived in America since 1980 [and] says flatly he now dislikes his native land, which he thinks has an 'inferiority complex.'

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<sup>104</sup> Nagorski, "Schindler's List and the Polish Question," 154.

<sup>105</sup> Nagorski, "Schindler's List and the Polish Question," 157.

[Kaminski says,] ‘The fact is, some Poles were traitors and sent Jews to their deaths [a]nd Poland is still an anti-Semitic place.’”<sup>106</sup> In addition to this biting remark on Polish national perceptions of themselves, the article also features a quote from a Polish consultant on *Schindler’s List*, Franciszek Palowski, who explained that the book upon which the movie was based caused tension in Poland. “The book destroys the cliché that existed in Poland that there were no good Germans. There’s also a jealousy here, I think. Poles take the view that no one ever wrote a book about Poles who saved Jews.”<sup>107</sup> There are in fact books written about Poles who saved Jews. Nechama Tec, a prominent child survivor of the Holocaust who became a notable scholar, published *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* in 1986 with Oxford University Press. A *New York Times* review noted, “What is unusual about this book is that it both emphasizes Polish rescue efforts and reveals a ubiquitous hostility toward Jews.”<sup>108</sup> There simply is no way to address Polish-Jewish relations without discussion of anti-Semitism, and it is peculiar a book harnessing both generous Polish actions in wartime and the hostility some Poles showed toward Jews did not seem to qualify as a book that simply shared stories of Poles who saved Jews.

This *Los Angeles Times* piece had another element unflattering to Poland: encounters the film’s cast and crew had with something that “alarmed and surprised [them]” which was the anti-Semitism that some hostile Poles expressed toward them while filming. Writer David Gritten describes three specific incidents relayed to him by the cast and crew. The first took place when actor Ralph Fiennes, who played SS commander Amon Goeth of Płaszów, the concentration camp featured in the film, was in costume on the set. “A woman came up to me,” he recounted “and said in Polish that the Germans were wonderful people, and that they didn’t kill anyone

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<sup>106</sup> “Schindler” story page 70, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, “Poles Who Saved Jews.” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1986.

who didn't deserve it."<sup>109</sup> Another time, a woman walked onto the set and when members of the crew went to stop her, she yelled, "Who cares about the [expletive] Jews?"<sup>110</sup> The third and final incident, classified as the "worst of all," happened when "an elderly Polish man approached one of the cast's Israeli actors in his hotel bar, and asked if he was Jewish. When he was told yes, the old man insultingly drew his finger across his throat, then pulled his fist up behind his neck to indicate a noose. Ben Kingsley [British actor playing Itzhak Stern]...saw the incident, leaped at the man, and a scuffle ensued."<sup>111</sup> These anecdotes in this article are significant because they contribute to the narrative of Poland as a place and Poles as a people as wholly intertwined with anti-Semitism, with revisionist feelings about the Second World War, and without sympathy for the Jewish experience in Poland. These incidents are in line with narratives of Jewish suffering but not in line with narratives of Polish suffering in the war. This attention to one narrative over the other is what the controversies surrounding the history of the Second World War in Poland are all about, and they play out not just in historiographies but in popular newspaper articles and films, too.

An interesting connection and tension to tease out—though not necessarily a correlation—is that an American Jewish public relations firm handled the publicity for *Schindler's List*. The Richard A. Cohen Associates, a former public relations firm whose records are now housed at the American Jewish Historical Society, arranged and oversaw the on-location media coverage for the film such as the *Los Angeles Times* piece. Media coverage for the film was not limited to California. A publicity calendar for the film shows that they spent time publicizing the movie all around the world—notes on articles in the *Los Angeles Times* sat

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<sup>109</sup> "Schindler" story page 70, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> "Schindler" story page 70, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

alongside notes marking the days *Schindler's List* stories would run in *Der Spiegel*, a German newspaper, as well as the BBC, news outlets in Croatia and Australia, and the French *L'Express*.<sup>112</sup> An annotated list of media outlets interested in covering the filming and release of *Schindler's List* shows that the Richard Cohen Associates turned down the vast majority of inquiries, including twelve out of thirteen requests from media outlets across Poland. To turn down so many Polish outlets demonstrates that Poles were not the target audience of the film and they were decidedly not relevant to any efforts to publicize the film—my own interpretation being the filmmakers were not interested in Polish pushback on their work. Spielberg gave one interview to Cracow TV until the public relations firm's associate realized the channel “had hidden cameras at many locations that drove production crazy,” she wrote. “[They] were the bane of my existence while in Krakow.”<sup>113</sup> This addendum helps demonstrate that it was not a machine or an algorithm deciding on who could cover the movie's presence in Poland or what story they could tell—it was people. People who became annoyed, who had favorites, who were, in all likelihood, completely wrapped up in the emotional world of the film, the scenes of Polish hatred, the arc of German redemption. People attuned to anti-Semitism and not anti-Polonism. The unanswerable question is *why* exactly Spielberg included no Polish suffering or redemption in the film, why one German man saw hero status, why Poles and Poland were nothing more than the backdrop of the film, why so much of the nuance of Thomas Keneally's Booker Prize winning novel *Schindler's Ark* was lost.

Through the successful efforts of the Richard A. Cohen Associates publicity and the film's striking effect on its viewers, *Schindler's List* put Kraków, Poland, on the map—and on the travel radar—for many American Jews. A *Jerusalem Post* article from November 1994 titled,

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<sup>112</sup> *Schindler's List*: publicity days, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>113</sup> Publicity Report by Anne Marie Stein, Records of Richard Cohen Associates, Inc. (1979-2000); I-314; box 9; folder 61; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

“The City ‘Schindler’s List’ made famous,” classified Kraków as “Poland’s most beautiful city” and the home of an “ancient Main Market Square [that] is one of the most charming in Europe.”<sup>114</sup> Yet the reason for Kraków’s tourism business, the article explained, is because “[Schindler’s List] put Cracow on the world tourism map, bringing in its wake waves of visitors who tour the city on Oskar Schindler’s trail, along the movie’s location sites: Schindler’s factory; the Jewish Ghetto; the Stara Boznica Synagogue, whose entire congregation was shot by the Nazis; and the local Gestapo headquarters.”<sup>115</sup> To have a critical mass of tourists entering into Poland through Holocaust tourism, to trace the steps of a redeemed German man, to enter into a country under the guise of Jewish death as opposed to the centuries of thriving Jewish life—all of this is to understand Poland as a nation and a people in the ways they are not looking to be understood. Andrew Nagorski noted that since World War II, the debate over Polish history “can be reduced to two (simplified) opposing views.” Polish Catholics, on one hand, draw attention to:

Poland’s long record as a land of refuge for Jews, beginning with the great migrations of Jews fleeing persecution in other parts of Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as a land of tolerance, where Jews were sometimes granted special privileges by Polish monarchs and nobles. Jews, on the other hand, often emphasized the steady growth of anti-Semitism in Polish society, especially when Poland reemerged as an independent state between the world wars.<sup>116</sup>

The tension between narratives surrounding Jewish life in Poland is exacerbated when tourists and visitors to Poland enter into learning about the nation’s history through the lens of tours that claim to follow in the steps of, for instance, Oskar Schindler. For all the attention that *Schindler’s List* brought to Poland—and it brought a lot—it brought the precise kind of attention that Poland did not want: attention to Poland as a land of Jewish death.

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<sup>114</sup> “The city ‘Schindler’s List’ made famous,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 18, 1994.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Nagorski, “Schindler’s List and the Polish Question,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 4 (1994): 152-153.



An example of the Polish national focus on Poland as a land of Jewish refuge prior to the twentieth century is in the official notes of an Israeli delegation's visit to Poland. Then Minister of Finance of Israel, Shimon Peres, visited Poland in the last week of November 1989. A confidential memo put together after his visit and delivered to the American Jewish Congress—the organization representing American Jewish interests all over the world—stated, “Great emphasis was placed on the common history and what [the Poles] often referred to as ‘A thousand years of coexistence’ as opposed to the bitter memories of the more recent past.”<sup>117</sup> “Coexistence” in particular implies difference and tolerance, not necessarily commonalities or acceptance. To have such a line included in a report from an international Jewish community to the American Jewish Congress illuminates the obviousness with which Polish attention is dedicated to reading particular moments in Polish-Jewish history through a revisionist lens, a lens separating out instances of suffering of Jews at the hands of Poles. This tactic of stressing the importance of focusing on particular moments in history is a phenomenon we will see increase and intensify with time in the following chapter.

#### **IV. The Schindler's Narrative in Polish Hands**

We have seen the ways in which the story of *Schindler's List*, as an example of a Holocaust narrative in American Jewish hands, invokes an image of Jewish suffering and death in present day Poland. But how does that story change when the story of Oskar Schindler is in Polish hands? In 2010, the factory Schindler and his Jewish employees used in Kraków opened to the public as a museum. The Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, a municipal organization and museum dating back to the nineteenth century, funded and facilitated the conversion from wartime factory to contemporary museum. For context, in December 1945, the City National

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<sup>117</sup> Peres Visit to Poland, American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 634; folder 8; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Council passed a proposition stating that the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków was an “independent and self-managed city branch, its aim...gathering and proper protection of all historical materials related to life and culture of Kraków since the first ages of the city’s history till the current time, as well as development of science, research, and education activities.”<sup>118</sup> It is significant, then, that the present day Schindler’s Enamel Factory Museum features prominently the stories not necessarily of Polish Jewish suffering but of the suffering of all of Kraków while under occupation in the Second World War. All of Kraków did not suffer or escape suffering at the site of Schindler’s enamel factory: Jews did. Why not set up a museum about the suffering of all of Kraków at a site such as the former Gestapo headquarters?

A glance at the TripAdvisor page, an extremely popular website for tourists to leave reviews of sites and hotels around the world, for Schindler’s Enamel Factory Museum features many positive reviews, to be expected of a multi-million-dollar, contemporary museum project, as well as more peculiar reviews. Visitors from all over the world noted that they expected the museum to focus heavily, if not exclusively, on the stories of Oskar Schindler and the Jews he saved. Yet that is not the focus of the museum’s exhibit. “An informative museum but not what I was expecting,”<sup>119</sup> one review began, while another explained, “Like most people have said it was more about the war and how it effected [sic] Poland than the factory but very interesting...”<sup>120</sup> There exists a disconnect between what tourists to the Schindler’s Factory Museum expect to see when they visit the museum and what they actually see. Given the enormous popularity of *Schindler’s List*, it makes sense that visitors would associate

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<sup>118</sup> “Mission and History,” Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, <https://www.mhk.pl/mission-and-history>.

<sup>119</sup> E17\_KJ, London, United Kingdom. January 12, 2019. [https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g274772-d647063-r645468317-Muzeum\\_Historyczne\\_Miasta\\_Krakowa\\_Fabryka\\_Emalia\\_Oskara\\_Schindlera-Krakow\\_Lesser\\_.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g274772-d647063-r645468317-Muzeum_Historyczne_Miasta_Krakowa_Fabryka_Emalia_Oskara_Schindlera-Krakow_Lesser_.html).

<sup>120</sup> Rosie I. Whitehead, Sheffield, United Kingdom, January 11, 2019. [https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g274772-d647063-r645285113-Muzeum\\_Historyczne\\_Miasta\\_Krakowa\\_Fabryka\\_Emalia\\_Oskara\\_Schindlera-Krakow\\_Lesser\\_.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g274772-d647063-r645285113-Muzeum_Historyczne_Miasta_Krakowa_Fabryka_Emalia_Oskara_Schindlera-Krakow_Lesser_.html)

contemporary Kraków with the film itself and presume they would see, at least in part, artifacts and narratives from the film's deceptively historical scenes on display in the Schindler's Factory Museum. But this is part of the problem Poland sees itself as facing: visitors come thinking too much about Jewish suffering on Polish soil and about a redeemed German man, even hero. For Poland, Poles suffered immensely at the hands of Germany and so to focus international attention to a single case of German redemption on Polish soil is completely problematic.

One of the main historians behind the creation of the museum and its exhibitions, Dr. Edyta Gawron of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, told the *New York Times*, “[Schindler's Factory is] a museum of the occupation that shows what the wartime experience was like in Krakow and shows the context of all the stories – of Jews in Krakow, of Oskar Schindler, of Cracovians, of the German occupiers.”<sup>121</sup> She is right: the museum does talk about all stories, including those belonging to Jews. It is just that Polish Jews are not the primary focus, as the exhibit title—*Kraków Under Nazi Occupation, 1939-1945*—indicates. This exhibit is an example of a wartime, Holocaust-related narrative over which Poland has near total control. A municipal museum organized and runs the Factory Museum, and it is a chance for Poland to counter the narratives put forth by Steven Spielberg and *Schindler's List*. And this is not the only example of a Polish institution trying to correct the record after the runaway success of *Schindler's List* and the runaway anti-Polish narratives it instilled in those who watched it.

## V. Auschwitz Then, Auschwitz Now

When tourists visit Poland—regardless of whether or not they are Jewish, have encountered *Schindler's List*, or have learned about the Holocaust—a major attraction is Auschwitz. Since 2016, over two million people have visited Auschwitz each year. It is difficult

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<sup>121</sup> Ruth Ellen Gruber, “New Museum Tells Krakow's Stories of World War II,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2010.

to walk far in Kraków without encountering some sort of advertisement for any number of tour operators who run buses from the city of Kraków to the town of Oświęcim where Auschwitz is located about an hour away. With the exceptions of the years 1999-2003, attendance to Auschwitz steadily increased beginning in 1993 when *Schindler's List* came out. Correlation does not equal causation, of course, but there is evidence to suggest that even if people were not actually entering into the grounds of Auschwitz, they were talking about it all across the world.

In 1996, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum released its first ever bulletin newsletter in Polish and English. It might seem standard for any sort of national museum with a wide following to send out some sort of periodical with updates, notes, and the like, but the Auschwitz bulletin came about for a peculiar reason at a peculiar time. Part of the introduction on the first page reads:

The mass media in Poland and abroad has devoted considerable attention to these problems, and to others associated with...the number of victims at the camp [for example]. Information on the history of the Auschwitz concentration camp and the current problems of the Museum has not always been accurate or sufficiently comprehensive, nor have journalists always turned to the most competent authorities. There have been instances of conscious distortion or even downright mendacity. Apart from these, the museum has also frequently failed to supply current information. In order to avoid such difficulties, the International Council of the Museum has proposed the publication of a special bulletin for the Polish and international media, and for official and scholarly institutions.<sup>122</sup>

It is significant that in 1996 an official Polish institution called out the international media for its inaccurate reporting or what it deems “conscious distortion or even downright mendacity.” This shows that Polish authorities were aware that all eyes were on Auschwitz—and, along with that, on the stories of Jewish suffering that took place there. The problem about the number of victims at Auschwitz mentioned in the introductory text refers to an ongoing dispute about the number of Jews who died at Auschwitz in relation to the number of Poles (meant here as Polish Catholics and *not* Polish Jews) who died at Auschwitz. The official Auschwitz death toll is approximately

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<sup>122</sup> Waclaw Długoborski, “Museum and Memorial Auschwitz-Birkenau Oświęcim, Poland,” bulletin no. 1, Aug-Sept. 1996. Leo Baeck Institute, The Center for Jewish History, C125. (unsure how to cite this)

1.1 million deaths, 90% of those deaths being Jewish deaths—though not only Polish Jews.<sup>123</sup>

The best estimates of demographics within the camp according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which utilizes up-to-date scholarship, are that approximately 1,095,00 Jews were deported to Auschwitz and 960,000 died and 140,000-150,000 non-Jewish Poles were deported to Auschwitz and 74,000 died.<sup>124</sup>

A 1992 article in the *Chicago Tribune* provides an important account of the issue of death tolls at Auschwitz. The article quotes Miles Lerner, the then-chairman of international relations for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council—the council responsible for the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—who said, “The numbers that we dealt with before were numbers that were politically motivated.”<sup>125</sup> During the years of communism in Poland, the politically motivated myth circulated that over one million non-Jewish Poles were killed in Auschwitz. Historian Tim Cole puts it this way: “The competing interests of the Soviet liberators and the Polish survivors of Auschwitz led to tension over whose story would be told—and whose story would be suppressed.”<sup>126</sup> As a result, it was a big deal when, in 1992, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum updated their exhibits to reflect the true numbers and the fact that Auschwitz was primarily a site of Jewish death.<sup>127</sup> All of this matters because it shows the ways that narratives and facts have shifted throughout Polish history—primarily in ways that privileged Polish suffering over Jewish suffering—and when these shifts came to light on the international stage through phenomena such as the effects of *Schindler’s List*, Poland had to respond and *right* the matters.

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<sup>123</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Auschwitz.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz>.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Dan Stetts, “Fixing the Numbers at Auschwitz,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1992.

<sup>126</sup> Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 38.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

Jews have encountered Poland as we know it today in one way or another since they were welcomed with open arms as they fled persecution in the eleventh century. At one point, Poland was home to the world's thriving center of Jewish life: incredible scholarship, music, prayer, and culture emerged from Polish-Jewish communities. As such, it is much too simple for Jews, American Jews in particular, to encounter Poland today only through, say, a March of the Living trip where they are told misleading and manipulative "facts" like that surrounding the legacy of Majdanek without addressing the long, storied, complex histories of Jews in Poland. Likewise, it is too simple to take Spielberg's *Schindler's List* or the City of Kraków's Factory Museum at their face values. Simplicity is perhaps the enemy of history. Histories are complex—particularly when suffering is involved—and it is worth ensuring the stories are told in their fullness. When I think back to the education I received growing up, it's this kind of nuanced, complex look at the past I wish I had. Whether American Jews erasing aspects of history flattering to Poland, or Poland erasing aspects of history regarding Jewish suffering at the hands of Poles, approaching history from a revisionist standpoint is deeply problematic in any manner. A deep exploration of this topic is to where this thesis now turns.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***It Must Be Remembered and It Should Be Stressed: Polish Institutions and the Fight for Historical Truth***

It is the middle of February, and I am in the depths of research and writing for this project. I notice on Facebook that many of my friends and colleagues from the Galicia Jewish Museum this summer are circulating a petition with notes of disdain and worry attached to their posts. The title of the petition immediately catches my eye, as it relates to Dr. Dariusz Stola, a renowned scholar upon whose work this chapter is based. “Keep Prof. Dariusz Stola as the Director of POLIN – Museum of the History of Polish Jews!” the petition reads; within a day of its launch it gathered over 2000 signatures. News had just come out that the Polish Minister of Culture would not renew Dr. Stola’s contract at the end of the month. The Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, is an appointment of the right-wing, nationalist party currently in power: Law and Justice, more commonly known by its Polish acronym PiS. He had been outspoken in his criticism of Dr. Stola’s tenure at the Jewish history museum because of an exhibit Dr. Stola oversaw which drew connections between the 1968 anti-Semitic purge in Poland and the Polish political climate of 2018. Instead of renewing Stola’s contract, Gliński said he would instead open the position up for applications and Dr. Stola could submit one for consideration.<sup>128</sup> Groups and people came to Dr. Stola’s defense, ranging from the Mayor of Warsaw to the Jewish Historical Institute Association, and there has been outrage from the international community deeply aware of and committed to Dr. Stola’s work and integrity.

In reading about the controversy surrounding Dr. Stola and what might become of POLIN—Museum of the History of Polish Jews, by all accounts the world’s premiere museum

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<sup>128</sup> Tomasz Urzykowski, “Minister kultury nie przedłużył kontraktu dyrektorowi Muzeum Polin. Co planuje Gliński?” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Warsaw, Feb. 16, 2019.

dedicated to Polish-Jewish history—<sup>129</sup>the George Orwell quote from *1984* came to mind: *He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.*

At the essence of George Orwell’s eminent novel *1984* is the importance of language in shaping thoughts. Orwell employs various fictional ministries—named using “doublespeak” in which words undermine the meanings typically associated with them—to illustrate the link between language and thought. Prisoners and enemies of the government are tortured in the Ministry of Love, and food is heavily rationed by the Ministry of Plenty. Most relevant to any discussion of history is the Ministry of Truth: home to propaganda creation and oversight of history, education, and news.

It is the Orwellian Ministry of Truth which Dariusz Stola, a widely published and respected historian, professor, and director of the acclaimed POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, invokes in his contribution to *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* titled, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: A Ministry of Memory?” Stola lays out the history of the Institute of National Remembrance (in Polish: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, or IPN). When Poland broke from the Eastern bloc in 1989, a major issue arose: how to interpret the past. In Poland, interpreting the past existed hand in hand with uncovering the past, particularly the communist past. Secret police and state archives were left over from decades of Soviet rule, and Poland needed to take care of them. Stola winds his way through the nearly ten years of bitter, partisan political battles that ensued until late 1998 when the Sejm—the lower Polish house of parliament—voted to pass the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. It took another 18 months before the Sejm “finally appointed IPN president, which was prerequisite for any institution building to start,” and in late 2000, IPN president Leon Kieres

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<sup>129</sup> Rick Lyman, “To Celebrate Its Jewish History, Poland Presents ‘a Museum of Life,’” *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2014. [On a personal note, the POLIN Museum is without a doubt my favorite museum I have ever visited: it is nuanced, thoughtful, complex, breathtaking, and itself worth a ticket to Poland.]



began hiring staff.<sup>130</sup> The legal document of the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance sets the tone for the institution and its work, opening with a section titled, “Bearing in mind,” which contextualizes the following articles and sections. “Bearing in mind: ...the patriotic tradition of the struggle of the Polish people against the occupiers, the Nazism and communism...” the act reads, listing other reasoning for the establishment of the Institute before closing with, “as an expression of our belief that no unlawful action by the state against the citizens can be guarded as classified or left to oblivion – the following shall apply.”<sup>131</sup> From its conception, the IPN was a nationalized entity of the government. In invoking the stories and emotions of a long national history under occupation, the IPN carves out legitimacy for itself as a place, a people, and a purpose that can and will change the status quo of what it has meant and means to remember and be remembered in Poland.

To do so, the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance lays out four main tasks. The first, in Stola’s words, is “to gather, manage, preserve and make accessible the archives of Communist security services.”<sup>132</sup> The IPN took over all archives relating to Poland’s years under totalitarian or communist control—90 kilometers of files in total that had to be moved to a central location.<sup>133</sup> This meant they had to build the infrastructure to house, organize, and store the documents. Stola notes that the mass of files came from a number of institutions with different systems for organizing the documents, so the IPN had to start from scratch in building a state archive. At the time Stola published his chapter in 2012—twelve years since the IPN commenced its work restructuring the files—the files were still in the process of being reorganized. The third main task of the IPN in its founding was to investigate and prosecute

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<sup>130</sup> Dariusz Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: A Ministry of Memory?” in *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* edited by Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman, 45-58. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012, 47.

<sup>131</sup> Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, 1998.

<sup>132</sup> Stola, 49.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

major crimes against the Polish nation or individual Polish citizens ranging from the years 1939-1989; the IPN includes Nazi crimes, communist crimes, crimes against peace or humanity, and war crimes within the scope of their prosecutors.<sup>134</sup> The fourth main task of the IPN is education and research: researching, publishing, and teaching on the years 1939-1989. In its work of archival research, publishing, and organizing conferences and a doctoral summer school, the Public Education Office is the largest organization dedicated to Poland's contemporary history.<sup>135</sup> The activities of the IPN's education and research departments, the institution's largest, are the focus of this chapter. Of particular importance is the higher standing and reach the IPN has compared to any other Polish academic institution. Stola writes, "In Poland, IPN towers above the much poorer academic landscape by its size, budget, number of publications, official status and focus of the media...Its research budget is most likely bigger than all of the other research centers combined."<sup>136</sup> IPN influence is staggering and not without issues. Stola acknowledges threats facing the IPN as of his writing in 2012, the most relevant threat being senior IPN officials responsible for "insufficient neutrality" in all matters relating to party politics or indulging in "highly controversial public statements," as well as public figures purporting and representing right-wing ideology who "tend to exploit certain representations of the past to confront their political competitors."<sup>137</sup>

All of the important contextual information Stola provides about the founding of the IPN sets up his argument: though the institution itself is nationalized, the work of the institution is not out to propagate any sort of national agenda. Stola explains,

In the midst of heated exchanges between [Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)] critics and supporters, such trivial deficiencies as a small reading room, publications of dubious usefulness or impractical computer catalogue pass unnoticed. Thus the secret of IPN this paper may reveal is the following: this is indeed a Ministry of

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<sup>134</sup> Stola, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Stola, 51.

<sup>136</sup> Stola, 55.

<sup>137</sup> Stola, 56.

Memory, but not of the Orwellian type. It is a regular continental European bureaucracy, with usual deficiencies of its kind, and a part of Polish government administration, which is not famous for its effectiveness.<sup>138</sup>

While Stola's reasoning is certainly not unfounded—it took twelve years and counting for institutional staff to carry out their most essential task of organizing archives—it is no longer accurate. Poland's Institute of National Remembrance is a Ministry of Memory and *indeed* it is now of the Orwellian type. In examining three case studies, this chapter will demonstrate how, since 2012, the IPN used language to shape thoughts in order to support a specific revisionist interpretation of history. The history they purport does not hold Poland responsible for anything that took place on Polish soil during World War II, the reasoning being that Poland must be exempt from the responsibility of the actions of its occupiers. This is particularly acute in the first case study, an exploration of the IPN's "Truth About Camps" campaign, as well as in the second case study examining the Polish League Against Defamation—a nongovernmental organization with very strong governmental ties. And, finally, this chapter will analyze the IPN's own publications featuring the writing of Polish history by IPN-employed historians with an eye toward their Orwellian characteristics and the response from American Jewry that followed.

## **I. Truth About Camps**

Open up [www.truthaboutcamps.eu](http://www.truthaboutcamps.eu) in your web browser and you are transported to a dark, eerie page. Barbed wire and electric fences make up the background image and appear to stretch far beyond what the eye can see. A message appears in seven languages: "WARNING! This site contains drastic and graphic material. Are you sure you want to enter?" Choose "yes" and a new page loads: atop the page sits an image of the notorious "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" sign at the entrance to Auschwitz I. Below the German phrase is a menu, highlighted in a deep red, with

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<sup>138</sup> Stola, 54.

page options ranging from “IT BEGAN IN THE THIRD REICH” to “REPRESSION AGAINST POLES” to “HOLOCAUST.” It is not immediately apparent who or what is behind this website until one moves down to the bottom of any page. In the bottom right corner is a small seal and the words “Institute of National Remembrance” which if clicked directs you to the website of Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance. The Truth About Camps website contains various texts, image galleries, and a propaganda video entitled “Words Matter – German Nazi Camps.” What does the Truth About Camps campaign—the website and all contained within it—say about IPN’s work to write Polish history? How does the IPN use the campaign to right what they see as misconceptions of Polish history?

Dr. Sławomir Kalbarczyk, historian and head of the faculty of Polish history until 1945 at the Institute of National Remembrance, wrote the mission statement of the Truth About Camps website. The “OUR MISSION” page opens with the phrase, “In the Name of Historical Truth” and goes on to begin a multi-paragraph mission statement by saying: “The past is an element of the present.”<sup>139</sup> The past matters deeply to Poland, particularly its leaders, and the IPN purports a specific vision of the past. The Truth About Camps website leaves out any mention of the less glamorous parts of Polish history during the Nazi occupation: Polish collaboration, murders of Jews, or taking of Jewish property—tombstones from Jewish cemeteries taken by Poles to pave their walkways as an example. The kind of historical truth being pursued by Poland through the IPN is a one-sided revisionist historical truth. The Polish historical truth is not so much a truth itself as much as it is a response to other historical truths put forward by outsiders: that of previously discussed Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and Poland as a land of suffering, for example, or Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbors* and Poland as a place in which some Poles needed no

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<sup>139</sup> Sławomir Kalbarczyk, “Our mission: In the Name of Historical Truth.” Institute of National Remembrance, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://en.truthaboutcamps.eu/thn/our-mission/15561,Our-mission.html>.

compelling in order to commit brutal mass murder of their Jewish neighbors. Kalbarczyk's mission statement goes on to argue:

The Institute of National Remembrance...whose duty is to disseminate knowledge on Poland's recent history, cannot remain indifferent with regard to the fact that this historically incorrect phrase of "Polish" death or extermination camps, which is so offensive to Poles, reappears in various speeches and publications. Thus, we have created the "German Camps in Poland" website within the framework of our mission. Its [sic] clear message is the historical truth that there were no "Polish" extermination, death, or concentration camps. Those were German camps, for they were established and managed by the Germans, who governed occupied Poland through terror.<sup>140</sup>

In working to right the interpretations of Polish history, the IPN utilizes specific language in order to change thinking. It is the language of "Polish death camp" with which they are concerned because of the implications possible from someone—whether informed on the details of World War II and Poland's occupation by German and Soviet forces or not—hearing the phrase as legitimate in any way. In response to one single phrase, three words in total, Poland created an entire web-based campaign including text, images, and video to combat use of the phrase.

In fact, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum created a software called *Remember: Correcting Memory Errors*.<sup>141</sup> This software, free to download in sixteen languages, is "an add-in for all who write, developed to prevent usage of incorrect phrases: 'Polish death camps' or 'Polish extermination camps.' The tool finds [the] incorrectly used phrase, underlines it and suggests correct replacement."<sup>142</sup> The Polish government's IPN confronts minute everyday word usage as part of their attempt to propagate history as they want it seen and remembered. It is too dangerous for students of history to draw their own conclusions as to what should be remembered and how because, like so much of the darkness in Polish history, it is out of the

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<sup>140</sup> Kalbarczyk, "Our mission: In the Name of Historical Truth."

<sup>141</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum's finances are funded primarily through income generated by the Museum, followed by grants from the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Explained on the "Donate: Finances" page on the Museum's official website.

<sup>142</sup> "Remember: Correcting Memory Errors." *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and Memorial*.

hands of and beyond control of Poles. In turn, Poland utilizes the Truth About Camps website to explicitly state what they deem memorable. The page titled “POLES UNDER GERMAN OCCUPATION” illuminates this most clearly. This section discusses how Poles “adopted various stances during the German occupation” ranging from resistance fighter to forced loyalty to collaboration and treason. While the IPN is forthcoming about the wide range of roles Poles played under German occupation, it is the following line where our attention must go: “But it should be stressed that the negative postures had only an individual dimension.”<sup>143</sup> This piece uses the phrase “should be stressed” four times over the course of the page, all to implore the reader to focus on the individual. “Hence, it should be stressed even more that in fact a whole lot of anonymous, common people who listened to their conscience and decided to risk their lives and help the Jews played a paramount role in rescuing the Jews,” reads one line. Immediately following reads, “It should be stressed again that the Poles constitute the most numerous group (over 6,000) awarded with the Righteous among the Nations Medal.”<sup>144</sup> Over and over, Poland—through its historical mouthpiece, the Institute of National Remembrance—utilizes language to shape thoughts. Stressing factors such as individual choice regarding collaboration with the Nazis negates the important histories of collaborators as members of the Polish nation. Stressing the number of Poles who received the Righteous Among the Nations honor is important, but so too would be stressing the number of Poles who turned a blind eye to deportations of Jews to and from ghettos. Emphasis on individual identities as separate from the Polish nation only takes place when an individual committed a crime, yet when one completed a righteous act they are heralded as indicative of the entire nation. This implication—that the entire Polish nation is innocent—is as false as any claim that the Polish nation suffered or the Polish nation is

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<sup>143</sup> Jan Daniluk, “Poles Under German Occupation.” Institute of National Remembrance, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://en.truthaboutcamps.eu/thn/our-mission/15561,Our-mission.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

responsible for anything in World War II. As we know, nations don't suffer, nations don't kill, nations don't maintain innocence: people do.

To implore people ranging from journalists to civilians to use accurate terminology to discuss German death camps in occupied Poland is reasonable. History thrives on accuracy, and it is important that actions (and their consequences) are assigned to their rightful owners. Where the IPN's "Truth About Camps" campaign deviates from the reasonable and enters into dangerous territory is where they use Orwellian tactics to employ a single-issue focus to obscure or detract from their broader historical revisionism efforts. "Truth About Camps" invokes sympathy with statements like the following from the Washington D.C. Polish Embassy's YouTube video titled "Words Matter." This video is featured on the "Truth About Camps" website, and it uses an authoritative narrator set to somber music to deliver the following message: "Using misleading language obscures the tragedy of millions of Holocaust victims. It's *not* just semantics. It's a matter of historical integrity and accuracy. Words matter. Remember to use the correct terms: German Nazi Camps."<sup>145</sup> Words do matter, particularly when they are being used simultaneously as revisionist efforts to separate instances of Polish collaboration with Nazis by indicating statements ensuring it is "stressed" that those who did not act like victims were not true Poles. Words matter when developing a computer software to detect perceived misuse of wording, labeling it a "memory error" in trying to change not just how contemporaries understand accurate terminology but changing the very ways in which they remember overarching narrative of the past, too.

The Polish impetus for historical truth as rendered through historical revisionism is exceedingly apparent in the quest by a nongovernmental organization with strong governmental ties, The Polish League Against Defamation, in their crusade against prominent historian Jan

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<sup>145</sup> PolishEmbassyDC, "Words Matter," YouTube Video, 1:43, January 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDpTcXQ8Na0>.

Grabowski upon the release of his book *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German Occupied Poland*. In countering the narrative purported by the IPN and its counterparts, Grabowski became the target of institutionalized intimidation and intellectual assault.

## II. The Polish League Against Defamation and Its Crusade Against Jan Grabowski

A key thread throughout the revisions undertaken by Polish entities such as IPN or the Polish League Against Defamation involves keeping the Second World War a historical event of Polish—and not Jewish—suffering. It is for this reason that scholarship on the suffering of Jews at the hands of Poles is threatening to the Polish ethno-nationalism described by Joanna Beata Michlic in chapter two, of which “anti-Jewish idioms in Polish cultural and political life [can] be seen as one of the chief markers.”<sup>146</sup> This nationalism relies on increasingly revisionist histories of Poland under occupation in World War II in order to place Poles in the brightest light possible. It is to an example of revising and righting history by embarking on serious, deep-rooted efforts to delegitimize academic scholarship that this chapter now turns.

On June 7, 2017, the Polish League Against Defamation released a statement signed by 134 scholars declaring that Polish-Canadian historian Jan Grabowski’s book *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* was, to echo their tone, garbage. The book uses immaculately researched archival material from German, Polish, and Jewish archives, interviews with witnesses and survivors, and prominent secondary sources to reconstruct German police searches for Jews with the help of Poles in wartime.<sup>147</sup> The scholars urged Jan Grabowski to “stop slandering the Polish nation and adopt an attitude befitting a researcher, which is to

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<sup>146</sup> Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006): 3.

<sup>147</sup> Archival sources include multiple IPN branches, Polish district courts, city and state archives in Poland, Ukraine, and Germany, as well as published and unpublished Holocaust testimonies and diaries. Secondary sources include a variety of articles and books in Polish, German, English, and French by notable scholars such as Barbara Engelking, Jan Gross, and Andrzej Żbikowski.



serve the truth.”<sup>148</sup> In using language such as “Polish nation,” it becomes clear that the document is part of an effort to preserve a specifically positive understanding of Poland and its nationalism on an international stage in a rebuke to the American narratives surrounding the Holocaust and Poland. Further, the statement “strongly opposed” the “false and wrong image of Poland and Polish people” it claimed Grabowski put forth by “placing the blame for the Holocaust upon the Polish nation.”<sup>149</sup> Of the 134 scholars who signed the statement, none were professional historians.<sup>150</sup> When the Polish League Against Defamation released the statement of scholars, it also published its own statement as an organization claiming that Grabowski “falsifies the history of Poland, proclaiming the thesis that Poles are complicit in the extermination of Jews.” They liken his “opinions,” as the report notably states, to those of Jan T. Gross, the author of the highly controversial *Neighbors*, and Barbara Engelking, another prominent and controversial Holocaust scholar in Poland. The statement goes on to classify Grabowski’s work as full of “pseudofacts.”<sup>151</sup> If the Institute of National Remembrance and its Truth About Camps campaign signified Poland on the defensive, then the Polish League Against Defamation came out swinging on the offensive. It is worth examining the specific words used in their statements—after all, within the Orwellian world of IPN, words matter. In using words like “opinions” or “pseudofacts,” the Polish League Against Defamation is discounting any work that goes against the ways they believe Polish history should be written and remembered. In waging offensive and defensive historically revisionist campaigns, Poland’s institutions illuminate the high stakes of what it means to write and right history as it will be remembered around the world.

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<sup>148</sup> “The standpoint of Polish scholars affiliated with the Polish League Against Defamation on the activities of Jan Grabowski.” Polish League Against Defamation. June 7, 2017.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> “In defence of Jan Grabowski’s good name.” Polish Center for Holocaust Research. June 10, 2017.

<sup>151</sup> “PLAD published a statement concerning the activities of Jan Grabowski.” June 7, 2017. Polish League Against Defamation.

In 2012, the Polish League Against Defamation—in Polish, Reduta Dobrego Imienia, or the Good Name Redoubt—was founded by Maciej Świrski, the Deputy President of the Supervisory Board of the Polish Press Agency, Deputy President of the Polish National Foundation (working to promote Poland’s reputation abroad), and most significantly: the key player in passing the “Holocaust bill,” or the January 2018 amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance declaring punishment by prosecution, fine, and imprisonment to any entity who used the phrase “Polish death camps” in an effort to rid the phrase from the international stage once and for all.<sup>152</sup> Upon the League collecting 41,000 signatures in support of the amendment, it was reported that Świrski was the only person formally consulted by the Polish justice ministry regarding the law before it was presented to parliament.<sup>153</sup> In fact, when the law went public and was met with international outrage, Świrski’s Polish National Foundation, in conjunction with the Prime Minister’s office, undertook a multifaceted, English language social media campaign in support of the law. In order to fully comprehend the League’s crusade against Jan Grabowski and the subsequent response of Holocaust historians across the world, we must first examine the activities and reach of the League’s founder Maciej Świrski and his influence on the League.

Had you been scrolling through Breitbart, an alt-right “news” source in the United States, on February 7, 2018, you may have come across an ad compelling you to “Watch the movie: Testimony of Truth #GERMANDEATHCAMPS.”<sup>154</sup> Perhaps you were on Twitter and came across the account originating in January 2018 called “United Against Defamation” with an image reading: “Auschwitz-Birkenau is not a Polish name, and Arbeit Macht Frei is not a Polish

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<sup>152</sup> In addition to the 2018 “Truth About Camps” campaign, the Polish Embassy in the United States has led a “Against ‘Polish Camps’ Campaign” in some capacity since 2004, asking people who see the phrase used to email it in to the Embassy. Source: *Against Polish Death/Concentration Camps: A How-To Guide*, Embassy of the Polish Republic in Washington, D.C., last updated July 4, 2016. [https://waszyngton.msz.gov.pl/en/news/against\\_polish\\_camps/](https://waszyngton.msz.gov.pl/en/news/against_polish_camps/)

<sup>153</sup> “The draft act on IPN was consulted with only one person – currently the deputy head of the Polish national foundation.” *Polsat News*, February 7, 2018.

<sup>154</sup> @zakavkaza. “That the Polish government is paying for this advertisement on Breitbart is wild.” *Twitter*, 7 Feb. 2018, 5:27p.m., <https://twitter.com/zakavkaza/status/961381050269229067>.

phrase” to welcome you to its page. A nongovernmental organization based in the Netherlands, United Against Defamation claims to “protect the truth about the Holocaust” and says you can find them located in Warsaw, Tel Aviv, and New York City.<sup>155</sup> Or maybe you were one of the 12.6 million people who viewed the video titled, “Today, we are still on the side of truth,” published on the Prime Minister of Poland’s YouTube channel and propagating the line, “There is no room for hatred or the distortion of history. #GERMANDEATHCAMPS”<sup>156</sup> This video features the music and animation from the Institute of National Remembrance film, *The Unconquered*, which explains Polish history from World War II onward. The film talks of Poland being betrayed in spite of all Poles went through during the war. The animated screen pans to the United States of America and says, “We are the first to alert the world about the Holocaust but politics appear to be more important than human life and nobody listens to us.”<sup>157</sup> This is all to say: Świrski’s influence extends beyond the Polish League Against Defamation which he founded and into the social media consumptions of people all over the world.

In pushing a hashtag, #GERMANDEATHCAMPS, across multiple platforms, attention is drawn to a select set of words. In fact, in addition to the IPN’s “Truth About Camps” campaign, Polish National Radio hosts the website: <http://germandeathcamps.info>. Providing photos, videos, and texts about Polish history during the Holocaust, the website has a section dedicated to instances of “distortion[s] of history” as well as a portal to report instances of journalists or organizations misusing the phrase “Polish death camps.” These websites, in addition to the social media campaign waged against the phrase Polish death camps, were released at the same time as the Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance which criminalized the use of such a phrase. Combined, these make up an all-out assault on historical remembrance. They

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<sup>155</sup> “About us.” United Against Defamation. January 2018. <https://www.uadefamation.org/about>.

<sup>156</sup> Kancelaria Premiera, “Today, we are still on the side of truth,” YouTube Video, 0:30, Feb. 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrkQ20SjHoU>.

<sup>157</sup> Institute of National Remembrance, *The Unconquered*, film, directed by Michał Misiński, 15 Sept. 2017.

draw attention in flashy ways to exactly three words, and compel attention away from the work of organizations like the Polish League Against Defamation in targeting scholars whose work presents Poles or Poland in what they consider to be a negative, even defamatory light—claiming that Jan Grabowski, for example, “falsifies the history of Poland, proclaiming the thesis that Poles are complicit in the extermination of Jews.”<sup>158</sup> Putting the (easily digestible via social media) issue of Polish versus German death camps at the forefront of the international stage moves the issue of historical revisionism—of which Poland works to do a lot of, making dangerous and false claims such as Poles not having ever been complicit in the killing of Jews—to the background. It is to this issue we now return.

When the Polish League Against Defamation and 134 scholars came out against Jan Grabowski, they did so with a tone indicating anger. The League classifies Grabowski’s book, *Hunt for the Jews*, receiving the 2014 Yad Vashem International Book Prize as “disturbing.”<sup>159</sup> It is important to note that they use “disturbing” to refer to the way a Polish author could present Poles in such a negative light whereas we might use “disturbing” to classify the shocking and heart-wrenching contents of the book. Further, a League statement of defense published approximately three weeks after the letter of Polish scholars makes a flippant claim about Grabowski: “But here he is, using his authority as a scholar in such newspapers [as, among others listed, *The Washington Post*] to support rhetoric which is not only unfavourable to Poland, but also, if not primarily, deeply prejudiced and unfair.”<sup>160</sup> The attack on Grabowski and his scholarship did not go unnoticed. The Polish Center for Holocaust Research, of which Grabowski is a part, published a statement calling the attack on him “as brutal as it is absurd,”

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<sup>158</sup> “PLAD [Polish League Against Defamation] publishes a statement concerning the activities of Jan Grabowski.” Polish League Against Defamation. June 7, 2017. [This ‘thesis’ is unequivocally false: books such as Jan Gross’s *Neighbors* or *Golden Harvest* prove otherwise.]

<sup>159</sup> “The standpoint of Polish scholars affiliated with the Polish League Against Defamation on the activities of Jan Grabowski.” Polish League Against Defamation. June 7, 2017.

<sup>160</sup> “In defence of Polish academics.” Polish League Against Defamation. June 27, 2017.

saying that they would be pleased to engage in scholarly debate with historians but none of the letter's signatories were members of the discipline.<sup>161</sup> In addition to this scathing letter, Grabowski's home institution, the University of Ottawa, sent a letter to the Polish League Against Defamation insisting they stop harassing Grabowski and his credible scholarship. Calling their statements "a vicious campaign directed at both [Grabowski's] scholarship and at him personally," the letter was supplemented by a statement from the Dean of the Faculty of History, Professor Sylvie Perrier, who characterized the League's campaign as "slanderous" and wrote that they had expressed their position clearly and "any further communications from your organization are unnecessary."<sup>162</sup> Both the Polish Center for Holocaust Research and the University of Ottawa responded forcefully to the offensive nature of the League's accusations and succeeded in shutting down their crusade against Jan Grabowski.

The letter from scholars distributed by the Polish League Against Defamation features misleading statements guised as facts and arguments that are in line with the propaganda of the "Truth About Camps" website but not in line with historical reality.<sup>163</sup> Instead of taking specific pieces of evidence from Grabowski's book and explaining why the scholars do not find them accurate, they deflect and pivot to an argument that "it is worth recalling that 6,706 Poles were awarded the honour of the Righteous Among the Nations." This invokes the language of the "Truth About Camps" campaign in which certain aspects of history should be "stressed" while others should be conveniently cast aside. Yet the scholars' argument is undermined by their mischaracterization of the significance of the number of Poles who received the honor of the Righteous Among the Nations. Classified as a "remarkable" feat, the scholars say that

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<sup>161</sup> "In defence of Jan Grabowski's good name." Polish Center for Holocaust Research. June 10, 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Sylvie Perrier to the Polish League Against Defamation. June 28, 2017.

<sup>163</sup> As an example, their letter states that "A 10 December 1942 note of the Ambassador of Poland Edward Raczyński addressed to the Governments of the United Nations," but the United Nations as it is invoked did not exist in 1942, and his title would have been Ambassador of the Polish Government in Exile, as "Poland" did not technically exist, having been occupied by Germany and the Soviet Union.

“communication barrier[s]” existed because “the possibility of providing Jews with effective help was limited, as 85% of the pre-War Jewish population did not speak Polish.”<sup>164</sup> In fact, the majority of Polish Jews indeed *must* have spoken Polish, as noted by a U.S. intelligence report detailing that 75% of the pre-war Polish Jewish population lived in cities and towns where they learned, worked, and socialized (using their Polish language skills) among Polish speaking Poles.<sup>165</sup> In addition to showing the lengths to which some Poles will go to revise their history—presenting inaccurate information—these components of the statement demonstrate the undertaking to “other” Jews and separate their suffering from the suffering experienced by “true” Poles in wartime. Poles who received the honor of Righteous Among the Nations are consistently “stressed” because it is a chance to highlight the actions of some Poles who went, by the logic of the Polish project, far above and beyond in a time of deep suffering and danger.<sup>166</sup> In attempting to delegitimize the work of Jan Grabowski, Poland is revising and righting history in a way that poses direct harm to the histories taken out of the equation. There is a focus on individual vice as unique and individual virtue as indicative of a whole nation. The efforts to put Polish suffering on the international stage are, as the next section will show, a direct response to the American narratives centered on Jewish suffering including at the hands of Poles.

### **III. In Their Own Words: IPN’s Accounts of Polish History**

In 2017, the IPN released an animated film called *The Unconquered* in Polish, English, and Russian. Professional animation, powerful music, and attention to alleged historical detail all

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<sup>164</sup> “The standpoint of Polish scholars affiliated with the Polish League Against Defamation on the activities of Jan Grabowski.” Polish League Against Defamation. June 7, 2017.

<sup>165</sup> “The Jews in Poland Since the Liberation,” *U.S. Department of State Intelligence Research Report*, May 15, 1946, 6.

<sup>166</sup> In order to become a Righteous Among the Nations, one must have experienced “risk to the rescuer’s life, liberty or position.” Poles are more likely to have experienced risk to their lives under Nazi law than any other group according to standards set by Yad Vashem.

prevail in the film which the IPN says took two years to conceive of and produce.<sup>167</sup> Narrated in English by Sean Bean from *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*, the film shows 24 key moments in “Poland’s battle for freedom” in an attempt to “tell the story of Poland’s history—a history that is complicated and yet unknown—in an exciting way.”<sup>168</sup> It is telling what made it into and what was left out of the story of Poland’s history. The film is decidedly militaristic. It focuses on Polish suffering: showing stories of Poles forced into cattle cars and shipped off to Soviet gulags, as well as narratives of the Polish army fighting alongside the Allied forces during World War II. Poles put up resistance movements within German concentration camps, the film notes, and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, when Polish Jews rose up against the Nazi forces in April and May 1943, is mentioned. These moments lead into the film’s final takeaway message: “Because we do not beg for freedom, we fight for it,” a quote from Polish General Witold Urbanowicz.<sup>169</sup> This is problematic because not all Polish citizens – namely Jews – were in any sort of position to be able to fight for their freedom whether because they were in hiding, trying to escape, or already in danger of persecution.

*The Unconquered* contains cameos from deliberately selected historical figures which the movie’s description classifies as heroes such as Irena Sendler.<sup>170</sup> Sendler, a Polish social worker, worked with the Polish underground resistance movement as part of the Council for Aid to Jews. She forged documents and smuggled over 2,500 Jewish children to safety out of the Warsaw Ghetto. “There are Poles who save Jews despite the threat of the death penalty,” the film’s narrator states. This is unequivocally true, yet it manipulates the viewer into seeing Poles only as heroes or victims which is only one piece of the historical picture. Together, the narratives within

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<sup>167</sup> “The Unconquered premiere,” Institute of National Remembrance. <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/954,039The-Unconquered039-premiere.html>. See also: Mateusz Mazzini, “Poland’s right-wing government is rewriting history – with itself as hero.” *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2018.

<sup>168</sup> “About the Film,” [theunconquered-movie.com](http://theunconquered-movie.com), 2017.

<sup>169</sup> *The Unconquered* film, 2017.

<sup>170</sup> “About the film,” [theunconquered-movie.com](http://theunconquered-movie.com), 2017.

the film show a Polish history of people fighting consistently against their oppressors to no avail and a virtuous group of people risking their lives to save those seemingly less fortunate, the Polish Jews. Yet these narratives leave out points that nuance the stories. The film alludes to Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski—recall he was honored posthumously by President Obama with the Presidential Medal of Freedom—when saying, “We are the first to alert the world about the Holocaust though politics appear to be more important than human lives and nobody listens to us.” Jan Karski was indeed the first person “to deliver to western powers eyewitness accounts of Nazi atrocities in the Warsaw ghetto and deportations of Jews to killing centers.”<sup>171</sup> There is no mention, however, of the fact that, as historian Peter Fritzsche pointed out in his book *An Iron Wind: Europe Under Hitler*, Karski “hardly disguised his contempt for ‘the Polish peasant, laborer, and half-educated, stupid, demoralized wretch’ who welcomed the fact that the Germans were ‘finally’ teaching the Jews ‘a lesson.’”<sup>172</sup> The IPN *Unconquered* film tells a specific history, a one-sided history, a history that is, as we will continue to see, even a manipulative one.

There is no mention in the film of the Poles who aided the Nazis, as Jan Grabowski’s scholarship asserts, or of the Poles who massacred their Jewish neighbors without any prompting by Nazis, as Jan Gross’s scholarship argues. One of the closing lines of the film, as the timeline nears 1989, goes, “In exchange for all that we do [during World War II], we are betrayed. The free world distances itself from us, leaving us behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>173</sup> With lines like these, the IPN teaches that the world has something to apologize for, to make up for, to *right*, to prove to Poland in contemporary times following what Poland deems to be extraordinary wrongs and betrayal. This message is consistent whether in the “Truth About Camps” campaign, the film *The*

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<sup>171</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Jan Karski.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jan-karski>

<sup>172</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *An Iron Wind: Europe Under Hitler* (Basic Books: New York, NY, 2016), 184.

<sup>173</sup> *The Unconquered* film, 2017.



*Unconquered*, or more blatantly on the official website of the Institute of National Remembrance.

A page on the IPN website titled “Brief History of Poland 1939-1989” asserts, “It must be remembered that Poland was the first country to stand against Hitler’s and Stalin’s invasion plans.”<sup>174</sup> This leaves out the fact that though Poland indeed never set up a collaborationist government with the Nazis, plenty of Poles collaborated with the Nazis or directly benefitted from Nazi treatment of Polish Jews.<sup>175</sup> Jan Gross describes in his controversial book *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, the “diggers” who “sifted through the ashes and remains of murdered Jews at sites of all the Nazi extermination camps in Poland (Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Auschwitz) for many years after the war, looking for pieces of jewelry and dental gold overlooked by the Nazis.”<sup>176</sup> History as it is written by Polish institutions is about claiming memory and building national identity. Statements such as “it must be remembered” or the earlier “it should be stressed” illuminate that Poland’s focus might claim to be on accuracy—saying “German death camps in occupied Poland” as opposed to “Polish death camps”—but in reality, the focus is on claiming and purporting a specific, doctored type of memory and history.

What has happened as a result of the extreme nature of historical revisionism undertaken by Poland is that extreme cries of Polish complicity in the Holocaust rang out from some American Jews. In February 2018, in response to the Polish campaign against “Polish death camps,” an American Jewish philanthropic foundation, the Ruderman Family Foundation, published a video on YouTube titled, “I will go to jail.” The video featured Jews of various ages—a mother sitting

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<sup>174</sup> “Brief History of Poland 1939-1989,” *Institute of National Remembrance*, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/brief-history-of-poland/1,Brief-history.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Note that there was never an opportunity for Poland to set up a collaborationist government as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin would never have accepted such a proposition.

<sup>176</sup> Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xiii.

with her two children, an elderly man, and young men and women—saying with force the phrase “Polish Holocaust.” The video features lines such as, “So listen Polish people: What happened during the Holocaust was enough. Repeal this disgraceful law now!” and “Jews will never again be silenced. The USA should suspend all ties with Poland. Before it is too late.”<sup>177</sup> The video culminated with a plea to sign a petition stating that the United States should suspend all ties with Poland. Jewish communities in Poland and the United States met the video with outrage. The Jewish Community of Warsaw published a statement calling the video “false and hurtful,” and pointed out that they did not agree with the actions of the Institute of National Remembrance but “the answer...cannot be a hate campaign.”<sup>178</sup> The American Jewish Committee, in a “rare attack on a fellow American Jewish organization,” harshly condemned the video.<sup>179</sup> The Ruderman Family Foundation, responsible for the video, primarily focuses their philanthropic efforts on advocacy for disability inclusion and Israel-American Jewish Relations. The Polish Holocaust video can be considered out of character of the efforts typically undertaken by the organization. It is noteworthy that the foundation’s video focuses on language and specific words in using “Polish Holocaust” repeatedly both for shock value and to draw attention to the pairing of the words—just as Polish campaigns sought to draw attention to the phrase “Polish death camps,” though in the pursuit of an opposite goal.

This is all to say: the Orwellian Ministry of Memory within Poland is succeeding. Attention to language abounds all around the world and especially within Poland. Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance has shaped a nation to claim and hold dear a revised historical understanding and memory that prioritizes Polish suffering and pushes Jewish suffering to the

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<sup>177</sup> Forward, “Ruderman Family Foundation’s Deleted Polish Holocaust Video.” YouTube Video, 1:39, February 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arvWzau9Tbk&t>.

<sup>178</sup> Lesław Piszewski, Anna Chipczyńska, and Rabbi Michael Schudrich, “The statement on the Ruderman Family Foundation Film,” Jewish Community of Warsaw, February 21, 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Josh Nathan-Kazis, “Polish Holocaust Video Yanked By Foundation Amid Outcry,” *Jewish Daily Forward*, February 21, 2018.

side while maintaining the groups' separateness. Even the most extreme outrage from groups within the American Jewish community, such as the "I'll go to jail" video, caused uproar within the global Jewish community—notably, in response to Jews saying "Polish Holocaust" as opposed to Poles using their "Polish death camps" campaign to overshadow the more dangerous historical revisionism taking place. Poland has masterfully distracted and deflected unflattering histories in pursuit of an ethno-nationalist project that defines Jews as "other," rewrites history, and commandeers scholarship to support the work of the post-communist state on a global stage. The prescience of historian Tony Judt's 2005 argument, that Poland is indeed going to great lengths to remember World War II—"It's just that Jews were not part of the story"—is all too clear.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 822.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Identity, Victimhood, and Gray Zones: The Controversial Publications of Jan Blóński and Jan Gross

With each and every tour I guided through the core exhibition at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, I began with the same photo and the same question: *who here has heard of Oświęcim?* Rarely did a visitor raise their hand. I followed up immediately: *who here has heard of Auschwitz?* I do not recall any visitor ever *not* raising their hand. Auschwitz, a well-known killing center of the Holocaust, is located in the town of Oświęcim, a nearly majority-Jewish town in Poland before the Second World War. The town's old synagogue still exists; it is now a museum dedicated to the thriving prewar Jewish community of Oświęcim. Yet they receive nowhere near the number of visitors that the Auschwitz Birkenau State Memorial Museum receives. Visitors to Poland are well acquainted with Jewish death. This should not come as a surprise given previous evidence: tourism at Auschwitz and the stories of *Schindler's List* reached millions upon millions of people. The thriving Jewish life from the eleventh century onward in Poland, however, does not typically so much as ring a bell for visitors. I opened with these questions—reflecting back to visitors the types of history and places they could recall in Poland—so I could set up a tension from the beginning of the tour: when it comes to thinking about history, there is more than one side. History is nuanced; it exists in, as this chapter will explore, *gray zones*. When we think of Jewish history in Poland, we must think both about Jewish life and death and about both Poles as victims and as perpetrators. This thesis has so far demonstrated the ways in which Poland works to rid the public of any notion of nuance and instead claim that Poles were entirely victims during the Second World War or that the only history worth remembering is that of the Poles who risked their lives to save Jews.

Primo Levi, an Italian chemist and writer who survived the Holocaust, coined the term “gray zone” in his 1986 essay collection *The Drowned and the Saved*. Arguing that it is human

nature to want to draw dividing lines between victims and perpetrators, Levi says this is inaccurate in the face of the reality of the lived experiences of Jews in Nazi concentration camps, particularly because it was part of Nazi practice to blur the line between victim and accomplice to the crime. He writes most notably of what he deems “privileged prisoners”—belonging to groups such as the *sonderkommandos*, the work units comprised of Jewish prisoners threatened with death and forced to aid Nazis in clearing victims from gas chambers—and forces his readers to confront the notion that a prisoner could be both privileged and in despair at the same time. Levi asks his readers to suspend both their disbelief and their judgment in pursuit of a complex, nuanced understanding of what it meant to be a prisoner in a place such as Auschwitz. History, wartime history in particular, exists in gray zones—worlds in which actors can be both victims and perpetrators, or in which someone can be both Polish and Jewish without a hyphenated identity—and it is these gray zones which we should allow to influence our interpretation of history. This argument can be made by demonstrating what has happened when gray zones are contested or take a backseat to one-sided, revisionist views. This chapter explores a theoretical framework for approaching the notions of “memory” and “remembering” that allow us to enter into a complex understanding of the work of, and subsequent pushback against, Polish historian and literary critic Jan Błóński in the 1980s and Polish-American historian Jan Gross in the early 2000s.

### **I. Memory vs. Remembering**

In addition to asking museum visitors about Oświęcim and Auschwitz on each tour, I also spent substantial time discussing contemporary issues regarding how the Holocaust is remembered in Poland. We talked of the different ways in which old synagogues are used by communities today when there are no Jews left to make use of them: some have been turned into

bars, such as an Old West style saloon in Chełm, and others such as the old synagogue in the village of Niebylec into public libraries.<sup>181</sup> We also talked of what became of the former slave-labor camp Pustków which was destroyed by Nazis in 1944 and rebuilt in 2012 by Poles eager to reconstruct the camp as it once stood in order to use it for educational purposes. Polish radio began reporting in 2007 that authorities from the Dębica region of southern Poland had obtained European Union funding to build a replica of the Nazi slave-labor camp, complete with details such as barbed wire, barracks, and a main entrance gate. Polish Jews did not support the plan. Piotr Kadlcik, chairman of the Union of Religious Jewish Communities in Poland, said on record that he found the reconstruction “weird” and was deeply skeptical of what the project’s message would be. “It’s like building an attraction, like a scare house,” he said, “the kind at a carnival where people pay to get scared out of their minds. This is not a good idea.”<sup>182</sup> Controversy ensued as some took offense to the reconstruction of a concentration camp—the Galicia Jewish Museum coined it the “Disneyland Reconstruction” in the exhibit caption accompanying the photo of the reconstructed camp<sup>183</sup>—and others found significance in helping people to see and feel what history might have looked like.

As I sifted through information about Pustków, I realized that perhaps the most important aspect of this camp is not how it is or isn’t remembered—it is what a survivor’s testimony tells us about the divisions between Jews and Poles within the camp. A memorial plaque indicates that 7500 Jews and 2500 Poles perished in Pustków.<sup>184</sup> A rendering of the camp by Mordechai Lustig, a Polish-Jewish survivor of multiple camps who lived in Israel until his death, depicts a Jewish camp area and a Polish camp area as having separate facilities and entrances. Lustig

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<sup>181</sup> Wall text, *Traces of Memory*, Galicia Jewish Museum, Kraków, Poland.

<sup>182</sup> “Poland to build Nazi camp facsimile,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 12, 2007. See also, “Mock Nazi camp in Debica,” *Polskie Radio*, March 10, 2007.

<sup>183</sup> Wall text, *Traces of Memory*, Galicia Jewish Museum, Kraków, Poland.

<sup>184</sup> “The memorial site at the camp,” Yad Vashem, photo details, Yerucham Apfel.  
[https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item\\_id=8224&ind=8](https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=8224&ind=8).

explained to translator William Leibner, “Most of the inmates from the Jewish concentration camp were Polish Jews, but they had little contact with the Polish concentration camp inmates. Both camps were guarded by Ukrainian S.S. who hated the Jews and the Poles with the same passion.”<sup>185</sup> The way Pustków is remembered by contemporaries does not differentiate between Jews and Poles, yet lived experiences that reside in the memory of those individuals were imprisoned in the camp do. There is work to be done in teasing out how groups of people actively remember their history and what that means for historical gray zones.

The scholarship this chapter is based upon—notably Joanna Michnic-Coren’s 1999 article “The Troubling Past: The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust,” *Neighbors* by Jan T. Gross in 2001, and selections from Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic’s 2003 *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*—all depend on ideas of collective memory. Harold Marcuse, historian of Germany, presides over a document tracing the definitions of collective memory as they have evolved. He splits the definitions into pre-1990s, 1990s, and 2000s. Most broadly defined, collective memory is the shared understanding through historical sources ranging from testimonies to family narratives, from movies to books, of the memories that compose a particular group’s identity.<sup>186</sup> I prefer a different term and structure my analysis of sources around a more active, individually-centered term: collective remembrance. To ask how individuals or groups are remembering and putting the memories into their shared lived experiences—for instance, who decides that a monument or memorial should be built, and to commemorate whom, and what is the process of determining what the inscription says, and who pays for the building and maintenance?—is, to me, a more

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<sup>185</sup> William Leibner, “Pustków: The Almost Forgotten Death Camp,” JewishGen, via the Museum of Jewish Heritage. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pustkow/pus001.html> [Pustków, by definition, was not in fact a death camp but rather a slave-labor camp. Mordechai Lustig, in his testimonies, describes all the camps he was sent to as ‘death camps.’]

<sup>186</sup> Harold Marcuse, “Collective Memory: Definitions.” *Collective Memory Seminar Course Page*, UCSB, last updated January 12, 2017.

pressing issue. Even in a world in which individual memories of events have often faded due to the aging and death of the wartime generation, considering how their descendants, students, and others remember what they have learned and consumed still matters. Jay Winter, a Yale historian of World War I, makes a compelling case favoring the term “collective remembrance” as opposed to the term “collective memory.” He says that collective memory has been overused to the point of losing its meaning entirely, whereas collective remembrance “points to time and place above all, to evidence, to traces enabling us to understand what groups of people try to do when they act in public to conjure up the past.”<sup>187</sup> He explains that privileging the act of remembering privileges specific agency: “on answering the question who remembers, when, where, and how?”<sup>188</sup> We have so far seen exactly what groups of people in Poland have done in acting to conjure up the past: writing historically revisionist narratives that right wrongs in order to suggest a specific past, one which separates the stories of suffering between Jews and Poles and ensures the Polish past is received by the world in the most flattering light.

## **II. *Narrative of Denial: Identity and Victimhood in Poland Pre-2001***

Joanna Michnic-Coren argued in 1999 that “the dominant pattern of perception of the Holocaust [in Poland] has been characterized by historical inaccuracies, distortions, and omissions.” She used two dominant patterns to support her argument: a deliberate unwillingness to acknowledge the differences in suffering and fate of ethnic Poles and Polish Jews at the hands of Nazi occupation and a push to deny any “wrongdoing that might reflect negatively on the ethnic Polish community as the key witness to the Holocaust.”<sup>189</sup> We have seen these patterns

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<sup>187</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 5.

<sup>188</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 3.

<sup>189</sup> Joanna Michnic-Coren, “The Troubling Past: The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust.” *East European Jewish Affairs* 29, no. 1-2 (1999): 75.



play out time and time again. The Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and its “Truth About Camps” campaign as well as other revisionist historical outputs such as the film *The Unconquered* are examples of historical distortion, omission, and inaccuracies on behalf of Poles sharing their history with the world. The crusade against Jan Grabowski’s book *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* illuminated the unwillingness to acknowledge wrongdoing at the hands of Poles in ways that shed negative light on the Polish community. Michnic-Coren utilizes what she deems the “narrative of denial” to explore the implications of an identity—what it means to be truly Polish—shaped by a call to win the “victimization competition” in which Poles insist that they suffered more than Jews in the Second World War. To build an identity around a claim to victimhood is a dangerous route to travel: it led to Polish efforts to write history in ways that right wrongs or revise unflattering moments. Doing so while holding claim to a status of victimhood, particularly in claiming to have suffered the most or in especially unfair ways, is where problems arise.

The problem specific to Poland, Michnic-Coren argues, is that coming to terms with the troubling past—negative perceptions surrounding Jews that result in their “othering” in pursuit of a “future independent Polish nation-state along ethno-national lines” where Jews are not considered a part of the project<sup>190</sup>—never completely happened because it would have destroyed an image of a heroic, suffering Poland.<sup>191</sup> Michnic-Coren published in 1999 before the establishment of the Institute of National Remembrance or the Polish League Against Defamation and before the publications of Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbors* and Jan Grabowski’s *Hunt for the Jews*. Yet Poland has been entrenched in purporting a “narrative of denial” since the 1980s: a narrative full of myths that Poles acted entirely in “principled” ways toward Jews in the Holocaust and a narrative claiming anti-Polonism when morally challenging problems or

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<sup>190</sup> Michnic-Coren, “...The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust,” 77.

<sup>191</sup> Michnic-Coren, “...The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust,” 83.

interrogations arise. This narrative, Michnic-Coren reasons, “may also provide a fuller explanation of why information on the genocide of Polish Jewry does not form part of Polish social history.”<sup>192</sup> Recall that one of the essential (as well as most controversial) questions of Jan T. Gross’s 2001 *Neighbors*, the story of a Polish village that massacred their Jewish neighbors, was this: “*How can the wiping out of one-third of its urban population be anything other than a central issue of Poland’s modern history?*”<sup>193</sup> That Michnic-Coren’s argument appears so prescient regarding the more contemporary issues within this thesis illuminates the ways in which Poland’s quest to revise history is not new. While the texts and sources in question have changed, the nationalist mission has changed only in that it has become intensified. A critical source that Michnic-Coren relies on in her argument is the controversial article by Polish historian and literary critic Jan Błonski entitled “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto.”

When Jan Błonski published his article in the progressive Catholic intelligentsia paper *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1987,<sup>194</sup> the response from readers was unlike anything the paper had ever seen according to editor Jerzy Turowicz:

When we printed the article, I was, as were my colleagues, aware that it would be an event to which there would certainly be a strong reaction. Their reaction was greater than anything known in the course of the 42 years during which I have edited that paper. I cannot remember any article which provoked such a strong reaction on the part of my readers.<sup>195</sup>

What shocked and provoked Polish readers? Błonski pushed back against the narrative of denial that encapsulated and shaped Polish interpretations of the Holocaust. He directly addressed the misconceptions and distortions that shaped Polish historiography, saying “We read or listen to discussions on the subject of the Polish-Jewish past and if some event, some fact which puts us

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<sup>192</sup> Michnic-Coren, “...The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust,” 77.

<sup>193</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin, 2001): xix.

<sup>194</sup> Michnic-Coren, “...The Polish Collective Memory of the Holocaust,” 78. [Translation: *The Catholic Weekly*]

<sup>195</sup> Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999) 115.

in a less-than-advantageous light, emerges, we try our hardest to minimize it, to explain it away and make it seem insignificant.” In calling this out to an audience of Poles—even progressive ones—he struck at the very heart of an emotional issue. He hypothesizes that the reason for the defensiveness is because:

...whether consciously or unconsciously, we fear accusations...We want to be absolutely beyond any accusation, we want to be completely clean. We want to be also—and only—victims. This concern is, however, underpinned by fear—just as Miłosz’s poem—and this fear warps and disfigures our thoughts about the past.<sup>196</sup>

The poem he refers to is a 1943 poem by Czesław Miłosz, “A Poor Christian Look at the Ghetto.” The poem paints a portrait of destruction, of a ghetto and a city in ruins, and what remains in a “guardian mole.” The mole moves through the ground—through the ashes, the bodies, the destruction—and the speaker of the poem is afraid of the mole. The mole is anthropomorphized to possess “the features of a Jew, poring over the Talmud or the Bible” and the message is this: “The mole burrows underground but also underneath our consciousness. This is the feeling of guilt which we do not want to admit...The fear of a non-Jew who looks at the ghetto burning down...The Christian feels fearful of the fate of the Jew but also—muffled, hidden even from himself—he feels the fear that he will be condemned.”<sup>197</sup> Błóński puts into public words the very private, even subconscious, feelings and perceptions of Poles who witnessed the events of the Holocaust. Michael Steinlauf argued in *Bondage to the Dead*, published around ten years after Błóński’s article, that Poles were unlike any other witnesses to the Holocaust because it is one thing to witness, for instance, a ghetto on fire in your neighborhood and it is an entirely other thing to fully comprehend the widespread, systemized nature of the killings. Poles did not grasp that during the war.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Jan Błóński, “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 43-44, January 11, 1987.

<sup>197</sup> Błóński, “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto,” 40-41.

<sup>198</sup> Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 53.

Where Błonski created severe tension was with his call to action. “We must say first of all—Yes, we are guilty,” he wrote.<sup>199</sup> He acknowledged that readers would likely protest any sort of shared responsibility for the genocide of Polish Jews, and he did not necessarily disagree. “So why talk of genocide? And of shared responsibility? My answer is this: participation and shared responsibility are not the same thing. One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it.”<sup>200</sup> Błonski is illuminating the same kind of tension I brought to bear on my tours of the Galicia Jewish Museum, the same tension Primo Levi fleshed out in *The Drowned and the Saved*: history exists in gray zones, in nuance, in complexity. In the case of Błonski’s assessment of Polish interpretation and active remembrance of the Holocaust, it is important to discuss both participation and shared responsibility. Błonski’s call to remember precisely the events that the broader Polish national project works to help its citizens forget, move past, brush off, or alter was quite radical both in its time and into today. In moving past the competitive victimhood and saying that both groups suffered—and suffered differently and in incomparable ways—Błonski challenged the Polish national project in calling for a sympathy with Polish Jews that had yet to be seen in Polish scholarship and widespread writings even into the present moment.

### **III. *Narrative of Denial: Identity and Victimhood in Poland, 2001 – present***

When historian Jan Gross wrote an article in 1998 on the ways in which Christian Poles mistreated their Jewish neighbors, he used the 1945 testimony of Szmuel Wasersztajn. Wasersztajn experienced (through hiding and surviving) an anti-Jewish pogrom in Jedwabne, a village in the Białystok region of Poland, in 1941, and had staggering accounts to show for it. The pogrom took place on July 10, 1941, less than a month after Germans entered the village. “I

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<sup>199</sup> Błonski, “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto,” 45.

<sup>200</sup> Błonski, “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto,” 47.

saw with my own eyes how those murderers killed Chajcia Wasersztajn, Jakub Kac, seventy-three years old, and Eliasz Krawiecki,” he began. “Jakub Kac they stoned to death with bricks. Krawiecki they knifed and then plucked his eyes and cut off his tongue. He suffered terribly for twelve hours before he gave up his soul.”<sup>201</sup> He went on to describe how a Polish priest intervened, telling the citizens to halt their pogrom with the reasoning that the Germans would handle it. While this stopped the pogrom, Wasersztajn explained,

From this day on the local population no longer sold foodstuffs to Jews, which made their circumstances all the more difficult. In the meantime rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all the Jews be destroyed...Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hooligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods...It is impossible to represent all the brutalities of the hooligans, and it is difficult to find in our history of suffering something similar. Beards of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers’ breasts, people were beaten murderously and forced to sing and dance. In the end they proceeded to the main action—the burning.<sup>202</sup>

The testimony continues on in describing the ways in which the Poles rounded up each and every last Jew, from elderly man to sick child, and “after various tortures and humiliations, they burned all the Jews in a barn.”<sup>203</sup>

Gross utilized this brutal testimony in his scholarship but quickly realized he had made a mistake in his interpretation. He later wrote,

I did not fully register then [in 1998] that after the series of killings and cruelties described by Wasersztajn, at the end of the day *all* remaining Jews were actually burned (I must have read this as a hyperbolic trope, concluding that only some had been killed that way.) A few months after I submitted my essay...I realized that Wasersztajn has to be taken literally.”<sup>204</sup>

This raw writing indicates the shock of Jan Gross in unearthing the Jedwabne massacre and foreshadows the shock that would engross all of Poland when his book examining the subject was later published. The account Gross shared from Szmuel Wasersztajn directly contradicts

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<sup>201</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jedwabne*, (New York: Penguin, 2001) 3.

<sup>202</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, 4-5.

<sup>203</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, 4.

<sup>204</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, 6.

every aspect of the narrative of denial purported by Poland and sent the nation into a state of shock, reckoning—and still, denial. Gross’s argument within *Neighbors*, a book that is meticulously researched, involves asking how and why the story of Jedwabne’s Jews—and the murder of Polish Jews in World War II more broadly—is, in any way, shape, or form, denied or swept aside. Jan Gross relied on Polish archives, some state-run and others run by Jewish institutions, to produce court documents, investigation protocols, and clemency petitions by the massacre perpetrators, for instance, and he placed heavy emphasis on using testimony from those who survived or witnessed.<sup>205</sup> There is dispute, particularly in Poland, over the sourcing Gross relied on yet searches into specific moments of contestation proved that Gross’s finds and interpretations of archival material were indeed correct.

For instance, a piece in *Contemporary European History* by John Connelly argued, “Gross had insisted that the few Germans present in Jedwabne did little more than take pictures, and to date, after months of research in Polish and German archives, nothing has emerged to contest his vision.” And in fact, Connelly noted that even the IPN, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, agreed with Gross’s outcome on the topic of German complicity.<sup>206</sup> Whether they agreed because of the documentation or because German complicity fits with the political narratives they purport remains to be seen. When it came to testimony, Gross was willing to take the words of people like Szmuel Wasersztajn as seriously as he would take the word of a nearby Polish peasant. His reliance and trust in testimony is an aspect of sourcing that later historians have criticized. Janine P. Holc, in her article “Working Through Jan Gross’s ‘Neighbors,’” noted, “Testimonials have been viewed as problematic tools for validating historical facts, but Gross defends the role of survivor accounts in historical scholarship as not

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<sup>205</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, 155.

<sup>206</sup> John Connelly, “Review: Poles and Jews in the Second World War: The Revisions of Jan T. Gross,” *Contemporary European History* 11, no. 4 (2002): 643.

only an overlooked resource but our best avenue for capturing realities that dominant cultural realities have kept hidden.”<sup>207</sup> This is particularly important in the case of Polish historiography, and underlies the question that Jan Gross asks, and that Joanna Michnic-Coren asked, too, how can the destruction of nearly an entire population group, comprising a third of the country’s urban population, not be a central, national historical issue in Poland?<sup>208</sup> which was not well received and resulted in a variety of loaded responses to his work. The issue of the destruction of Jedwabne’s population is critical, though it is the entirety of the period’s trauma—the violence and powerlessness Jews faced, and how the Poles contributed to that whether actively or passively—which we must probe. It is the responses to Jan Gross’s work to which we now look.

Within two years of the publication of *Neighbors* in Poland and within one year of publication in the United States, Polish scholars had much to say on the book and particularly about the sourcing used to make claims about such a horrific massacre. Wojciech Roszkowski, a politician, economist, former member of the European Parliament, and current affiliate of the right-wing nationalist party, Law and Justice, wrote a provocative piece in 2002 titled “After *Neighbors*: Seeking Universal Standards.” While it is not every day that a politician publishes an article in an academic journal, Roszkowski worked also as a historian. Publishing under a pen name, Andrzej Albert, his books about twentieth-century Polish history and political theory have since been translated into English. His *After Neighbors* piece argued that “*Neighbors* is by no means a scholarly work,” but rather one of multiple “political pamphlets with an a priori thesis.”<sup>209</sup> He goes into detail regarding which specific flawed testimonies Gross used and disputes over the way in which Gross selected witnesses for his project. For all the detail his argument provides, Roszkowski does not lose sight of the bigger picture, either, writing: “Polish-

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<sup>207</sup> Janine P. Holc, “Working Through Jan Gross’s ‘Neighbors.’” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002): 45.

<sup>208</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, xix.

<sup>209</sup> Wojciech Roszkowski, “After *Neighbors*: Seeking Universal Standards.” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002): 462.

Jewish controversies, like the one involving *Neighbors*, paradoxically stem from both sides adopting the assumption that they have been innocent victims of history...Moreover, extremists from both sides tend to become furious if their misfortunes are compared.”<sup>210</sup> We have seen the way this plays out, the way that entering into historical understandings through high-powered emotion leads to extremism, with the case of Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance attempting to curb any mention of “Polish death camp” within international media and the subsequent response of the Ruderman Family Foundation’s video featuring the phrase “Polish Holocaust” repeated over and over in a follow-up attack on the proposal.

Yet the most pressing point Roszkowski makes is one not about extremism but rather a point that provides further insight into the relation between historical revisionism and the Polish national project. Coming from a politician and historian, the following quote should come not as a shock but perhaps as a reminder, a clue, a key to understanding identity, victimhood, and gray zones on a national scale. His overall claim—“there are no innocent nations just as there are no guilty nations”<sup>211</sup>—works well in proving his point that Poles as a nation do not need to profess guilt for what happened to Polish Jews during World War II yet undermines other attempts to write off any sort of Polish guilt or complicity in the Holocaust by blaming Germany or Germans as a whole. Roszkowski explains,

As compared to other nations, Polish collaboration with the Nazis was absolutely marginal. There was no rump Polish state in Poland, and there were generally no Polish organizations tolerated by the Nazis. There were cases of spontaneous manifestations of anti-Jewish feelings in such tragic events as those in Jedwabne...and there were cases when the scum of Polish society sold Jews to Nazi henchmen, but it would be unfair to blow these incidents out of proportion. It would also be unfair to forget that Poles frequently, if often incorrectly, considered Polish Jews to be communists or sympathizers.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Roszkowski, “After *Neighbors*,” 465.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 464.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.



It is significant that Roszkowski finds different ways to assert that Poland, on the whole, did not collaborate with the Nazis on any scale similar to other nations, and worries of instances of collaboration—which he acknowledges existed, though qualifies in saying they were “absolutely marginal”—being blown out of proportion. One could alternatively think of this to mean that collaboration took place at the hands of the scum of society, which every nation has and every nation despises. Time and time again, we see that Poles, particularly those in positions of power whether politically or intellectually, draw attention to an argument that Polish wartime collaboration with the Nazis is not worth paying attention to or that it is “unfair” to be remembered. The notion of fairness is a particularly fascinating one. When has history ever been fair? Individual memories are not intrinsically fair, either, as we are likely to privilege our own suffering in our memories. Is it not unfair to Polish Jews that their suffering at the hands of their Polish neighbors is revised out of Poland’s national history? To bring questions of fairness to bear is a marker of an emotional argument, and it is telling that Roszkowski’s argument extends into such a realm. Such emotion hints at a nationalist agenda rather than an academic one.

Roszkowski continues on, writing,

As a fair nation, Poles should apologize for any Jewish life that was lost due to malicious Polish action—not for any reason of collective guilt but because Poles should feel responsible for the values (“Thou shall not kill”) transgressed against by those murderers who were Poles. But this should be a moral reflection rather than a political event spotlighted by the media that leaves the false impression that Poles feel guilty as a nation.<sup>213</sup>

The dichotomy between Poles apologizing for Jewish life lost at the hands of Polish collaboration with Nazis or unaffiliated Polish violence as being a moral question and explicitly *not* a political question is noteworthy. When Roszkowski draws attention to ensuring that readers do not take his call for a Polish apology to mean anything political, it begs the question: why the

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<sup>213</sup> Roszkowski, “After *Neighbors*,” 464.

concern? Also important is the mention of the media being the entity that “leaves a false impression that Poles feel guilty as a nation.”<sup>214</sup> Roszkowski is referring here to the international media attention upon the publication of *Neighbors*, to media attention—and likely cultural attention—that presents the narrative antithesis to the Polish “narrative of denial” in painting Poland as a nation with blood on its hands, a nation reeling in guilt, a vulnerable nation, a nation susceptible to being defined by its weakest points in history. None of these reputations, of course, are wanted by Poland as leaders pursue their nationalist project.

In calling for Polish reflection on the past to be interpreted morally and not politically, Roszkowski asks for a highly individualized, challenging to argue with, unquantifiable approach to collective remembrance. His ask and his argument ensure not only that Poles are not held responsible for the damning evidence presented in *Neighbors* but also that they are the moral victors, taking initiative to apologize on behalf of the values that all Poles should share—“Thou shall not kill”—as opposed to atoning, attempting to make right, or simply acknowledging the atrocious actions of the Poles of Jedwabne against their Jewish neighbors. This work is meant for us, the outsider, to interpret Poles as the victim time and time again, as wrongfully “on the hook” for the actions of those unrelated to them and taking the moral high road when, in fact, this takes away attention from Polish-Jewish victims, writing and solidifying stories of separate suffering.

#### **IV. *Responding to Neighbors: Identity and Victimhood Outside of Poland***

In addition to the work by Janine P. Holc and Wojciech Roszkowski which we encountered in the *Slavic Review*, there is other work to consider from a variety of Polish and American writers. Scholars Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic compiled a large quantity of sources relating to responses to *Neighbors* from Poland and around the world in their anthology

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

*The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*. Published in 2004, the anthology includes a vast array of sources translated from Polish ranging from the initial reporting on news of the massacre brought to light by Jan Gross, to the moral debate that played out across Polish cultural and intellectual publications, to official statements from Poles and Americans, to debates within the Catholic Church, the residents of Jedwabne themselves, the historians who study them, and, finally, the conversations surrounding the issue that took place outside of Poland and primarily in the United States. We will first consider Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's January 2001 article in the leading (and left-leaning) Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* titled "Obsessed with Innocence." She writes of the Polish obsession with innocence and the ways in which it is damaging to those who suffer, weaving together a variety of sources we have explored in this chapter thus far. She begins: "I cannot resist the thought that Gross would not have written this book if he had not worked abroad."<sup>215</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross—she almost always writes out his full name in what is likely meant to draw attention to his Polish identity in spelling and naming—was born in Warsaw but pursued graduate schooling at Yale University and later took a job within the Department of History at Princeton University where he remains as a professor emeritus today. Notably, Tokarska-Bakir is not referring to any sort of thought regarding logistics, censorship, or the sort of reasoning why Gross could not have written the article in Poland. Rather it is because it is impossible to see what is right in front of you, she argues, what you are deeply immersed and wrapped within but might not necessarily comprehend.

The way Gross tackled his historical work and writing is what Tokarska-Bakir classifies as a "new approach to the sources," in which she is referring to a statement by Gross himself.

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<sup>215</sup> Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Obsessed with Innocence," from January 2001 *Gazeta Wyborcza* in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 75.

“Our initial attitude toward every report by would-be victims of the Holocaust,” he asserts, “should be changed from one of doubt to one of affirmation.”<sup>216</sup> While this is a feel-good approach that makes complete sense to morally minded people who do not want to create more trauma for those already traumatized, Tokarska-Bakir points out a glaring issue that remains: “It can only convince someone who is already convinced.”<sup>217</sup> She writes of the people who are persuaded by sources and texts such as the poetry of Czesław Miłosz “about the mole-guardian with the red lamp on his forehead” and the writing of Jan Błóński in “The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto” as well as other similar works as the people who do not exactly *need* to be reading it.<sup>218</sup> That is to say, it is precisely the people who should be reading historical accounts such as *Neighbors* who are the ones likely to take it less seriously. But Tokarska-Bakir’s chapter is of course, as its title suggests, ultimately about the Polish obsession with innocence. As an anthropologist, she writes of being much more interested in what people say about the facts as opposed to what the facts say themselves. And when it comes to *Neighbors*, the root of the discussion, the angst, the fury—all of the heavy emotions associated with the illumination of an exceedingly dark moment in Polish history and Jewish suffering—is that it strikes at what Jan Błóński deemed the heart of the issue: the fear of being named an accomplice to the crime in the eyes of an unforgiving world. Tokarska-Bakir concludes her article with an emotional plea, writing of the book *Jak żyć [How to live]* by Father Józef Tischner who wrote, “‘If Poles were truly religious, they would not try so forcefully to convince themselves and others of their innocence.’ Amen.”<sup>219</sup> To strive for an image of innocence is to move beyond the gray zone, to not allow oneself or one’s history to exist in any sort of gray area. To strive for innocence is to straddle politics and morality, to insist, as Roszkowski does, that it is unfair to privilege stories

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<sup>216</sup> J.T. Gross, *Sasiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Senjy, 2000), 94.

<sup>217</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, *The Neighbors Respond*, 79.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, *The Neighbors Respond*, 85.

of Polish collaboration over stories of Polish suffering. To strive for innocence is to convince, to persuade, to put forth a nationalist project that prioritizes Polish innocence over Jewish suffering.

## V. *Neighbors Across Country Lines: Officials Respond*

The Polish conversation about Jedwabne extended beyond Poland and into the United States via high-ranking Polish government officials. Polonsky and Michlic's *The Neighbors Respond* features a section compiled of official addresses delivered by Polish officials. Among the most significant is an address delivered in Washington, D.C. at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by then-Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Władysław Bartoszewski. He explained in his speech that the purpose of his U.S. visit was "to [have] meetings with Mr. Powell and Ms. Rice" and that he "made a special effort to have the opportunity for at least a short meeting at the Holocaust Memorial Museum." The meeting came on April 5, 2001, shortly before Jan Gross' *Neighbors* would be released in the United States. Bartoszewski never mentioned Jan Gross or *Neighbors* by name; he instead spoke around the topic, clearly trying to get ahead of the issue. His opening lines present him as an ally: "Dear Friends," he says, "I am starting in this way because I see only friendly people in this hall. I think the unfriendly ones have simply stayed home. The authors of the anonymous letters I receive often regard me as a Jew. They think that that is a way to offend me, but it isn't."<sup>220</sup> Following this strange opening of a diplomatic speech, more pleasantries are offered, more examples of ways in which Bartoszewski is a friend to all. And then comes discussion of Jedwabne. A book has recently come out in Poland, he explains, published by a Catholic monthly, *Więć*, and titled *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne*. An anthology, it compiles various writings by Polish authors on

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<sup>220</sup> Władysław Bartoszewski, "Address Delivered at Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.," April 5, 2001, in *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 126.

Jedwabne, including, notably, Jan Błóński's "The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto." Bartoszewski explained that after his speech, the Polish secretary-general of the Council for the Protection of Monuments to Struggle and Martyrdom would address the crowd to speak about the investigation launched into Jedwabne.<sup>221</sup> Polish representatives are speaking to an audience composed of, presumably, American Jews, and in doing so are stressing the importance of Jedwabne to them, their institutions, and the world.

Recall the way in which Polish politician, writer, and historian Wojciech Roszkowski combined a discussion of the need for Poles to issue a moral apology for atrocities committed against Jews with a discussion of the way it was profoundly unfair to "blow out of proportion" the topic of Polish collaboration with Nazis. The same tactic is used by Bartoszewski in his Washington, D.C. address. He emphasizes how the audience will learn about the Polish work to investigate Jedwabne, then shifts to the following point:

I should not like it to be forgotten that it was Poland that put on trial and justly executed such criminals such as Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz; Greiser, the Gauleiter of western Poland, whose territorial jurisdiction included the Łódź ghetto; Goeth, the executioner of the Kraków ghetto; and Stroop, the executioner of the Warsaw ghetto. Crimes did get prosecuted and a great many collaborators ended up in jail. But that wasn't sufficiently written up or publicized.<sup>222</sup>

To say he would not like it to be forgotten is akin to the Polish Institute of National Remembrance saying "It must be remembered" or "It should be stressed" as we encountered in the previous chapter. We must be wary of any person or entity attempting to redirect our attention, tell us what we *should* think about, prioritize, or remember. In this case, in D.C. at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, it is exchanging memory or questioning of Jedwabne for heralding Polish efforts to pursue justice for war criminals. In making these swaps, we are moving too far away from the notion of history as existing in gray zones and

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<sup>221</sup> Bartoszewski, *The Neighbors Respond*, 127.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

complexities. We are not making space for the world of, as Primo Levi might say, privileged prisoners. We are not making space to talk both about Jewish life in Poland *and* about the fact that King Kazimierz formally welcomed Jews fleeing persecution to the then-Kingdom of Poland in the eleventh century *and* about the destruction and horror Jews saw in Poland in the twentieth century. We are not making space for “The Poor Poles Looks at the Ghetto” and questions of Polish innocence *and* for the criticism and arguments of people such as Wojciech Roszkowski.

If history does not, or cannot, exist in gray zones, then extremism comes to bear. Nationalists cannot have history exist in gray zones because there must be clear winning and losing nations and ways of living. It makes sense, then, that Poland has not—and still does not—make room for these types of gray zones. Whether through revisionist history campaigns making history into a black and white, right or wrong, set of stories or in responding to American cultural markers such as *Schindler's List* by making the conversation not about Jewish suffering but about Polish suffering, Poland writes its history in dangerous ways.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Contemporary Fight Over the Not-So-Distant Past

On February 1, 2018, news outlets around the world broke the news that Poland’s Senate officially passed what would come to be known as the infamous “Holocaust bill.” The law, an amendment to the existing Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, made it a criminal offense punishable by fine and up to three years of jail time for “...whoever accuses, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich...”<sup>223</sup> In breaking the news, the BBC explained, “President Andrzej Duda says Poland has the right ‘to defend historical truth.’”<sup>224</sup> News of the bill—and analysis about the dangers it posed for historians of the Holocaust, particularly those writing of instances of Polish complicity such as Jan Gross or Jan Grabowski—held strong for months. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, “described [the bill] as an attempt to rewrite history and deny the Holocaust.”<sup>225</sup> With Poland claiming the right to institute legislation to “defend historical truth” and Israel claiming that same legislation would revise history in such a way as to deny the Holocaust, tensions between competing visions and understandings of history illuminate how far apart two nations are positioned in recalling the same moment of historical suffering. *The New York Times* editorial board classified the legislation as “Poland’s Holocaust Blame Bill” in a scathing article, writing, “It is baffling why Poland’s nationalist-controlled Parliament would mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day...with a needless, foolish, and insulting [bill].”<sup>226</sup> This bill maintained its spot in the news and cemented itself into the minds of many. When I got to Poland nearly six months later and

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<sup>223</sup> “Full text of Poland’s controversial Holocaust legislation,” *Times of Israel*, Feb. 1, 2018. [“Text...as provided in Polish by the Polish government to Israel’s Foreign Ministry, and translated by the ministry Jan. 31, 2018.”]

<sup>224</sup> “Poland’s Senate passes controversial Holocaust bill,” *BBC*, Feb. 1, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42898882>.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.* [Note that rewriting history and denying the Holocaust are two separate actions, not necessarily correlated.]

<sup>226</sup> Editorial Board, “Poland’s Holocaust Blame Bill,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2018.



began work at a Holocaust and Jewish culture museum in June 2018, one group of people in particular consistently asked about it: American Jewish tourists to Poland.

On my first day at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, I shadowed a tour. Larysa, a Polish educator at the museum, guided a group of American Jewish visitors from Florida (on a heritage tour in eastern Europe) through the museum's main exhibition. Barely fifteen minutes into the tour, an older woman interrupted Larysa's explanation of Jewish life as it once stood in Kraków to ask about the "Holocaust bill." Larysa explained that the law was complicated. It had not gone into effect yet; it stipulated protections for educational institutions that were not reported internationally; and, most importantly, the museum staff would never let it impact their work. The woman did not like this answer. She began shouting at Larysa. In an email I wrote that night, I paraphrased the account as followed: *She yelled about the fact this bill could even be established is disgraceful, blamed Larysa for the acts of the Polish government, and threw her hands up. A minute or so later she cried, "I just can't listen to this woman anymore!" and stormed out.* We know that American Jews are nearly conditioned to expect the worst from Poland and Poles. Popular cultural narratives like those found in *Schindler's List* portray Poland as a land of Jewish death and Poles as a people who hate Jews. This interaction between American Jewish visitor and Polish host illuminates the ways in which, following the passage of the Holocaust bill, the historically rooted tensions explored throughout this thesis came to a boiling head.

This chapter outlines various contemporary fights over the not-so-distant past. It is all too trite to say "history repeats itself"; this chapter is not that. What is not trite but simply true is that patterns occur throughout history and operate in ways that connect distant pasts with modern pasts, the past with the present, and, in all likelihood, the past and present with the future. It is then fitting to bring to bear in what follows instances in which the actors, institutions,

movements, and historical debates explored thus far in this thesis have interacted with each other across recent time and space.

Before we dive into the Holocaust bill of early 2018 and all that followed, we must realize that this bill did not appear out of nowhere. Scholar Mark Kramer has argued that the “main impetus” for national debates on the topic of Polish complicity in the Holocaust stems in large part from the publication of *Neighbors* by Jan Gross in 2000. We saw this in exploring the historical moments before, during, and after the release of *Neighbors*. What Kramer adds is that the criticism of Gross and his irrefutable claim that Polish Jews suffered at the hands of non-Jewish Poles “escalated after the right-wing populist Law and Justice party [or *Prawo I Sprawiedliwość*, PiS] of Jarosław Kaczyński won Poland’s parliamentary elections and Andrzej Duda, a PiS leader, won the presidency in 2015.”<sup>227</sup> Less than a year after winning the presidency, Duda called for stripping historian Jan Gross of a high honor bestowed upon him in 1996 by the Polish government, the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Merit, and intense international backlash followed. Duda was clear, Kramer notes, in asserting that his move as president to strip Gross of the honor was “part of a wider ‘offensive’ he spearheaded to burnish Poland’s image in the face of ‘malevolent’ attempts to ‘cast aspersions’ on the country’s historical record and its current global standing.”<sup>228</sup> As the American publication *Politico* summed it up in a headline: “Poland turns history into a diplomatic weapon.”<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Mark Kramer, “Public Memory and Communist Legacies in Poland and Russia,” in *Transitional Justice and the Former Soviet Union: Reviewing the Past, Looking Toward the Future*, ed. Cynthia Michalski Horn and Lavinia Stan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 70.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Jo Harper, “Poland turns history into a diplomatic weapon,” *Politico*, February 19, 2016.

## I. History as Nationhood

What has happened—and continues to happen—is that Poland, like most countries, utilizes history not only as a diplomatic weapon but also as an inward-facing nationalist weapon. When we talk about nationalism, we are talking about the constructedness of a nation. Nationalism is a nineteenth century concept—and a *Western European* construct, too, importantly. French philosopher Ernest Renan first bore the concept of nationalism in his 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne University in Paris titled “What is a Nation?” Renan delivered the lecture as a Frenchman coming out of the Franco-Prussian War in which France suffered a humiliating loss to Germany. Renan’s idea of a nation directly contradicts what Germany as a “nation” was known for; his speech laid the foundations of the spectrum of civic and ethnic nationalisms which are today still used by historians to classify nations. Renan’s ideas of a nation along with civic and ethnic nationalisms are uniquely applicable to Western European nations and specifically useful in drawing a dichotomy between France and Germany. French nationalism is defined by civic traits like shared values and culture whereas German nationalism is defined by bloodlines, language, and the land, all ethnic traits—and though these traits, bloodlines in particular, defined nationalism in places like the Balkans, too, it still differed markedly from France. This question of what is a nation and the way Renan set out to answer it is limiting for historians of Central or Eastern European nations such as Poland. Geneviève Zubrzycki, sociologist and established scholar of Polish studies, notes that “the accentuation and naturalization of differences between ethnic and civil national understandings, and between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ ignores the diversity that exists within each region, as well as the tensions within each mode.”<sup>230</sup> Zubrzycki shows that we must move beyond the standard questions and

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<sup>230</sup> Geneviève Zubrzycki, “‘We, the Polish Nation,’: Ethnic and Civic Visions of Nationhood in Post-Communist Constitutional Debates.” *Theory and Society* 30, no. 5 (2001): 629.

ideology to come out of Renan's "What is a nation?" and, I will argue, where we must go is toward a more relevant question for Polish nationalism: who is part of the nation?

Throughout history, Poles faced many questions about what it meant to use the word "nation" in part because their territory, a seemingly basic, first-line qualifier for a nation, was constantly shifting. During the nineteenth century, as communities all over Europe began to think and speak of nationhood, Poles had more reason to begin to define what "nation" could look like and entail. Historian Brian Porter traces this in his important book *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Poland*. In the latter half of the century, he argues, the question of what is a nation began to move toward who would be part of the nation; this occurred alongside a pivot toward Jews as more than "other" (which they had nearly always been) and in fact an "enemy."<sup>231</sup> Jews as the enemy occurred during a rise in anti-Semitism, specifically anti-Semitism as a modern phenomenon. At this time, nationalist sentiments and anti-Semitism began to be intimately intertwined because to believe in them was to believe in being modern.

To underpin this argument, Porter traces the rise of a Polish magazine weekly, *Głos* (The Voice), established in 1866 to target Polish youth.<sup>232</sup> *Głos* contributed directly to the rise in anti-Semitism by making it, within the pages they published, "respectable, sophisticated, and modern."<sup>233</sup> Porter offers translations of a wide array of articles and editorials from all throughout the nineteenth century in *Głos* along with his analysis. He writes,

...the magazine argued in 1890 that anti-Semitism 'does not stand in the way of the progressive moment of humanity' and should be understood as a "positive phenomenon, testifying to the strengthening of consciousness and social solidarity." This brings us to the fundamental transformation mentioned in the title of this book: the moment when it became possible to speak of hatred within the discourse of nationalism.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Poland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158.

<sup>232</sup> Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*, 87.

<sup>233</sup> Porter, 176.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

This evidence matters because this publication shows that Polish-Jewish relations did not always exist in a sphere of peaceful coexistence as Polish officials today say they did. At the very core of the late-nineteenth/early twentieth century Polish national project was a hatred against Jews. In fact, four years before claiming anti-Semitism was positive, the editors of *Głos* wrote, “Every society, in relation to the Jews, must work to destroy them—whether we call this extermination, expulsion, or assimilation does not change the essence of things. Both Judeophiles and anti-Semites want to destroy the Jews as Jews, that is, as representative of a separate society.”<sup>235</sup> Coexistence was not always the nature of the relations between Poles and Jews. Indeed, there was talk at a national level about physically removing Jews from Poland, that Jews could never be Poles and as such posed a danger to the nation.

It is peculiar, then, that Polish officials in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries harp on “coexistence” as a defining feature of Polish-Jewish history, that Poland welcomed Jews fleeing persecution in the eleventh century and they gloriously lived, thrived even, since. Consider the following: less than two months after the passage of the 2018 Holocaust bill, in the midst of much international outrage, Polish President Andrzej Duda made a visit to Auschwitz along with 12,000 visitors from 40 countries.<sup>236</sup> This was not just any visit—it was *Yom Ha’Shoah*, or Israeli Holocaust Memorial Day—and Duda did not join just any visitors. He was there to address the crowd of March of the Living participants as they descended upon the town of Oświęcim and prepared to walk from Auschwitz I to Birkenau. Recall that March of the Living has come under critique by scholars such as Erica Lehrer for their explicitly anti-Polish sentiments and teachings. As part of the 2018 mission, President Duda walked into Auschwitz alongside Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and the two sat together during the

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<sup>235</sup> Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*, 177.

<sup>236</sup> TOI Staff, “Led by Israel’s President Rivlin, thousands attend March of Living in Poland,” *Times of Israel*, April 12, 2018.

ceremony marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of March of the Living trips to Poland and the annual Holocaust Memorial Day. In an address to the crowd, Duda remarked, “Oświęcim was the place of coexistence of Poles and Jews. For 1000 years, the Jewish nation regarded my country as the land of Polin – a hospitable, safe home.”<sup>237</sup> Duda’s March of the Living remarks show that when confronting groups considered to be anti-Polish, the focus turns to utilizing a history of coexistence as a diplomatic tool. His statement and precise word choice echoes what Israeli diplomats wrote in a confidential memo previously mentioned describing their visit with Shimon Peres to Poland in November of 1989: “Great emphasis was placed on the common history and what [the Poles] often referred to as ‘A thousand years of coexistence’ as opposed to the bitter memories of the more recent past.”<sup>238</sup>

In invoking the phrase bitter memories of a more recent past, the Polish officials neglect to acknowledge that there *are* bitter memories even in the far more distant past. In fact, the man widely considered to be the founder of modern Polish nationalism, Roman Dmowski, was deeply anti-Semitic; he consistently conjured up sentiments against Jews. Dmowski contributed writing to *Głos* in 1891 (before the magazine was shut down by Russian police in 1894) and his political party, the National Democrats, existed upon a platform of extensive anti-Semitism.<sup>239</sup> In fact, Brian Porter argued that it was in 1919 when the National Democrats rose to prominence that “we see an emergence of anti-Semitism as a factor in defining what it meant to have a Polish nation.”<sup>240</sup> And this was not any kind of anti-Semitism, it was a very particular kind: a notion of Jews as undeniably, unchangeably Other, a belief that “most Jews were unassimilable and

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<sup>237</sup> Andrzej Duda, “Address by the President of the Republic of Poland Mr Andrzej Duda during the March of the Living in Auschwitz 12 April 2018,” (speech, Oświęcim, Poland, April 12, 2018), <https://motl.org/gallery/president-andrzej-duda-poland-2018/>.

<sup>238</sup> Peres Visit to Poland, American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 634; folder 8; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>239</sup> Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*, 180.

<sup>240</sup> Porter, 9.

therefore could never become Poles.”<sup>241</sup> To say that Jews would need to assimilate in order to have a place within the Polish nation illuminates that coexistence was not the answer to any sort of Jewish question posed in nineteenth or twentieth century Poland. Ezra Mendelsohn, a historian, traced (among many factors) the writings of Roman Dmowski in the interwar period, including an essay titled “Jews on the War” from 1925 in which he “declared that Jews had long served German interests and were formidable enemies of Poland.”<sup>242</sup> Adam Michnik, a Polish historian, has argued that nationalism “...amounts to intolerance: it allows the rejection of another person because of his otherness.”<sup>243</sup> When it comes to Polish nationalism and Jews, his warning holds true. The history of Polish nationhood makes clear that Jews were never to be part of the story.

## II. History as Enemy

What we have, then, is a disconnect between “historical truth” as demonstrated by evidence found within Polish writings and the history that Polish officials purport took place between Poles and Jews. A key part of Ernest Renan’s speech involved providing a compelling, pressing, and relevant explanation for why nationalist groups and causes work to actively revise history. And not just revise or *right* history but actually disregard and cast aside unbecoming histories. Renan said, “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality.”<sup>244</sup> Nearly two centuries later, Renan’s statement was echoed and taken a step further by Adam Michnik who wrote, “Nationalism is usually a technique of escaping

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<sup>241</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 38.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Michnik, “Nationalism,” 759.

<sup>244</sup> Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” (lecture, Sorbonne University, Paris, France, March 11, 1882).

responsibility for the past. Strangers are guilty – that is the conviction of a nationalist.”<sup>245</sup> Polish nationalists long cast Jews as the enemy, the stranger, and they are then able to cast historical wrongs onto Jews themselves as opposed to Poles. We will see this later in the chapter with a contemporary example of Polish state television invoking controversial talk about the roles of Jews in the Holocaust who were forced by the Nazis to serve in worker roles, such as *kapos* in the concentration camps or *Judenrat* in the ghettos.

First, though, we must return to Andrzej Duda’s (belated) call to strip Jan Gross of the prestigious Polish national honor for the way his book *Neighbors* portrayed Poles as complicit in and responsible for the massacre of a Jewish community. The international community certainly perceived the proposal of Andrzej Duda as an attack on historical studies in the pursuit of creating a nation, a national narrative, on the basis of tactical historical errors. The American Historical Association (AHA), a professional organization dedicated to promoting and protecting historical studies since it was incorporated by the United States Congress in 1889, published an open letter to the Polish government calling Duda’s attack on Gross what it was: an attack on the study of history. The letter, written in November 2016, also expressed concern over discussion of what would later officially become the Holocaust bill. The ultimate request of the AHA letter is this: “...that Professor Gross—a scholar of whom Poland can be deservedly proud—is not prosecuted for the pursuit of historical truth that has always animated his scholarship.”<sup>246</sup> With this statement, the AHA takes Duda’s precise wording of “historical truth” and turns it right back around on him to classify what Gross has done as the “real” historical truth. What is one to do when two parties both claim to have the monopoly on historical truth in pursuit of their own goals, goals at complete odds with each other? There are no easy answers, perhaps even no

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<sup>245</sup> Michnik, “Nationalism,” 760.

<sup>246</sup> Patrick Manning, “Letter of Concern to Polish Government regarding Treatment of Historian Jan Gross,” American Historical Association, November 2016.



answers at all, though a starting point can be to understand why groups tell conflicting stories and harness conflicting truths in the first place.

Alon Confino, a historian whose work looks at how the Nazis understood their anti-Jewish project, echoes Renan's statement. Confino writes,

We all tell stories about ourselves, individual as well as national collectivities, in order to give our lives purpose and meaning. These stories are the bedrock of our identity, although we often tell our national stories not in order to get the facts right but to get them wrong, to explain our history and justify our motivations for doing things, the good deeds and especially the bad ones...<sup>247</sup>

Confino did not write his statement as a specific response to Polish histories, but it is extraordinarily fitting nonetheless. When the Law and Justice party pushes back against Jan Gross and the notion that Poles were complicit in causing Jewish suffering and death in World War II, they tell stories that deliberately get the facts wrong. Take Jedwabne, the massacre of Polish Jews at the hands of their Polish Catholic neighbors that Jan Gross meticulously researched and presented, for example. The Polish state-run Institute of National Remembrance could not find evidence to disprove Gross's conclusions. Mark Kramer noted that in 2002 the IPN published "authoritative" evidence that upheld Gross's "basic findings." Even though their initial report claimed to find reduced death tolls from what Gross offered, later research indeed found the numbers of victims and perpetrators closer to Gross's numbers.<sup>248</sup> The right-wing ruling party works to encourage their constituents and the broader world to conveniently forget unflattering aspects of national history because it is, as Renan noted, a threat to their national project. It is also a threat to those whose histories are cast aside: Polish Jews.

It would be a fatal flaw of this project not to engage in discussion and analysis on anti-Semitism in Poland as we started to do in evaluating Polish nationalism. It would also be a fatal

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<sup>247</sup> Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>248</sup> Mark Kramer, "Public Memory and Communist Legacies in Poland and Russia," 68 and footnote 9.

flaw, however, to pretend the topic can be parsed without, well, an entire thesis-length paper devoted to it. The history of anti-Semitism in Poland is long, storied, and complex. So much of the attention paid to Poland's Holocaust history bill and legislation focuses on the international outcry: the reactions of Israel or the United States, for instance, to which the BBC article breaking the news dedicated sub-headlines and space, or what the bill meant in the context of rising populist parties in Europe overall. Yet this misses a crucial aspect, as a piece in *The Atlantic* reported.

“Something much more important, in my judgment, is what they [Law and Justice] have done internally,” [Jan] Gross [said] about the new law. “They have stirred anti-Semitism. This has always been part of this party's spiritual legacy. For God's sake, these Jewish victims were Polish citizens!” Gross added. “These guys who say ‘They the Jews’ and ‘We the Poles’ are out of their minds.”<sup>249</sup>

Recall that Gross raised alarms about this issue of separating Polish and Jewish identities and suffering nearly two decades earlier.<sup>250</sup> He struggled and encouraged others to struggle in not letting go of the fact that the Polish national project did not give space to answering such an essential question. The insinuation on behalf of Polish officials? Polish Jews were not real Poles. This has been the case since the origins of Polish nationalism—when nationalism began to hate, as historian Brian Porter so aptly wrote—and it has not yet changed.

*The Atlantic* article's reporter Rachel Donadio followed Gross's analysis with evidence of a shifting atmosphere toward Jews in Poland. She pulls from an Associated Press report out of Warsaw which spoke of an “eruption” of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiments in Poland following the loud critiques of the Law and Justice party's Holocaust bill. Marcin Wolski, director of a state-run television station, said on air on January 29, 2018 “that the Nazi death camps should actually be called Jewish. ‘Who managed the crematoria there?’ he asked—a

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<sup>249</sup> Rachel Donadio, “The Dark Consequences of Poland's New Holocaust Law,” *The Atlantic*, Feb. 8, 2018.

<sup>250</sup> Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002 and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xix.

reference to the fact that death camp prisoners, usually Jews, were forced to help dispose of gas chamber victims.”<sup>251</sup> The position of the Polish government when facing internally is one that is largely rooted in anti-Semitism, yet the position of the Polish government when facing externally is one of avid protectors of Jews and the long history of Jews in Poland dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### III. History as Protector

In his remarks to the Jewish participants of March of the Living, President Duda also made mention of a moment in history highlighted by the Institute of National Remembrance’s film *The Unconquered* that we evaluated in the context of Polish institutions writing national histories. Duda launched into a defense of Polish actions in wartime as a marker of Polish innocence and caring for their Jewish counterparts. He said,

We, Poles, consider it our duty to spread the testimony about the Holocaust across the globe. We were doing it already at the time when Germans were executing it...But our alarming calls fell on deaf ears. The scale of indifference is exemplified by the fact that the call of the Polish Government to help rescue Jews was published in a brief note by “The New York Times” on 11 December 1942, as far as page 8.<sup>252</sup>

This point is eerily similar to the wording of the propaganda film which said, “We are the first to alert the world about the Holocaust though politics appear to be more important than human lives and nobody listened to us.”<sup>253</sup> With this, the Polish government is working to draw attention to historical error on behalf of others, to distract Polish insiders and outsiders alike from the issues at hand about historical revisionism, for instance, or writing Jewish suffering out of Polish national history.

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<sup>251</sup> Vanessa Gera, “Israeli criticism sparks anti-Jewish remarks in Polish media,” *Associated Press*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>252</sup> Andrzej Duda, “Address by the President of the Republic of Poland Mr Andrzej Duda during the March of the Living in Auschwitz 12 April 2018.”

<sup>253</sup> Institute of National Remembrance, *The Unconquered*, film, directed by Michał Misiński, 15 Sept. 2017.

These instances all point to actions by the Polish government to deflect from and defend against historical moments where Poland as a nation or Poles as a people are understood to have had anything negative to do with the events of World War II or anti-Semitism more broadly. Jan Grabowski, historian and, as we previously saw, target of the Polish government, coins this as the “Righteous Defense Argument.” He explains,

The Righteous Defense in all its variations allows for the gradual shift of Jewish victims to the periphery of the historical account and their systemic replacement with noble Gentiles...The Holocaust becomes a theater that provides a stage upon which Righteous Gentiles can perform noble deeds on the largely undefined and obscure crowd of anonymous Jews in need.<sup>254</sup>

It is worth noting that this Righteous Defense, while indeed indicative of a shift in historical narratives, is also a sort of a “Righteous Rejection.” The Polish government is not simply defending; they are flat-out rejecting historical facts and narratives. While this had not quite taken place when Grabowski published his article in 2016, it had indeed taken place by the time of the Holocaust bill’s passage in January 2018. Historian Marci Shore wrote of this fact in an opinion piece for *The New York Times* days after news of the Holocaust bill’s passing became public. She argued,

The rejection of the universal—the insistence on Polish exceptionalism—is at the heart of Poland’s “historical policy,” which aims to control the narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in such a way as to glorify and exonerate Poles. The underlying principles are simple: a trope of Christ-like martyrdom; a Manichaeian division between innocence and guilt, and an assurance that everything bad came from the outside.<sup>255</sup>

This rejection of particular histories is crucial because at the very heart of national movements and nationalism overall lies a need for, as historian Stefan Berger put it, “establishing a historical pedigree.” Berger explains that national movements “regularly celebrated foundational moments

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<sup>254</sup> Jan Grabowski, “The Holocaust and Poland’s ‘History Policy.’” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2016): 485.

<sup>255</sup> Marci Shore, “Poland Digs Itself a Memory Hole,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2018.

from which they could construct such continuous national narratives.”<sup>256</sup> Leaders of national movements often drew these histories from days of antiquity, and so in some ways foundational historical pedigrees far predate any history that would be called into question via Poland’s twenty-first century history policy or legislation. But in other ways, Poland is in fact still in the foundational stages of building a national movement and history post-communism. The problem is this: nationalism needs a shared history, but many histories in pursuit of a shared identity are harmful to nationalists. If we recall Ernest Renan’s point—that forgetting and historical error is essential to creating nations yet the process of writing history can be a threat to nationality—we find that Poland’s Holocaust legislation epitomizes the irony, the tension, these forces of truth with which the government is forced to reckon and, as we ultimately see, reject.

What my project adds to this discourse is the argument that this Righteous Defense or Rejection has connections to the Americanization of the Holocaust, the process by which the Holocaust moved from the margins to the center of American cultural life. Within this process, a specific vision of the Holocaust emerged to the forefront of the American (and especially American Jewish) mind: a Holocaust in Poland by Poles, the kind of moments explored in, for instance, *Schindler’s List* where the young Polish Catholic girl screams “goodbye, Jews” to the Jews moving into the Kraków ghetto. What the historical record shows, however, is that historians of the Holocaust—specifically Polish experiences of the Holocaust, both Catholic and Jewish—long thought specifically about how to bring narratives of righteous Poles into the national discourse. Poland is on the defense against a phenomenon that scholars, really historians, have worked to actually protect Poland from in meaningful ways as early as the 1980s.

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<sup>256</sup> Stefan Berger, *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Europe, 1789-1914* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 179.

In September 1984—prior to even the conception of *Schindler's List*—the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, the precursor to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, sent a memo to the presidents of major American Jewish organizations. The memo's purpose was to keep the organized Jewish community informed of the Council's work, and that work, importantly, involved announcing a conference called Faith in Humankind: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust. The conference planned to bring scholars together to compile resources on the subject of righteous gentiles and make those resources available to the wider public once the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened to the public. Among the notable scholars advertised was Professor Nechama Tec, "Holocaust survivor and Professor at the University of Connecticut... also actively involved in researching righteous acts that occurred in Poland."<sup>257</sup> Born to a Polish Jewish family in Lublin in 1931, Professor Tec's life was saved by Polish Catholics who hid her.<sup>258</sup>

The Council at the forefront of bringing scholarly work on the Holocaust into mainstream American life paid special attention to righteous gentiles and to *Polish* righteous gentiles in particular. This is not to say that all scholars and people more generally were talking about acts of righteousness among Poles, not at all, but this *is* to say that *some* people were. And that is more than the zero people whom Poland's government has claimed for years are talking, publishing scholarship, or bringing attention to righteous gentiles in Poland. The highest levels of legitimate Holocaust authority in the United States—the Council responsible for the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—engaged in bringing attention to Poles who saved Jews. Histories are, as we have seen, nothing without nuance and complexity. It is for this reason that an instance of the organized American Jewish community working to educate

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<sup>257</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 6/27/84 Memorandum, American Jewish Congress, records; I-77; box 646; folder 18; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>258</sup> Nechama Tec, *Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

themselves on precisely the issue Poland stresses the world comprehend—stories of Poles risking, even giving their lives to save Jews in wartime—is vital to this project. The Polish government is weaponizing history in pursuit of their own national goals and not the betterment of academic scholarship around the world.

#### IV. History as Suffering

Histories of Poland often invoke the ways in which the nation has suffered. For so long, Poles lived under the rule of foreign occupiers and Polish territory was constantly split up among surrounding powers. Adolf Hitler specifically targeted Poles as among the worst people in Europe, and three million non-Jewish Poles died in World War II. All of this is to say: Poland has experienced many difficult moments throughout its history. Political scientist Adam Bromke wrote in 1962, “It is their unhappy history which has made the Poles intensely, at times boisterously, nationalistic.”<sup>259</sup> And yet, even as unhappy as their history has been, Brian Porter argues, to say all of this is to, as some Poles have done, “[produce] a national martyrology – an elevation of the entire collectivity to the status of sanctified victim... When faced with stories about Poles who have done bad things, proponents of this view either insist that the evildoer was not a true Pole, or that the historian is lying.”<sup>260</sup> We have seen this play out time and time again, well into the present. Yet it is a claim, a reminder, a warning Porter offers in a later book that gets at so much of what we talk about when we talk about *writing* and *righting* history: *nations don't suffer—people do.*<sup>261</sup>

What has happened as a result of Poland using history as a weapon, internally or diplomatically, is that the individual stories are the first to become lost in the shuffle. It is the

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<sup>259</sup> Adam Bromke, “Nationalism and Communism in Poland,” *Foreign Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1962): 636.

<sup>260</sup> Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 4.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

stories of suffering we lose, the stories of overcoming darkness, the stories of extremes and also the stories of everything in between both during and after wartime. And these individual stories are what we need the most in order to make sense of the past and its implications for the present and the future. Without a willingness to share and listen and hold all of these stories at once, we see tensions come to a head via legislation like the Holocaust bill, a way of saying certain stories take precedence over others—and that some stories are flat out wrong. We need all stories, however, especially those that are difficult to hear. As writer Kazuo Ishiguro put it in his 2017 acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize in Literature: “...in the end, stories are about one person saying to another: This is the way it feels to be me. Can you understand what I’m saying? Does it also feel this way to you?”<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, “Nobel Lecture” (speech, Oslo, Norway, Dec. 7, 2017), Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/25124-kazuo-ishiguro-nobel-lecture-2017/>.



## EPILOGUE

On April 16, 2019, Ryszard Legutko came to Colby College to deliver a talk, “The Present and Future of European Democracy,” based upon his book *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*. Legutko co-chairs the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, and he is the head of Poland’s Law and Justice delegation to the European Parliament. His visit was a bit last minute and, to me, entirely unexpected and of great importance: an opportunity for me to be in the same room with a high-ranking member of the very political party this thesis has examined, to perhaps ask a question and evaluate how all that I have argued throughout this thesis might play out beyond the page.

Legutko stood at the front of the classroom and delivered his lecture to between fifteen and twenty students and faculty. When the time came for him to take questions, I raised my hand. “Both in this evening’s talk and in your book,” I began, “you say that communists and liberal democrats cast away obligations of the past, losing respect and memory for what came before them. My first question is what exactly are those obligations? My second question is how do you reconcile this statement with Law and Justice casting away the past, too, by entertaining the idea to take away Jan Gross’s Order of Merit for his work with the histories of Jedwabne?” Legutko stayed silent for a few moments that felt to me like an eternity. He turned to the professor chairing the event and asked, “Should I answer that?”

Upon the professors in the room telling him to please, indeed, answer the question, he spoke of what “obligation” meant to him as a politician and a former professor of political philosophy. Legutko then moved to the second part of my question and introduced Jan Tomasz Gross whom he explained authored a book called *Neighbors*. “The book was not particularly

well-researched,” Legutko said.<sup>263</sup> “It was an all-out attack on Poland, on the Polish nation. And it was received as such. If you look at scholarly reviews, at criticism—you see, Gross is not a historian. His treatment of the sources was appalling.” As this thesis has proved, such a statement is false. Legutko continued to say that the book gets at the treatment of Poles as accomplices to Germans in the Holocaust. “That is rejected by a lot of people,” he said, “because those are only isolated cases. You have to understand that helping a Jew was punishable by death to the entire family. You can’t throw such accusations and say you Poles did not help Jews; the situation in World War II was incomparable to that of France or the Netherlands. And still many Poles lost their lives helping Jews!” He told the audience to look to Yad Vashem, to see the large number of Poles recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in a classic pivot to Jan Grabowski’s Righteous Defense argument. Finally, Legutko closed his response by saying that Gross’s book “was not a historical dispute. It’s about today’s politics.” Gross’s book came out nearly two decades ago, and the case of Jedwabne was, as we know, even settled by the IPN itself. It is not Gross making the book and the history about today’s politics: it is people like Ryszard Legutko and parties like Law and Justice doing that.

There is so much one could have responded to Legutko to push back against his claims. Providing a reminder, for instance, of the scholarship from Andrzej Żbikowski who found that, within rural areas of occupied Poland from 1942-1945, “in 80 to 90 percent of the cases, Poles rescued Jews for money or other material gain, and when funds (or other valuables) were exhausted, the attitude to those rescued changed radically.”<sup>264</sup> But I did not respond, nor did anyone else, and Legutko moved on to the next question. The things that he said did not surprise

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<sup>263</sup> All quotes based upon my written notes from the evening: Ryszard Legutko, “The Present and Future of European Democracy.” Lecture. Colby College, Waterville, Maine, April 16, 2019.

<sup>264</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, “‘Night Guard’: Holocaust Mechanisms in Polish Rural Areas, 1942-1945,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (August 2011): 512.

me in that I have seen them before, though to encounter someone who actively *righted* history was a valuable yet disturbing experience. Legutko gave a black-and-white answer to a question imploring him to explore the gray zones, as Primo Levi would have it. Levi was never interested in branding people as wholly or inherently good or bad, virtuous or evil, instead choosing to see the choices people make in their darkest moments of history as entirely complex. Yet the current Polish government does not see history in this way; it does not serve their national project.

And so it has gone time and time again while engaged in this project. These kinds of black and white moments all too often leave no room for any kind of moments within a gray zone nor any space for nuance and complexity. It has felt at times that the majority of news I came across this year—often via Twitter from the scholarly-run @NotesFromPoland account which offers translated summaries of a variety of news articles, some key features and others pieces that might have slipped under the radar from across the span of Polish news outlets—sat entrenched in gray zones and was desperately deserving of being worked into this project. It is from this account I learned, for instance, that on March 18, 2019, the Polish news reported that there would not in fact be “further exhumations at the site of the Jedwabne massacre, after prosecutors decided there is now no new evidence justifying such an action. The head of the IPN and the prime minister recently raised the idea. Jewish leaders strongly oppose it.”<sup>265</sup> The histories within this thesis come alive on near-daily basis in the Polish news. Even when evidence disproves claims, those claims persist. History in Poland is too often a political exercise.

Regularly seeing stories like this one in the news and encountering Legutko’s answer to my questions tell us two things. First, the work of this thesis is important, vitally so, because we have to understand all facets of the past to be able to interrogate and contextualize the ways in

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<sup>265</sup> Violetta Baran, “Prokuratura podjęła decyzję. Nie będzie ponownej ekshumacji ofiar a Jedwabnem.” March 18, 2019, Wiadomości. <https://twitter.com/notesfrompoland/status/1107606431895863297>

which Poland still in this contemporary moment uses history as a tool at home and weapon abroad. Second, nationalist fervor is increasing in Poland and indeed across the world, including right here in the United States with President Trump declaring in October 2018, “You know what I am? I’m a nationalist.”<sup>266</sup> If rewriting histories is a nationalist weapon, then bringing those very histories into the light in ways that are digestible for all is a key to combatting the dangers of nationalism. For every time a member of the Law and Justice Party (or anyone, really) makes a statement that it is only worth remembering the Poles who saved Jews in wartime, someone must be ready to call out reminders of Oskar Schindler and Jedwabne. For every time that the IPN invokes reopening the case of Jedwabne, someone must be ready to call out that the institution itself formally closed the case; exhuming dead bodies is a political tool of the most horrific kind. Similarly, every time someone uses the term “Polish Death Camp,” they too should be corrected.

In calling for nuance and complexity to come from Polish interpretations of the Holocaust, it is crucial to note that is a call, too, for nuance and complexity from American interpretations. The Americanization of the Holocaust has targeted Poland in a way that relies too heavily on narratives involving *only* Polish wrongdoing against Jews, such as the world-famous story of *Schindler’s List*. I offer this to bring balance but not to say that the ways Poles and Americans have interpreted the events of the Holocaust are of equivalence. Recall that President Obama apologized for his “Polish death camp” remarks and the historical record, his archived speech, was amended. We have never seen any kind of response like that from the Law and Justice party in their historically inaccurate and intimidating remarks.

There was no chance I was going to change Ryszard Legutko’s mind about Jan Gross, but hearing him ask “Should I answer that question?”—something he did not ask of any other question posed to him that evening—tells me I did my job. It has been apparent since the late

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<sup>266</sup> Felicia Sonmez, “Trump: I’m a nationalist and I’m proud of it,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 23, 2018.

nineteenth century that histories are either brought into the light or cast aside in pursuit of national projects and goals. We have seen this play out in Poland and seen it pick up with intensity since certain narratives from the Holocaust took center stage in the United States and, with the enormous success of films like *Schindler's List*, across the world. Through it all, the constant that politicians, scholars, films, and everyday people argue over, return to, hide, or propel is stories. Ryszard Legutko might work to keep stories of Polish Jews hidden away, but we have an opportunity and an obligation to bring them into the light. Telling stories—complex stories, stories within gray zones, stories that are hard to hear—is what makes us human, what we use to make sense of our past, situate ourselves within the present, and think about our future. *Writing* our history sits at the crux of this, but *righting* our history does not.

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